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The Feoclassical Architecture of Panama

li.bel noun

(From Middle English: little book, formal document; from Latin *libellus*, diminutive of *liber* book.

- anything that is defamatory or that maliciously or damagingly misrepresents.
- 2. (archaic) a handbill.

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The Feoclassical Architecture of Panama



SPECTRE IS haunting Panama—the spectre of Feoclassicism.
Whence springs this glorification of bad taste, bad both as in flawed and as in evil, yet so bad it approaches greatness? This essay intends to give a historical and theoretical context to the Feoclassical Architecture of Panama, which good snobs find so repulsive, and to sing its praises as a clear expression of our culture and national spirit.



E BEGIN BY explaining the neologism. Feoclassical is a portmanteau, a composite word that puns on Feo (ugly) to give a name to the corruption of Classical Greco-Roman Architecture that ails us, thus culminating the triad original-revival-decadence: Classical-Neoclassical-Feoclassical. We have all seen the Feoclassical, and without a doubt some may sincerely like it; our thesis is that there is nothing wrong in appreciating it.



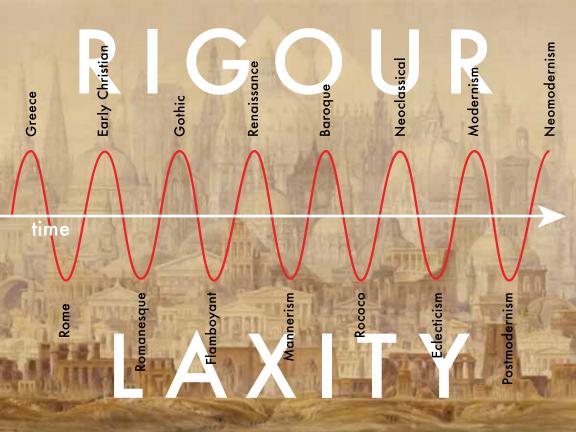
HERE ARE TWO types of Feoclassical. The most abundant is the Popular Feoclassical, which is generally anonymous and of a small scale and is applied in residencies and parks throughout the country to show wealth ("Successful professionals live here") or to inspire commemoration ("I Am a Monument"). Although it is sometimes seen in new construction, it usually appears as a gradual and additive phenomenon, covering capital by capital and baluster by baluster a house or a whole neighborhood.



BUT THERE IS also a High Feoclassical, grandiloquent and especially offensive. It is High because of its more refined aesthetic pretensions and because it is mainly found on luxury apartment towers. Unlike the Popular Feoclassical, this is a Feoclassical done by Architects, so it is also High because of its cost.



RELATED STYLE—but one that deserves independent study—is our Cholonial Architecture, which seeks inspiration not in Imperial Rome but in the Spanish Colonial and *Bellavistino* of the past century. It is characterized by its clay tile overhangs, rusticated stucco and peach-colored paint, and it is applied on hotels of dubious reputation, country mansions in Costa del Este and housing tracts further East.



Architecture forms part of a linear and predictable sequence of architectural styles. In very broad terms, the history of Western Architecture can be graphed as a sine wave that moves between rigour and laxity—between styles that follow strict rules and styles that break them and that substitute each other in a series of revolutions. The Feoclassical, with is profusion of applied ornament, would thus be the natural reaction to the abstract ascetism of the Neomodernism of recent years, and is destined to be substituted by more extreme rigors in the future. Let us enjoy it while it lasts.



PULCHRITUDO et ORNAMENTUM

Beauty is somewhat lovely which is proper and innate, and diffused over the whole Body, and **Ornament** somewhat added or fastened on, rather than proper and innate.

HE ISSUE OF beauty has worried architects since the beginning of time. During the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti used Tully's worries about the scarcity of handsome youths in Athens another issue that has worried architects since the beginning of time—to introduce the distinct concepts of *Pulchritudo et Ornamentum*: beauty and ornament. Whereas "Beauty is somewhat lovely which is proper and innate, and diffused over the whole Body, [...] Ornament [is] somewhat added or fastened on, rather than proper and innate." But although the latter is "an auxiliary Brightness and Improvement to Beauty", its application—"by painting and concealing any Thing that was deformed, and trimming and polishing what was handsome"—allows "the unsightly parts [to give] less Offence, and the more lovely [parts to give] more Delight."



S THE AMERICAS were conquered at the beginning of the Sixteenth Century, the first Architecture with a Capital A in our continent was in the Baroque Style, richly but rigorously ornamented. This style, championed by the Catholic Counter-Reformation, used its profusely decorated façades and altars as tools of evangelization that manifested the glory of God and the Holy Mother Church. The Hispanic Colonial Baroque is a mestizo style based in the imitation of European models using local labor and inevitably influenced by native aesthetics. 500 years later, these characteristics—ever present in Panamanian Architecture—culminate in the Feoclassical, which is the apotheosis of the hybrid, the imitative and the ornamented.



RNAMENT—FASTER AND cheaper to produce than beauty—became in Panama the perfect complement to Colonial Architecture, which had rather simple looks. Times change and fashion changes: little by little, colonial houses are redecorated with round arches, cornices and french-style balconies. Others are painlessly demolished to make room for more ornamented buildings. And so layer upon layer of "so colonial" icing, just over a hundred years old, begins sedimenting on our Casco Viejo; regretfully, the true colonial Panama was much uglier than the fantasies of our board of tourism or ministry of culture.



Architecture is the art of building and decorating the buildings built by man, whatever his fate, so that their appearance contributes to the health, strength and pleasure of the mind

Not only is ornament produced by criminals but also a crime is committed through the fact that ornament inflicts serious injury on people's health, on the national budget and hence on cultural evolution.

OR CENTURIES, ornamentation was an essential part of making Architecture; John Ruskin even said it was what distinguished this art from mere building. Naturally, it wasn't long until a stylistic revolution denied this principle. In Ornament and Crime, his excellently entitled essay from 1908, Adolf Loos applauds the clean and simple products of modernity and says that making decoration was the work of inferior cultures, Papuans, children and criminals. A new commandment: Thou shalt not make ornament.

VITRUVIUS A) Firmness B) commodity+ @ Delight GROPIUS !:

WENTIETH CENTURY Modern Architecture changed the rules of the game, at least in theory. Ever since Vitruvius, the Roman author of the earliest surviving architectural treatise, Architecture was defined as the combination of *firmitas, utilitas et venustas*. For Modern architects, beauty was the inevitable result of proper firmness and commodity, so one needed not be concerned about it. Form follows function; Less is more; If you build it, they will come.



T MAY BE that the ascetism of Modern Architecture, with its clean surfaces and straight lines, was invented just ninety years ago, but it was what educated those who educated us and those who designed the buildings where we were educated. Ricardo Bermúdez, one of the designers of the Campus of the University of Panama, memorably accused those who insisted in applying ornament of "rebuilding, like any mortician, the horrendous corpses of Architectures of times bygone."



ND SO THE first generations of Architects educated in Panama built a city of modern buildings, mostly free of decorations inspired by historical models: a tropical architectural utopia. The towers of early Paitilla were unhindered by today's conical tiled crowns, pastel paints, and Corinthian capitals.



F COURSE, the public never got it. As European as the modernist aesthetic was pitched, it never gained much popularity. The people still wanted their decorations and, as with any vacant niche, some architects were quick to fill it by pleasing the market and dressing their designs with classicist *appliqués*. A few even rejected the modernism of their earlier oeuvre to abandon themselves in a decorative frenzy. The Feoclassical Architecture of Panama was born.



lama whore and I am paid very well for high-rise buildings.

But we were not inventing the wheel. This is the route of Postmodernism, the revolutionary return of historicist decoration in Architecture. Philip Johnson, the formerly fierce promoter of Modernism that by that time was beginning to flirt with ornament, defended himself from his critics by equaling Architecture with prostitution in an aphorism that we would do well to tattoo across our chests when we get licensed as Architects.



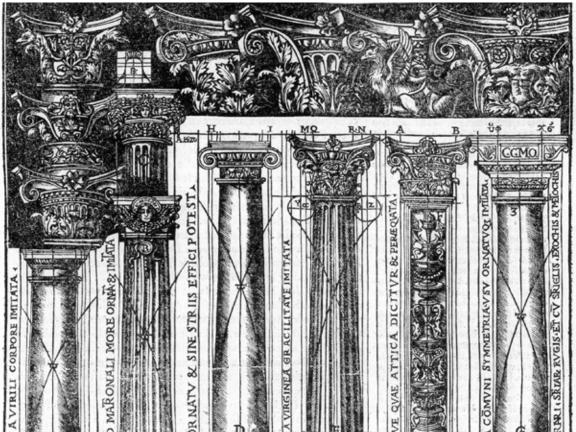
AKING FEOCLASSICAL Architecture is easy and fun. Since the masses adore it, success is guaranteed, plus you get to compare yourself to the glories of Greece and Rome. Since the job consists mostly of cutting and pasting and it's mostly limited to façades, there's no need to torture yourself with subtleties. You just take a building, in paper or already built, and cover it as many decorations as you can afford and wherever you like (or dislike).



OUNTLESS WORKSHOPS—our new artisans—have appeared all over Panama to satisfy this demand for architectural decorations, casting in concrete all types of columns, balusters and statues. These ornaments are usually produced to the scale of a tract house, so if you need five-foot capitals for a High Feoclassical apartment building you are better off looking online or abroad.



UR PROBLEM IS that the art of ornamentation has distanced itself from the science and theory that used to regulate its proper application. Ornament has become superficial, and it is treated with all the disdain that this superficiality entails. But there is a solution, and this is not just to end on a high note. This is a call to action and back to sanity, back to rigor. It is correct to decorate, but we must decorate correctly. Although ornamenting is not a crime, what needs to be punished with jail time is to go around sticking capitals on buildings at whim.



S WITH MOST problems that ail society, our best way out is through education. As civilians, our duty is to educate ourselves and educate our eyes: we need to demand quality and require our columns to have the entasis and intercolumnation that God intended. As Architects, our duty is to educate ourselves even more and to understand the rules that have always governed ornamentation, even if it is to break them intelligently. And even if our student unions take to the streets, we need to emphasize, or at least encourage, the study of architectural treatises in our universities. That's what Vitruvius and Alberti and Serlio and Vignola and Palladio would have wanted.



FOCLASSICISM IS the revenge of Panamanian Architecture. It is the return, after fifty years of exile, of the way we have always decorated our buildings: overloading them with eclectic ornaments applied without much worries about authenticity or historical significance. Just look at the National Theater (left), undisputed architectural jewel from the dawn of our Republic. If Gennaro Ruggieri were alive, he would certainly be designing things like the Hospital del Niño (right). And even if it is a shame that today's State-anointed Architects are not made like those of times past, Feoclassical Architecture belongs to us and we must love it, respect it and defend it like a sacred symbol of our Nation.

Por eso y muchas cosas más

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