Words and Buildings

## A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture

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Character is a large word, full of significance; no metaphoric river can more than hint at its meaning.
Louis Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats*, 33

Introduced into architectural discourse in the eighteenth century, the term 'character' has been central to efforts to demonstrate a relationship between built works of architecture and ulterior meaning. References to 'character' almost always raise issues of 'meaning', and this must be taken into account in analysis of the term. In particular it has been through the word 'character' that the successive debates over what has sometimes been called the 'crisis of representation' have been conducted. The multiple uses of 'character' within architecture over the last two and a half centuries are, to a large extent, the outcome of the uncertainty as to whether or not buildings carry 'meaning', and if they do, how it is to be discerned.

Although generally identified as a product of the classical tradition, which is where it was principally developed, 'character' is a term by no means restricted to classicism, and it has been used widely in the twentieth century. Despite the attempt by the critic Colin Rowe (in his essay 'Composition and Character' written in 1953–54) to expunge it from the modernist vocabulary, there is plenty of evidence for its unapologetic use throughout the modernist era. Examples range from the proto-modernist Otto Wagner, who directed his students to attend to 'a clear, easy, and immediately apprehensible expression of the building's character' (89); to David Medd, a British mid-century schools architect – 'colour is perhaps the single most important factor in determining the character of a building' (1949, 251); to the American late-modern urbanist, Kevin Lynch – 'If Boston districts could be given structural clarity as well as distinctive character, they would be greatly strengthened' (1960, 22); and to the British critic Robert Maxwell writing in 1988: 'There seems no doubt that the building [Mississauga City Hall] has communicated a character, and that it has

succeeded in this by means of a skilful rhetoric' (1993, 85). If Rowe's claims – that 'the present day has imposed critical taboos on characterization', and that the word was 'somewhat suspect' (62) – are not borne out by the evidence, his essay was nonetheless important in that it conformed to a particular, high modernist view, elaborated in his other writings, that the meaning of architecture lay solely in the immanence of its perception, and that architecture could represent nothing beyond its own immediate presence.

Over the last twenty years, interest in 'character' has increased. This is a symptom of the decline of semiotic theories of meaning, and the growing favour for phenomenologically based analyses of meaning. The present-day use of 'character' belongs very much within a view that meaning is to be understood as the outcome of the occupation of a particular physical place by an active human subject. The best-known instance of this kind of discussion occurs in the writings of Christian Norberg-Schulz who, following Heidegger, posited the two fundamentals of architecture as 'space' and 'character'. Space, or whatever is enclosed, is where man is; while character, denoted by adjectives, is what satisfies man's need 'to *identify* himself with the environment, to know *how* he is in a certain place' (1976, 7). 'Character' is both 'a general comprehending atmosphere, and on the other [hand] the concrete form and substance of the space-defining elements. Any real *presence* is intimately linked with a character' (5–6). According to Norberg-Schulz, 'we have to emphasize that *all places have character*, and that character is the basic mode in which the world is "given"' (6). A more comprehensive discussion of the problem of architecture's meaningfulness, also informed by phenomenology, occurs in an article by Dalibor Vesely, who sees the development of the concept of 'character' since the eighteenth century as a primary symptom of the collapse of a general system of transcendental meaning in architecture: 'The ambition to subsume the traditional
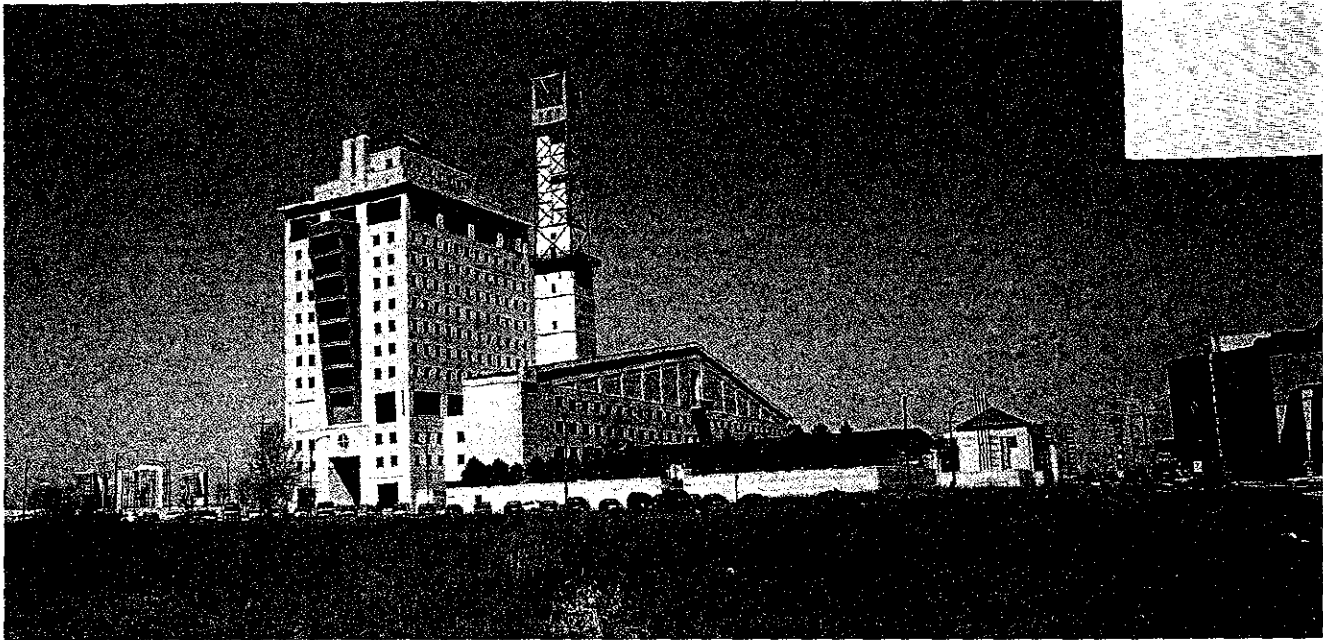
City Hall, Mississauga, Canada, E. Jones and M. Kirkland, 1982–86: 'no doubt that the building has communicated a character'. 'Character' has remained in constant use throughout the modern era, despite Colin Rowe's attempt to expunge it from the modernist vocabulary.

metaphysics and poetics of architecture into the aesthetics of *character* created a temporary illusion of order, but in the long run proved to be a basis of relativism, arbitrariness and confusion' (1987, 26). Vesely's argument is that 'character' allowed architecture to become perceived as 'representational', as a cypher for the thing represented, producing a duplication of reality. 'The belief that the building before us is representing by referring to something not present disregards the simple fact that the only possible way that we can experience the reference is through the situation of which not only the building but also we ourselves are part' (24–25). As developed in architectural discourse, Vesely's contention is that 'character' encouraged people to take for granted a distinction between the work as built and a symbolic meaning. 'Character', a product of the eighteenth-century separation of aesthetic and scientific knowledge of the world, induced 'a tendency to move towards the surface of a building, an interior or a garden, towards the experience of appearances' (26). Yet, if as Vesely suggests, 'character' has been partially responsible for depriving architecture of meaningfulness, it is nonetheless 'the prime, if not the only, link still preserved with the more authentic tradition of representation' (25) that allegedly

existed before the eighteenth century. Therefore, while Vesely sees 'character' as unsatisfactory and harmful in its effects upon architecture, he nonetheless believes it to be worth holding on to.

Vesely's critique of 'character' should be borne in mind when we turn to the history and various uses of the term. It is generally agreed that 'character' was introduced into architecture by the French architect and writer Germain Boffrand, in his *Livre d'Architecture* (1745).[1] Drawing an analogy from Horace's *Ars Poetica* he wrote:

> Although architecture may seem only to be concerned with what is material, it is capable of different *genres*, which make up, so to say, its forms of speech, and which are animated by the different characters that it can make felt. Just as on a stage set a Temple or a Palace indicates whether the scene is pastoral or tragic, so a building by its composition expresses that it is for a particular use, or that it is a private house. Different buildings, by their arrangement, by their construction, and by the way they are decorated, should tell the spectator their purpose; and if they do not, they offend against the rules of expression and are not as they ought to be. (16)

Summarizing his argument, Boffrand wrote:

> A man who does not know these different characters, and who cannot make them felt in his work is not an architect ... A banqueting hall and a ballroom must not be made in the same way as a church ... in every one of the modes, or orders, of architecture one can find the signifying characters which are most particularly suited to each sort of building. (26)
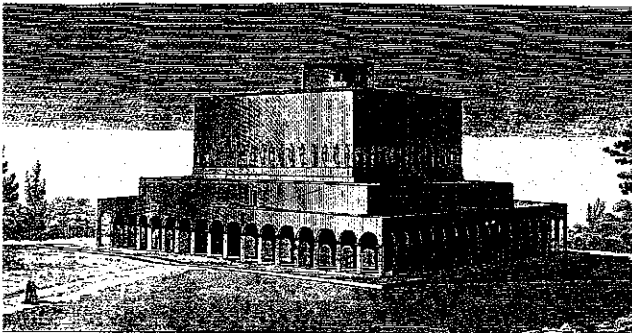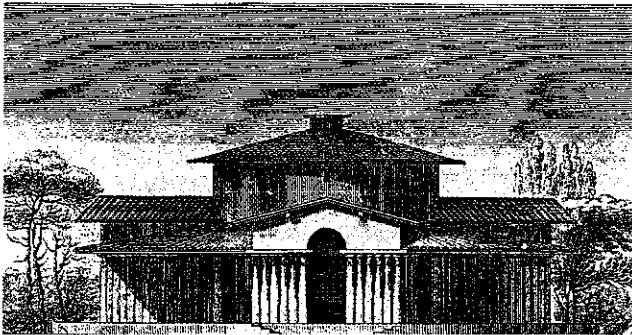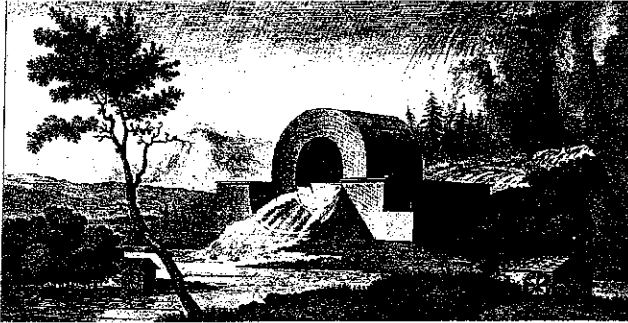
Boffrand's idea of character was, as he made clear, borrowed from poetry and drama – yet this translation to architecture was not without difficulties, for the characteristic genres of poetry and drama – epic, pastoral, comedy, tragedy – did not readily fit architecture, and much of the subsequent discussion of the topic in the eighteenth century was taken up with attempts to find characters more appropriate to architecture. It was of course precisely this dependence of 'character' upon a critical vocabulary developed in other art practices that made it so unattractive to Colin Rowe and other modernist critics.

The most systematic development of Boffrand's idea was by J.-F. Blondel. In an essay of 1766, reprinted in the *Cours d'Architecture*, he wrote:

> All the different sorts of architectural production should bear the imprint of the particular purpose of each building, all should have a character determining their general form, and announcing the building to be what it is. It is not enough for the distinctive character to be indicated only by the attributes of the sculpture ... It is the fine arrangement [*disposition*] of the general masses, the choice of forms, and an underlying style which gives to each building a bearing which suits only those of its sort. (vol. 2, 229–30)

Blondel went on to distinguish sixty-four different building *genres* (or 'types' – see 'Type', p. 304–5) discussing the form and decoration appropriate to each. Earlier, in chapter four of volume one of the *Cours*, Blondel had described the range of characters which were possible in architecture – in all he listed no fewer than thirty-eight – among them sublime, noble, free, male, firm, virile, light, elegant, delicate, pastoral, naïf, feminine, mysterious, grand, bold, terrifying, dwarf, frivolous, licentious, ambiguous, vague, barbaric, flat, trifling and impoverished (on 'male' and 'feminine', see chapter 4). Fascinating though his expositions of the

'Character' according to Blondel 'announces the building to be what it is'. For Ledoux, in common with other eighteenth-century French architects, the task was to give each *genre* an appropriate character. From top to bottom: Superintendents' house, Source de La Loue; Woodcutter's Workshop; Panarèthéon (House of Good Conduct), from Ledoux, *L'architecture*, 1804.

architectural expression of each character are, when he came to the description of the sixty-four building *genres*, he made little use of them, which is indicative of the difficulty of fitting these essentially literary figures to the determinate forms of architecture.

More fruitful than Blondel's literal borrowing from literary modes was that of Blondel's contemporary, the architect J.-D. LeRoy, who suggested that the themes expressed by architecture might instead be drawn from the experience of nature. LeRoy, in his *Histoire de la Disposition et des formes différents que les chrétiens ont données à leurs temples depuis le règne de Constantin le Grand à nos jours* (1764), wrote – and this is the English translation made by Sir John Soane, whose attachment to 'character' we shall turn to shortly –

> All grand spectacles impose on man: the immensity of the sky, the vast extent of the earth or of the sea, which we discover from the tops of mountains or from the middle of the ocean, seem to raise our minds and to enlarge our ideas. Our great works make likewise on us impressions of the same nature. We feel at their sight strong sensations, very superior to those which are only agreeable and which are the only ones which small edifices can give us. (50; Soane's translation quoted in Watkin, 1996, 201)

It is the attempt to perceive in architecture an analogous range of sensations to those experienced in front of nature that was to become the main preoccupation of late eighteenth-century discussions of character. This theme was introduced first in two British books on aesthetics, Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1762), and Thomas Whately's *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770), both of which were translated shortly after publication, the former into German, the latter into French, and had considerable influence on continental thought. Kames's was the first English use of 'character' in relation to architecture in the new sense introduced in France by Boffrand: 'every building ought to have a character or expression suited to its destination' (vol. 2, 386). Kames placed considerable stress upon the expression of utility as part of the pleasure of architecture, and was critical of literal, emblematic devices – such as the temples of Ancient and of Modern Virtue at Stowe – to create 'the certain agreeable emotions or feelings' that were the foundation of the art (vol. 2, 432, 384). Whately put forward a more exact classification of 'character' into three kinds – emblematic, imitative, and original. The shortcoming of emblematic characters – such as
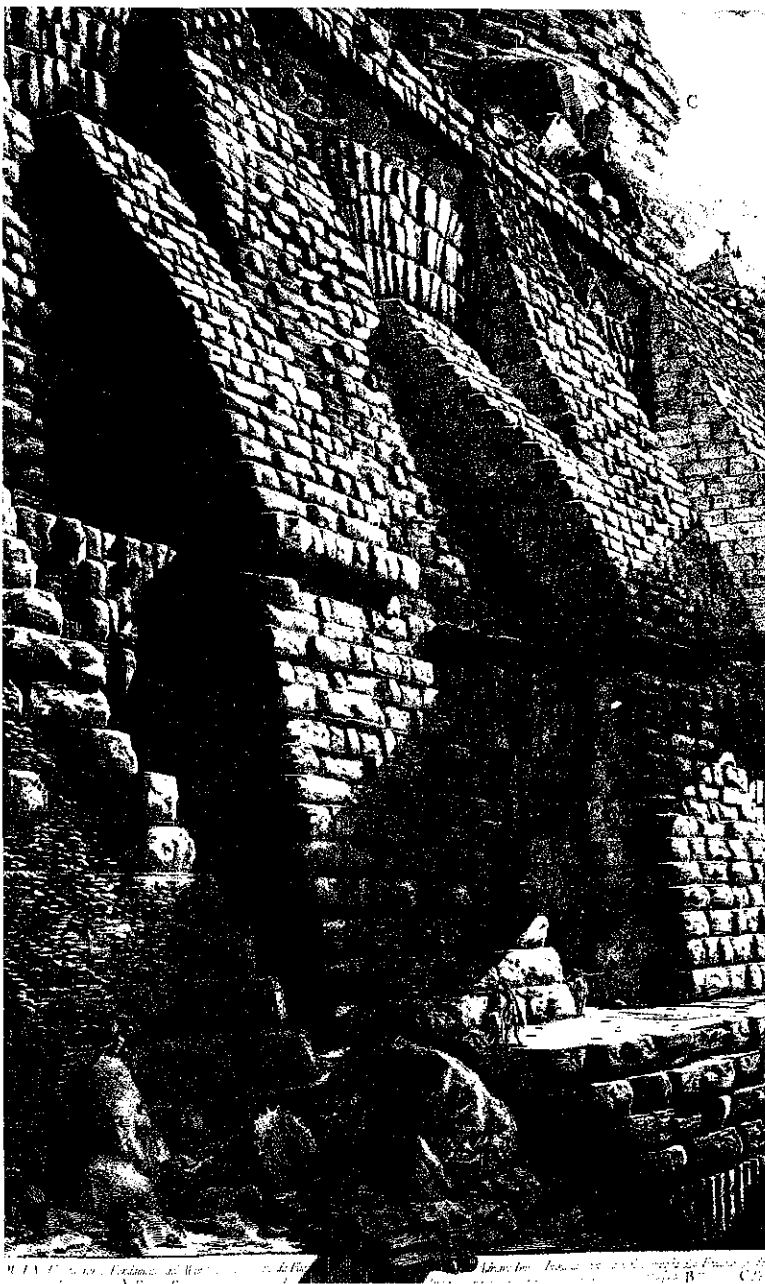
Foundations of Castel S. Angelo, Rome, etching by G.-B. Piranesi, *Antichità Romana*, *1756*. LeRoy, familiar with Piranesi's engravings and Burke's *Essay on the Sublime*, pointed out that the works of man were no less capable of stimulating emotions of horror, wonder and delight than were spectacles of nature; in the late eighteenth century, 'character' acquired a secondary meaning as a description of the property of works of architecture giving rise to such emotions.

allegorical garden ornaments, with mythological or other significance – was that 'they make no immediate impression; for they must be examined, compared, perhaps explained before the whole design of them is well understood'; far better that the allusions be 'not sought for, not laboured, and have the force of a metaphor, free from the detail of an allegory' (158). Likewise imitative character, because of the consciousness of resemblance, 'checks that train of thought which the appearance naturally suggests' (159). Whately argued that

> the art of gardening aspires to more than imitation: it can create *original* characters, and give expressions to the several scenes superior to any they can receive from allusions. Certain properties, and certain dispositions, of the objects of nature, are adapted to excite particular ideas and sensations: ... all are very well known: they require no discernment, examination, or

discussion, but are obvious at a glance; and instantaneously distinguished by our feelings. (160–61)

The merit of 'original character' is that 'we soon lose sight of the means by which the character is formed' (163).

It was this idea, that architecture might achieve a direct appeal to the spirit without mental reflection, that fascinated late eighteenth-century French architects, in particular Le Camus de Mézières, Boullée and Ledoux, and which dominated discussions of character in the latter part of the century. Here, it seemed, there was a real possibility that architecture might create 'characters' that, while analogous to nature in their effect, were entirely specific to architecture. In *Le Génie de l'architecture* (1780) Le Camus de Mézières made use of analogies from both painting and theatre to explain his notion of character, but ultimately saw architecture as capable

Elysian Fields, Stowe, Buckinghamshire, W. Kent, c. 1735. Whately suggested that landscape gardening had the power to create 'original characters', whose direct appeal to the emotions was unencumbered by allegory or intellectual reflection.
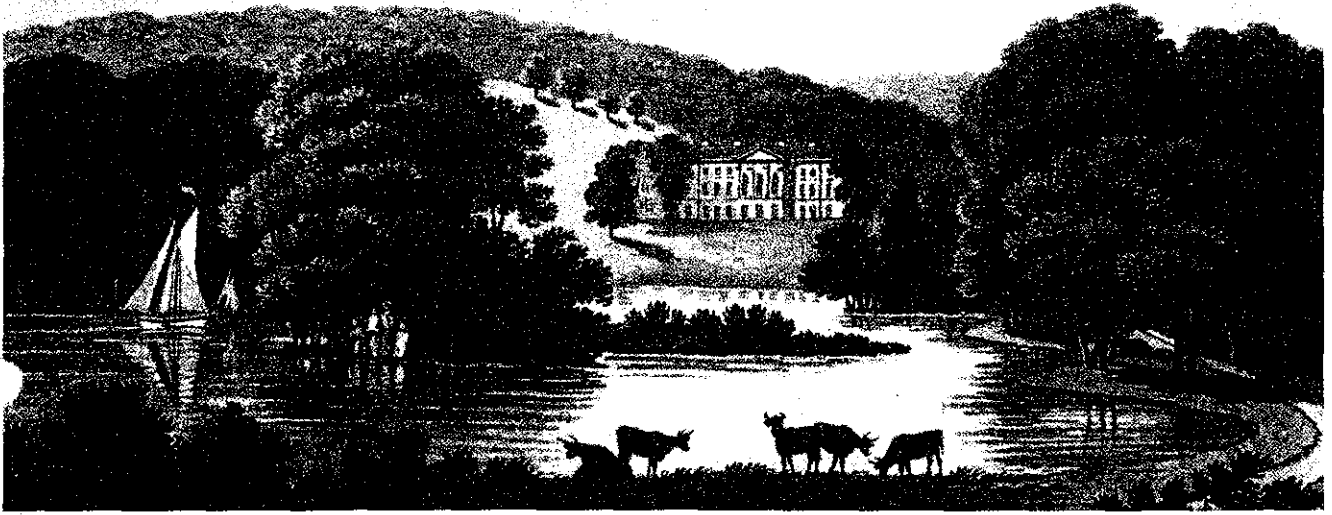
Humphry Repton's proposed changes to West Wycombe Park, Buckinghamshire, 1794–95. 'Unity of character' for practitioners of the picturesque like Repton meant 'it seemed as if some great artist had designed both the building and the landscape, they so peculiarly suit and embellish each other'. From Repton, *Observations*, 1805.

of producing its own specific characters. Within the house, 'Each room must have its own particular character. The analogy, the relation of proportions, decides our sensations; each room makes us want the next; and this engages our minds and holds them in suspense' (88). It was from Le Camus de Mézières that Boullée developed his notion of the Poetry of Architecture: here, Boullée described character in terms of the moods of the seasons – the magnificent splendour of summer, the smiling variety f autumn, the sombre gloom of winter – each of which could be expressed in architecture by means of their particular qualities of light and shade (see ill. p. 230). 'This type of architecture based on shadows', he claimed, 'is my own artistic discovery' (90).

To the two main eighteenth-century senses of 'character' described so far – the expression of the building's particular purpose, and the evocation of specific moods – we should add a third, the sense of character as expression of locality, of place. Fundamental to the practice of picturesque landscape and architecture, this particular meaning follows from Alexander Pope's well-

known lines in his 'Epistle to Lord Burlington' of 1731:

To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,
To swell the Terras, or sink the Grot;
In all, let *Nature* never be forgot.
Consult the *Genius* of the *Place* in all.

For practitioners of the picturesque, like Humphry Repton, 'unity of character' was 'amongst the first principles of good taste' (1795, 95). And as Repton's contemporary Uvedale Price explained, 'union of character' was found where 'it seemed as if some great artist had designed both the building and the landscape, they so peculiarly suit, and embellish each other' (1810, vol. 2, 177).

Of the architects mentioned so far, probably the most enthusiastic exponent of 'character' was the English architect Sir John Soane. Soane's extensive reading of French architectural thought, and his familiarity with the principles of the picturesque, gave him a particularly broad

grasp of the various senses of the concept, and in his Royal Academy lectures it was (together with 'simplicity') one of his two most heavily used critical terms, conferred upon everything of which he approved – for example of Vanbrugh, he writes 'His works are full of character, and his outlines rich and varied' (563). Soane used 'character' in all the ways so far considered. It appears in the sense used by the picturesque, to describe the relatedness of the architecture to its natural setting: 'The surrounding scenery having determined the architectural character of the villa …' (588). Secondly, following Boffrand and Blondel, Soane used 'character' to describe the architectural expression of the building's purpose. In a long and eloquent passage in Lecture XI, he pressed this sense:

> Too much attention cannot be given to produce a distinct character in every building, not only in the great features, but in the minor details likewise: even a Moulding, however diminutive, contributes to increase or lessen the character of the assemblage of which it forms a part.
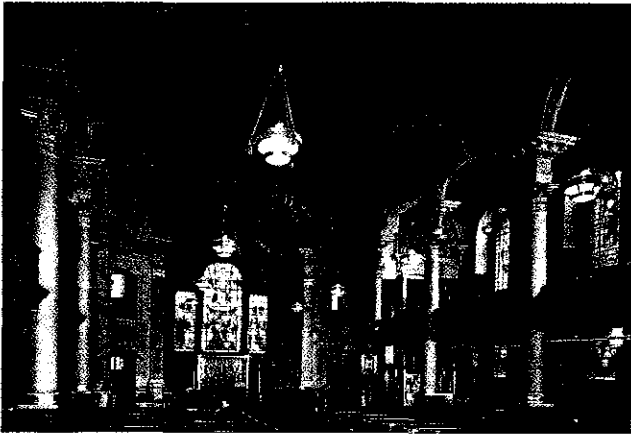
Interior, St Martin's-in-the-Fields, London, James Gibbs, 1722–26. Criticized by Soane for inappropriate character: 'who that looks at the interior of St Martin's... but is inclined to imagine himself in a private box in an Italian theatre than in a place of devotion'.

(opposite) Joseph Gandy, view under the Dome of Sir John Soane's Museum, 1811. Soane's own house in Lincoln's Inn Fields was a complex essay in the various notions of 'character' current at the end of the eighteenth century: not only did the building advertise itself as 'the house of an architect', but within Soane experimented with effects of light and dark to create different moods or 'characters' appropriate to the stages of a narrative, or of a theatrical drama.

Character is so important that all its most delicate and refined modifications must be well understood and practised with all the fine feelings and nice discrimination of the artist. He who is satisfied with heaping stone upon stone, may be a useful builder, and increase his fortune. He may raise a convenient house for his employer, but such a man will never be an artist, he will not advance the interests or credit of the art, nor give it importance in public estimation. He will neither add to its powers to move the soul, or to speak to the feelings of mankind.

Notwithstanding all that has been urged to the contrary, be assured my young friends, that architecture in the hands of men of genius may be made to assume whatever character is required of it. But to attain this object, to produce this variety, it is essential that every building should be conformable to the uses it is intended for, and that it should express clearly its destination and its character, marked in the most decided and indisputable manner. The cathedral and the church; the palace of the sovereign, and the dignified prelate; the hotel of the nobleman; the hall of justice; the mansion of the chief magistrate; the house of the rich individual; the gay theatre, and the gloomy prison; nay even the warehouse and the shop, require a different style of architecture in their external appearance, and the same distinctive marks must be continued in the internal arrangements as well as in the decorations. Who that looks at the interior of St Martin's church, and observes its sash-windows and projecting balconies at the east end, but is inclined rather to imagine himself in a private box in an Italian theatre than in a place of devotion?

Without distinctness of character, buildings may be convenient and answer the purposes for which they were raised, but they will never be pointed out as examples for imitation, nor add to the splendour of the possessor, improve the national taste, or increase the national glory. (648)

Thirdly, in a reference to Le Camus de Mézières and Ledoux, Soane described 'character' in terms of the mood created by light:

> The 'lumière mystérieuse', so successfully practised by the French artists, is a most powerful agent in the hands of a man of genius, and its power cannot be too fully understood, nor too highly appreciated. It is, however, little attended to in our architecture, and for this obvious reason, that we do not sufficiently feel

the importance of character in our buildings, to which the mode of admitting light contributes in no small degree. (598)

Turning from Soane, immersed in English and French theory, we must now consider the other generic theory of 'character' developed in the eighteenth century, that of the German Romantics. Principally identified with Goethe, the theory of 'expressive character' was developed in reaction to the various French theories, and in part emerged out of Goethe's theories of animal and plant morphology – themselves developed in reaction to French methods of biological description. The earliest and most passionate statement by Goethe of this new theory was in his essay 'On German Architecture' (1772), in which his contemplation of Strasbourg cathedral (see ill. p. 300) led him to see its character as the expression of the soul of its mason, Erwin von Steinbach. Goethe deduced from this that the truth (see p. 299–301) of all art and architecture lay in the degree to which it expressed the character of its maker: 'Now this characteristic art is the only true art. If, out of ardent, united, individual, independent feeling, it quickens, unconcerned, yea, unconscious of all that is strange, then born whether of rough savageness or of civilized sensibility, it is whole and living' (159). This notion of 'character' as the outward expression of an inner force, whether of the individuality of the artist, or of his culture, places art in a correspondence to nature. As developed by the German Romantics, this theory of character was used most particularly in relation to the national identity of art. Thus, for example, in an essay of 1816 Goethe wrote: 'just as we bring out the character of the individual which consists in not being controlled by circumstances but controlling and conquering them, so we rightly recognize in every people or group a character which manifests itself in an artist or other remarkable man' (Gage, 146).

Although the older senses of 'character', particularly that of manifesting the building's purpose, continued in normal usage during the nineteenth century, it was to be 'expressive character' that became the most active and interesting sense in which 'character' was to be used, and it was to be this theory of 'character' which prevailed, particularly in Germany and in the English-speaking world. For instance, Jacob Burckhardt's writings all rest upon the principle that national distinctions in architecture are the outcome of the expression of the specific, historically developed characters of particular peoples; and in the United States, discussions about the development of an American architecture took place largely in terms of 'char-

acter' – one may recall Emerson's indictment of American culture, 'in all, feminine, no character' (1910, vol. 4, 108).

Yet despite the widespread adoption of the notion of 'expressive character', of works of art as the outward expression of their makers' spirit, it did not go uncriticized. Even John Ruskin, whose enthusiasm for the German Romantic idea that architecture's meaning lay in its power to communicate the soul of its builders informed all his architectural writings, was nonetheless aware of its problems as a theory of architectural expression – for how was the viewing subject to be certain of understanding what they perceived in the way intended by the makers? Ruskin identified this problem in volume one of *The Stones of Venice*:

> A building which recorded the Bible history by means of a series of sculptural pictures, would be perfectly useless to a person unacquainted with the Bible beforehand .... So, again, the power of exciting emotion must vary or vanish, as the spectator becomes thoughtless or cold; and the building may be often blamed for what is the fault of its critic, or endowed with a charm which is of its spectator's creation. It is not, therefore, possible to make expressional character any fair criterion of excellence in buildings, until we can fully place ourselves in the position of those to whom their expression was originally addressed, and until we are certain that we understand every symbol, and are capable of being touched by every association which its builders employed as letters of their language. (chapter 2, §2)

It was precisely so as to put the nineteenth-century spectator 'in the position of those to whom their expression was originally addressed' that Ruskin wrote the chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic' in volume two of *The Stones of Venice*. In this chapter, the most exhaustive analysis of 'expressive character' attempted by any nineteenth-century writer, Ruskin set out to show exactly how the immanent properties of Gothic architecture communicated themselves to their audience. Drawing an analogy with the double character of rocks and minerals, their external crystalline form, and their internal atomic structure, so,

> Exactly in the same manner, we shall find that Gothic architecture has external forms, and internal elements. Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of richness, and such others. Its
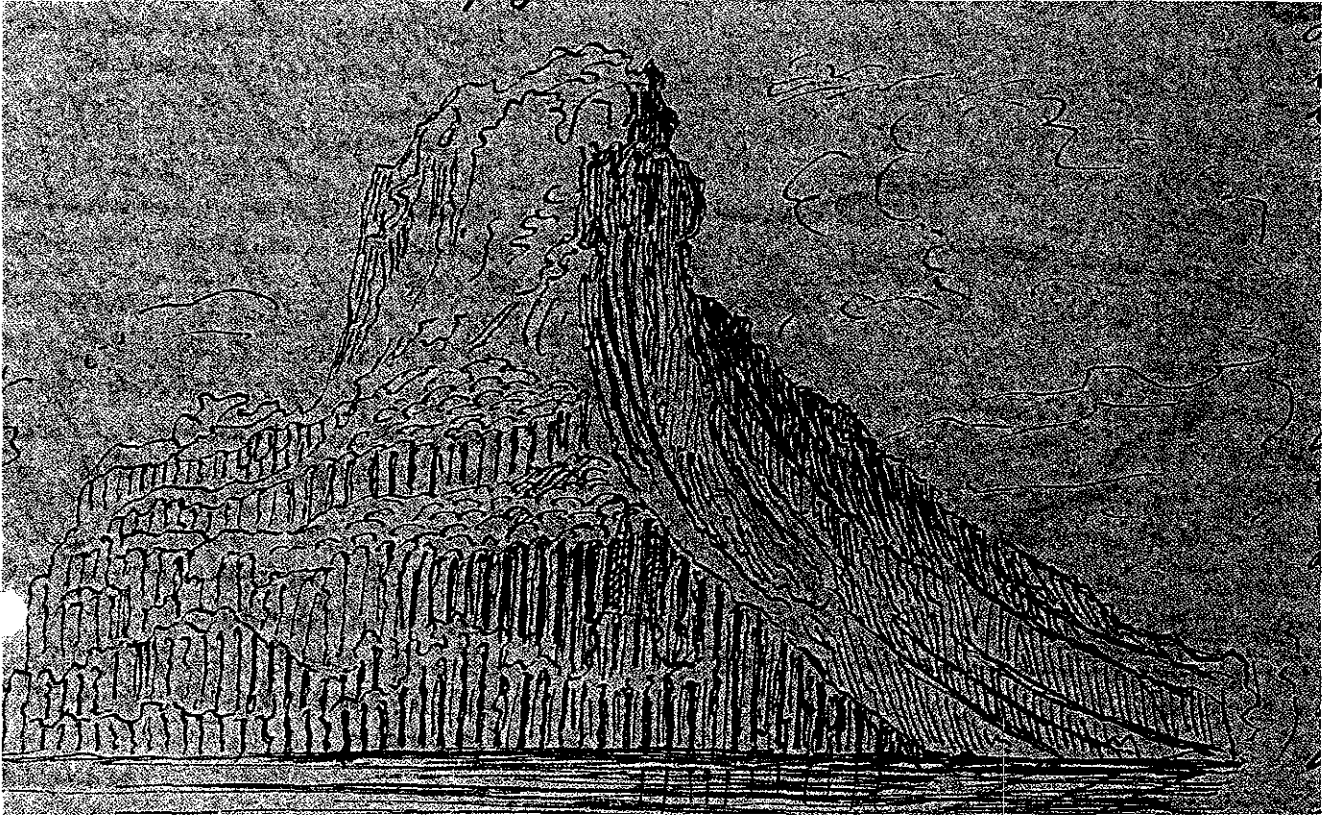
John Ruskin, sketch of island of basalt, from his Early Geological Notebook. Ruskin gave precision to the notion of 'expressive character' in architecture by an analogy with the crystalline structure of rocks and minerals in geology: the internal elements – in architecture, the mental tendencies of the builders – correspond to the outward shape of the rock, or building.

external forms are pointed arches, vaulted roofs, &c. And unless both the elements and the forms are there, we have no right to call the style Gothic. ... We must therefore inquire into each of these characters successively; and determine first, what is the Mental Expression, and secondly, what the Material Form, of Gothic architecture, properly so called. (§4)

Ruskin proceeded to list six properties of the material form of Gothic architecture (Savageness, Changefulness, Naturalism, Grotesqueness, Rigidity, Redundance), and then to show the correspondence of each of these to specific mental tendencies of the builders. Ruskin's particularly ambitious system of relating the visible characteristics of Gothic architecture to the mental and social life of its builders took the theory of 'expressive character' a step beyond the looseness of all previous uses of the concept.

The other nineteenth-century theorist to show ambivalence towards 'character' was Viollet-le-Duc. Although he, in common with many other architects and critics, lamented the lack of character of the works of his own time ('Will this age, which is so fertile in discoveries ... transmit to posterity only imitations or hybrid works, without character' [*Lectures*, vol. 1, 446]), Viollet was fiercely opposed to the whole system of elucidating the meaning of architecture in terms of character types. As he wrote in the entry on 'Construction' in the *Dictionnaire Raisonné*,

A building can in no way whatsoever be 'fanatical', 'oppressive', or 'tyrannical'; these are epithets that simply do not apply to a unitary assemblage of stones, lumber and iron. A building is either a good building or a bad one, well thought out, or devoid of any rational justification. (1990, 116)

As far as Viollet was concerned, the only meaning a building could have was in the integrity of its structure, and the system of 'characters' was superfluous. This reaction against 'character' was to become even more explicit amongst Viollet-le-Duc's American followers. Leopolod Eidlitz stated: 'The character of his [the architect's] work must refer solely to construction, and construction to the idea which is to be expressed and to the material which is at his command for the purpose' (1881, 486). And in a similar vein Henry van Brunt, in his essay 'The Growth of Characteristic Architectural Style in the United States' (1893), writes:

> the most distinctive character of our best work in architecture is its hospitality to new materials and new methods of construction, its perfect willingness to attempt to confer architectural character upon the science of the engineer, and to adapt itself without prejudice to the exactions of practical use and occupation. (321–22)

Louis Sullivan's ambivalence towards 'character', noted in the quotation at the beginning of this entry, presumably derived from the difficulty of reconciling his own passionate enthusiasm for the 'expressive character' of German Romantic thought with the structural rationalists' hostility towards 'character'.

The relative decline of 'character', in all its senses, in the early twentieth century would appear to have been primarily due to the influence of structural rationalism. Wherever structural rationalism took hold, 'character' was ridiculed. For example, W. R. Lethaby ended his rationalist 1910 lecture 'The Architecture of Adventure' by saying:

> The method of design to a modern mind can only be understood in the scientific, or in the engineer's sense, as a definite analysis of possibilities – not as a vague poetic dealing with poetic matters, with derivative ideas of what looks domestic, or what looks farmlike, or looks ecclesiastical – the dealing with a multitude of flavours – that is what architects have been doing in the last hundred years. (95)

Yet, suspicious though architects and critics became of 'character' in the modernist era, they never, as we have seen, found it possible to dispense with altogether.

1 On the history of 'character' see Szambien, *Symétrie Goût Caractère*, 1986, chapter 9, 174–99; Egbert, *The Beaux-Arts Tradition in French Architecture*, 1980, chapter 6; Watkin, *Sir John Soane*, 1996, chapter 4, 184–255; Vidler, *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux*, 1990, chapter 2, 19–73; and for a slightly different view, see Rykwert, *The Dancing Column*, 1996, 43–56.

E.-E. Viollet-le-Duc, design for a French Street Villa. Viollet-le-Duc and his followers outlawed 'character', as irrelevant to the methodical pursuit of reasoned construction that they considered to be the principal business of architecture. From Viollet-le-Duc, *Entretiens sur l'Architecture*, vol. 2, 1872.