

When the Oppressive New and the Vulnerable Old Meet; a Plea for Sustainable Modernity

BY HUBERT-JAN HENKET

The following article is an edited version of the keynote presented at the 13th International docomomo Conference that took place in Seoul, Korea, on September 2014.

The economic miracle, increasing transparency and growing emancipation are some of the striking advantages of modernity. However these meet their opposites in severe conflicts at both global and regional scales. Where the oppressive new meets the vulnerable old the damage is at its heaviest and often non-reversible.

The history of modernity in the Western world, from the European Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution to the Machine Age provides information of the root causes of these conflicts, such as the dominance of rationality, fragmentation, the linear and short term mind frame, devotion to constant newness and ever increasing scale.

The history of East Asian civilizations shows the millennia old care for the environment and for dynamic tradition.

Precisely the 14th International **docomomo** Conference in Seoul – for the first time organized entirely in an Asian country – offers the opportunity to widen our scope.

docomomo has four advantages that make it particularly useful to contribute to soften these conflicts in the future. Today it is a global organization with many different cultural backgrounds, it is multidisciplinary, it concentrates on history and on the reuse of what is already existing and it shares communal enthusiasm. Until today we concentrated our efforts mainly on the history of the Modern Movement and the restoration of its icons. We could enlarge our scope to include the reuse and transformation of the ordinary Modern Movement heritage and to research the history of modernity as well in the various cultural regions.

Some proposals will be made how we could change words into structured action, in order to contribute more effectively to a circular mindset of reuse, reduce and recycle, to arrive at a sustainable future for all.

The Chinese philosopher and religious founder of Daoism, Laozi, was born in the 6th century BCE. He was an archivist in the Zhou state library so the legend goes. His life was less important for the future of religious thought than his departure from China and his death. He loathed the spiritual situation of his time so he left “heading West — the direction of enlightenment, just as the East is for Europe — he stopped for the night with the gatekeeper of the pass across the mountains to the West. The gatekeeper asked him to leave a message or guideline for those left behind and the legend tells us that Laozi wrote the Daodejing (formerly written as Tao Te Ching) that night. Handing it over to the gatekeeper, he then departed West and was never seen again”¹.

Could this legend of Laozi and the West meeting the East be an inspiration to us after some 2500 years? Could we learn and benefit today from millennia-old East Asian wisdoms gathered over the centuries? I think we could. The Daodejing, meaning “Canon of the Way”, tells us about unity and the integration between the universe, the earth, man and nature, between the material and the non-material. Its

does and dont's form the oldest written environmental and ecological guidelines on earth. Taoism has had enormous influence on East Asian cultures and the Daodejing is one of the best sold books in the Western world.

This can't come as a surprise. Whereas the benefit of modernity and its economic miracle in both the East and the West are beyond belief, at the same time modernity creates an ecological and climatic drama and is a serious threat to centuries old, vulnerable cultural traditions.

So it makes sense, when faced with an irreversible environmental disaster to try to find ways to get out before it is too late. If **docomomo** could contribute to solutions for conflicts at regional levels, we should first look at what the idea of modernity is and how it originated. Although this is a highly complex and controversial issue allow me to give you my simple overview, for what it is worth.

The concept of modernity as we know it today originated in Europe in the 14th century CE. The Modern Movement that resulted from this at the beginning of the 20th century is not so much a particular style as it is a way of thinking, an



01 Nils Ole Lund, *The future of architecture*, Collage, 1983.

ongoing process that is a harbinger of contemporary values. You might say it is the endeavor to increase the living conditions of all through the development and implementation of inventions in science and technology. Hope, emancipation and optimism make the Modern Movement distinct from other movements.

During the last hundred years modernity has expanded to all corners of the world, not leaving even the remotest culture on the planet untouched.

Supposing that we all know by experience what the benefits of modernity are, permit me to concentrate on some of the conflicts.

- Climate and environmental change;
- Addiction to constant newness;
- A linear and short term mind set;
- Fragmentation;
- The loss of tradition and cultural identity.

In the fascinating book *Soul Mountain*, written by the Chinese Nobel Prize winner, Gao Xingjian, almost every page radiates both the wisdoms of Confucius, Buddha and Laozi

— which are still today incorporated in much of everyday living — and the confrontation of these traditions with the violent faces of modernity.

If we want to find contributions to divert the conflicts mentioned before, we should first look at the origins of modernity to understand where these conflicts come from.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in Europe in the 5th century CE a period of roughly a thousand years followed in which God All Mighty provided the answers to all phenomena man could not explain. In this task God was seconded by The King, the Church hierarchy and the monasteries. The unconditional acceptance of suffering and of injustice guaranteed a better life after death. This concept started to change during the Renaissance in the 14th century CE, first in Italy and later on in the rest of Europe. Philosophers began to reason that man had a free will without limits and that he himself could create a happier future on earth. The feudal system started to wane, the discovery of new continents took place, the introduction of the printing press and of paper occurred, etc.



02 Johannes Vermeer, *De Soldaat en het Lachende Meisje*, Painting, approx. 1660. Friek Collection, New York.

Just look for a while at this 17th century Dutch painting by Johannes Vermeer (figure 2). Here the Humanist spirit is made extremely clear. You don't look at a King, a saint, a martyr or an important member of the elite as you mostly saw on paintings of previous centuries. No, you see an everyday scene of a liberated girl having an emancipated and jolly conversation with her lover.

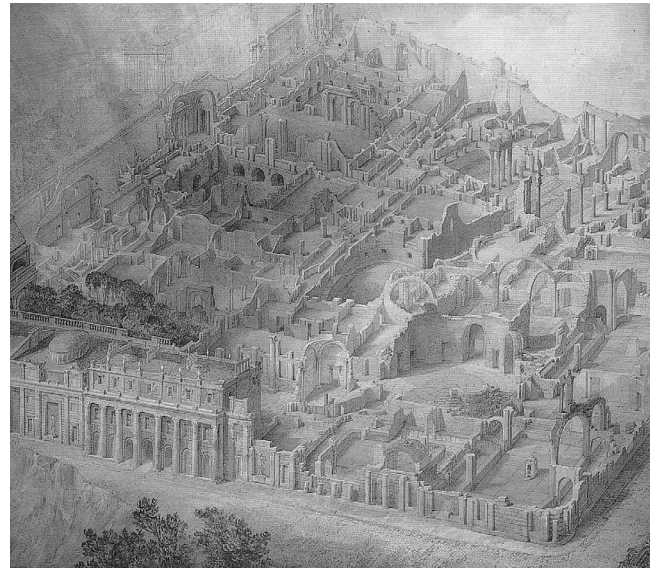
Around the time that this painting was made, the Portuguese Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza argued that if there was no proof that one existed before one's birth, how could there be any rationale for life after death? The *here* and the *now* were the only reality.

In the meantime the Dutch scientist Constantijn Huygens invented the pendulum which made the clock a common everyday object. Up to then man had lived in a circular concept of time: day and night, summer and winter, sowing and harvesting, year in year out. Slowly that was replaced by accurate time measurement in seconds, minutes and hours. *Tick, tack, tick, tack*, said the clock and the seconds disappeared into thin air, never to return. The linear time concept came into being. And when you combine this with Spinoza's reasoning that there was no life after death you will understand that Western man became in a hurry to make the best of the short here and now. The short term mindset entered the stage.

Simultaneously a concept emerged, that everything could be understood through the implementation of reason, because the cause of everything is hidden in the laws of nature. Enter the 18th century in North West Europe, the century of the Enlightenment, which together with 16th century Humanism form corner stones of modernity.

The philosopher Emanuel Kant wrote the definition which is still most in use: "the Enlightenment is the escape of man from the dependence he is only himself to blame for... Have the courage to use your own brains"².

This new frame of mind not only triggered on an enor-



03 Joseph Gandy, *A Bird's-eye View of the Bank of England* (coll. title, *The Bank in Ruins*), pen and colored washes on paper, 1830. Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

mous progress in science and technology. It also gave birth to a drastic modernization of society, the universal declaration of Human Rights, the American Revolution and the ideals of the French Revolution of freedom, equality and brotherhood. Also liberalism and socialism resulted from it. However these drastic changes did not happen without violently conflicting points of view.

Figures 3 and 4 are important in understanding how differently two architects at the same time looked at the here and now. The first painting was painted in 1830 by Joseph Gandy and shows the Bank of England as it would look after a thousand years. The complex was designed by the famous architect Sir John Soane. He wasn't a conservative at all. He introduced many innovative building techniques and state of the art functional planning. Yet his architectural creation is meant for eternity. Thus we see parts of the building still in use and parts in ruin. The message of the painting is that even after a thousand years the complex is still present and through the beauty of its composition we become aware that the continuity — in other words the connection with history and tradition — is a value that is of vital importance to a community.

Diametrically opposite to this message is a sketch by the German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel made in 1828, which is part of a letter he wrote to the Prussian King informing him about an excursion to Manchester, to learn about the effects of the successful Industrial Revolution in England. Here Schinkel experienced what the English Poet Thomas Carlyle had written a year before: "We are living in the age of the machine in every inward and outward sense of the word". The Industrial Revolution was at its peak, the result was not only of technological innovation but also of the mood of its time.

In 1714 the Anglo Dutchman Bernard Mandeville published a pamphlet. He argued that up to then thrift and uprightness were traditionally considered the pillars of an

Handwritten text in German, likely a letter or report, mentioning "Manchester" and "Fabriken".



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04 Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Factories of Manchester, Sketch, 1828.



05 Jan Duiker, Sanatorium Zonnestraal, Hilversum, Netherlands, 1928. © Sybolt Voeten.

honest Christian society. “Nonsense” he said. Look around and you see how sin does produce profit. Gentlemen, it is greed what it is all about, because if you want more than you can obtain it will lead to consumption, consumption will lead to increase in production, increase in production will result in more work and more work is profitable for all³. The commercial revolution was starting, the consumption society and the Industrial Revolution made their entrance on the world theatre.

Adam Smith, the father of capitalism went further⁴. He said that if one would not apply a division of labor, in other words specialization, one would not get an increase in production. And without an increase in production there would be no rise no raise in the standard of living and thus no increase in individualization. This is, he argued, because individualization and independence develop in proportion with the income per head of the population.

Economic reason dictated that mass production for the benefit of mass consumption is only possible through constant innovation of new products and new production processes. The devotion to the constantly new was born.

And that was precisely what made the German architect Schinkel so excited. He wrote about buildings he saw in Manchester of six to eight stories high, with paper-thin elevations, efficiently made and assembled, and easy to transform in order that the buildings could adapt rapidly to ever changing requirements. These buildings were not aesthetic providers of status with an everlasting message and meaning, like the Bank of England by Sir John Soane. These were flexible and rational containers responding to the needs of a world in rapid change.

In 1835 the French philosopher Alexis de Toqueville also visited the city of Manchester. Opposite to Karl Friedrich Schinkel, he was stunned by what he experienced. He wrote: “here civilization demonstrates its wonders, yet civilized man has almost been reduced to a savage”⁵.

Country folk, looking for work in the new industrial cities, were here degraded to a miserable and anonymous proletariat. Obviously they could not handle the dynamics of rapid change and fragmentation, because their histories, traditions and habits that had provided strong and long-lasting bonds with agrarian communities did not count any longer in these anonymous environments. Even today we recognize this as a global problem. As a reaction to this Karl Marx wrote his Communist Manifesto in 1848. Uprisings and revolutions broke out all over Europe.

In the meantime a growing middle class emerged, that had managed to liberate themselves from the grip of the old elites, thanks to the ideas of the Enlightenment and the financial successes the Industrial Revolution had brought them. To protect their new status for themselves and for their children, many adopted the conventions and the conservative outlook of the old aristocracy.

In literature, painting and architecture a social reaction against this conservatism emerged which culminated in the beginning of the 20th century. *Tabula rasa* was the new idea of the young intelligentsia and progressive artists, an unconditional new beginning without the strangle hold of traditions and old habits. Emancipation and freedom for everybody was from now on the goal. Devotion to invention and to the constantly new entered the realm of architecture. History and tradition disappeared into the dustbin of progress. Many different approaches within the Modern Movement in architecture appeared. Take for example the Zonnestraal Sanatorium in the Netherlands designed by architect Jan Duiker in 1928 (figure 5). Duiker — a functionalist — believed in what he called spiritual economy. By this he meant that everything, both material and non-material, should be realized with as little means and energy as possible. By the way, Duiker’s approach of doing more with less and taking the responsibility for environmental harmony in one’s own hand echoes the intentions of Daoism.



06 Eduard Louis de Coninck, Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle, Netherlands, 1838.
© Michel Kievits.

Back to the cradle of the Modern Movement in the early days of the 20th century: as I mentioned many different interpretations emerged in Europe as to why, how and what the Modern Movement was to be. Via the European colonial powers and much more so through the modern media, the idea of modernity in architecture and local interpretations mushroomed all over the world. Architects like Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil, Luis Barragán in Mexico, Charles Correa in India, Kenzo Tange in Japan and Kyu Sung Wu in Korea all developed a distinctly different approach to modernity.

A question is: due to its unscrupulous and dynamic force, can the icons they and many others have produced, mask the reality that modernity has created serious conflicts. Isn't it so that these conflicts multiplied in the last fifty or so years, due to the ever increasing scale of what we are doing?

Two of the main global problems we are facing today — climate change and violent clashes between old cultures and Modernity — have their roots in the history of modernity.

Fragmentation, for example, was promoted by Adam Smith in 1776 as the rational engine of progress. In 1911 F.W. Taylor published the principles of scientific management promoting standardization and the division of labor into separate, scientifically researched tasks. Henry Ford successfully implemented the Taylor principles and from then on they were adopted in the building industry, in urban design, and, in all levels of the market economy. As I showed you before, linear and short-term decision making, the addiction to the constantly new, the ever increasing scale and the dominance of rationality all originated from the Enlightenment and the European Industrial Revolution of the 18th century; in other words in the cradle of modernity.

The next question is: can we — as self-appointed caretakers of the heritage of the Modern Movement contribute to soften these conflicts? I surely think we can and we should.

In 2012 at our 12th International **docomomo** Conference in Helsinki, John Allen gave a stimulating key note

titled: “From Sentiment to Science; **docomomo** Comes of Age”. In it he argued that a shared love of the most precious achievements of the heroic period of Modernism had brought us together, with the Zonnestraal Sanatorium as the seed for **docomomo**'s birth. He put the question to us: “isn't it time to redefine our mission?”. He continued, “the conditions of our time have surely taught us that progress must now consist in learning how to renew the world with things that exist already”⁶. Next he stretched the concept of heritage by saying “the materials we are dealing with in Modern Movement buildings — cement, steel, aluminium, copper, oil based products — have some of the highest embodied energy values of any building materials. We must begin to appreciate this investment in energy and material as another kind of heritage”. John Allen concluded his presentation with these extremely relevant questions: “If — as the slogan has it — the greenest building is the one already built — then the question, I put to **docomomo** is whether it is willing to venture into this territory and master the science and politics of sustainability and embodied energy in the cause of keeping modern buildings? Or would we rather stay in our comfort zone, immersed in history and culture and carrying on lovingly restoring our favorite icons?”⁷.

In 2008 we started the debate concerning sustainability. Today in 2014 it is about time that we exchange words for action here in Seoul. Thus my proposal is twofold. In the Council Meeting we should agree to adjust the Eindhoven statement in which we establish our (revised) commitment. My personal response to John's clear appeal is that we should do both.

Besides we should make a serious start with the science and politics of sustainability at this conference, by establishing a new **docomomo** International Specialist Committee on Sustainability. Its task should be to prepare a framework how we will respond to this challenge. Part of this endeavor might be to establish our strategy of care not only towards the older stock but also as regards the vast quantity of modern architecture manifestations of the last 20 years. These environmentally destructive buildings for which competition who is the biggest, the tallest and the most expressive seems to be the yard sticks of architectural success and stardom.

Simultaneous with this endeavor we should surely continue with our attention to the histories of the Modern Movement and the restoration of its icons and the renovation of the more mundane remnants. Why? Not only to contribute to a more green society but also because science and technology in themselves are useless without the combination with the power of imagination, historical facts and philosophy.

Let me quote Antonio Damasio, a famous brain researcher from Portugal and author of international bestsellers such as *Descartes's Error* and *Looking for Spinoza*. He writes: “Our lives for a large part are driven by the guidelines of our individual biological structure stored in our brains and for an important part by the guidelines from a culture outside our brains, as the historical contribution of enormous amounts

of similar brains. To that culture belong art objects, buildings instruments, rules and regulations, habits, traditions, rituals, courtesies, peculiarities and what not. We live within that opaque, misty past, that dependant on the spot on the planet we find ourselves or where we grew up, that always adopts completely different forms”⁸. Also the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa in his keynote lecture entitled *Newness, Tradition and Identity*, at the previous International **docomomo** Conference in Helsinki, stressed the importance of tradition and continuity compared to the obsessive search for the constantly new and uniqueness. “Cultural identity, a sense of rootedness and belonging is an irreplaceable ground of our very humanity” he said. Juhani talked about tradition as something dynamic that has to be re-invented and re-created by each new generation.

He said: “Tradition maintains and safeguards the collective and accumulated existential wisdom of countless generations. It also gives a reliable direction to the new and maintains the comprehensibility and meaning of the new”⁹.

As the French physicist Blaise Pascal said: “the past and the present are our measure, the future our goal”.

If you combine the two phenomena of care for historical fact and tradition together with the green necessity of reusing what is already there, both in order to soften some of the conflicts we are facing globally, than you are right at the core of what **docomomo** could be in the future.

One of the most crucial characteristics of **docomomo** is that we are a global family of architects, historians, conservation specialists and landscape architects all interested in how the new and the old can meet.

So why don't we adjust ourselves to the new global situation? We are perfectly suited for it because of our focus and the integration of our various backgrounds.

This is why I make this urgent appeal to you all. Because our survival is at stake let us join forces by making use of the incredible advantages of modernity, to conquer the serious conflicts modernity is delivering in an ever increasing scale as well.

Let us contribute to the model where economic growth is developing in harmony with the principles of reuse, reduce and recycle. In other words leave the principles of the linear economy — brought about by modernity — behind and embrace a circular economy of sustainable modernity.

In concrete terms this could involve the following plan of action:

- Explain to the public in general and politicians in particular what the benefits are of reusing existing buildings and of continuity and tradition, in order to create harmony between the economic, social and environmental demands.
- Change the curricula at the schools and faculties of architecture to include history of modernity as well as the conservation and adaptive reuse of what is there already as a standard part of the education of all students involved in the building industry.
- Stimulate architects to design appropriate buildings which are sustainable, in other words, which are based on the principles of reuse, reduce and recycle. Buildings that create love and care rather than awe and hatred.

Indeed love and care for our environment and the cultures of the communities we serve are the main ingredients in making a better world for all. And a better world for all will remain the main goal of the Modern Movement.

Our real challenge is to bring the new and the old together in such an inventive and harmonious way that the results are both inspiring and sustainable.

May the wisdom from the Daodejing be our guide in this endeavor: “The earth is a sacred vessel” and cannot be owned or improved. If you try to possess it, you will destroy it; if you try to hold on to it — you will lose it”¹⁰. ■

Notes

- 1 Allerd Stikker, *Sacred Mountain*, London, Bene Factum Publishing, 2014.
- 2 See Immanuel Kant, *Wat is de Verlichting*, Kampen, Kok, 1988.
- 3 Bernard Mandeville, *Fabel van de Bijen Particuliere Zonden, Algemeen Profijt*, 1714.
- 4 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776.
- 5 Alexis de Toqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, Chapter Manchester, 1835.
- 6 John Allen, “From Sentiment to Science — **docomomo** Comes of Age”, *Proceedings of the 12th International **docomomo** Conference*, Espoo, Finland, 2012.
- 7 *Idem*.
- 8 Antonio Damasio, “Twee Culturen, één Brein”, *Nexus*, vol. 66, 2014.
- 9 Juhani Pallasmaa, “Newness, Tradition and Identity — Existential Meaning in Architecture”, *Proceedings of the 12th International **docomomo** Conference*, Espoo, Finland, 2012.
- 10 Daodejing, chapter 29.

Hubert-Jan Henket

(b. 1940, Netherlands). Hubert-Jan Henket is a practicing architect in the Netherlands, professor emeritus of the Eindhoven and Delft Universities and Honorary President of **docomomo** International.

He graduated cum laude in 1969 at the Faculty of Architecture at the Delft University of Technology Afterwards and he studied Urban Design at the Otaniemi University in Helsinki Finland. From 1971 he worked in London until 1976 when he started Hubert-Jan Henket architects in the Netherlands. Since 2010 the practice is known as Bierman Henket architects. He held the chair of building technology at Eindhoven University from 1984 till 1998 and one of the chairs in architecture at Delft University from 1998 till 2005. In 1988, together with Wessel de Jonge, he founded **docomomo**. He is the chairman of the Rietveld Schröder House Foundation and the Theo van Doesburg House Foundation. Together with Hilde Heynen he edited the book *Back from Utopia, the Challenge of the Modern Movement*. Recently he published a book in Dutch: *Where New and Old Meet, a Plea for Sustainable Modernity in Architecture*.

His architectural work, which mainly concentrates on the relationship between new and old, received wide coverage. He is involved in the restoration of buildings by Rietveld, Dudok and Duiker. He designed among others 11 museums, such as the extension to the Teylers Museum in Haarlem and recently the Museum de Fundatie in Zwolle, for which he received the Dutch Design Award 2013. Together with Wessel de Jonge he received the World Monuments Fund, Knoll Modernism Prize for the restoration of the Zonnestraal Sanatorium in Hilversum, the Netherlands. Hubert-Jan Henket was awarded the *Bernhard Cultuurfonds Prijs* for his complete oeuvre and the Kubus of the Dutch Institute of Architects. He is a Knight of the Order of the Dutch Lion.