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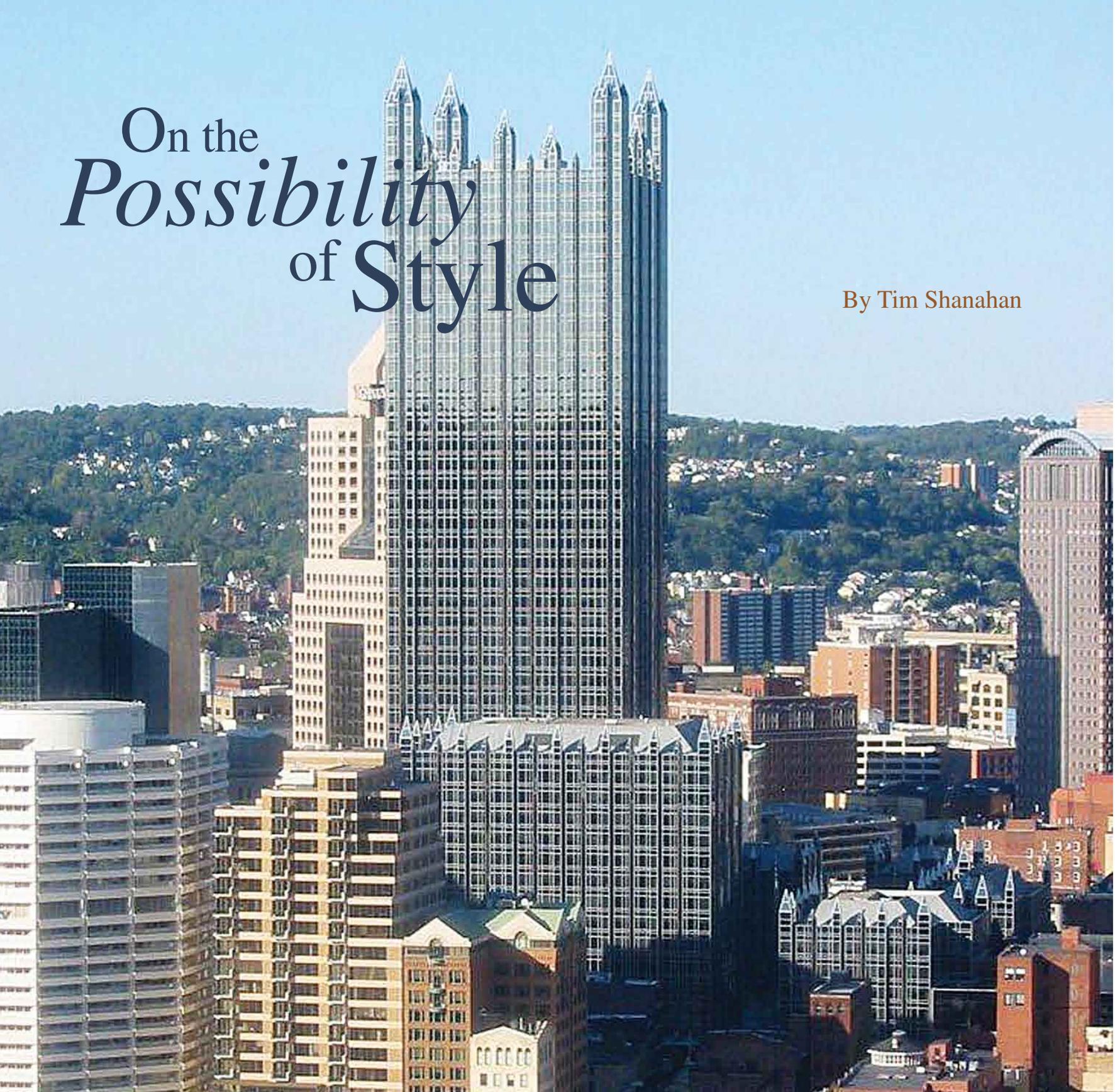
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On the *Possibility* of Style

By Tim Shanahan

Style is a much-debated concept within the architectural community. The following essay interrogates the intellectual coherence of the concept in order to determine the full extent of its influence for the profession of architecture. The author contends that style, as it is commonly understood, cannot exist at the physical level, and is most likely a social, rather than an architectural, phenomenon. Through this change in perception of style, we can approach a better understanding of its social implications and its role in building design.

The idea of style is a deeply troubling one for the profession of architecture. It is a pervasive and influential concept, but it is often only spoken of in hushed tones or quotation marks. Architects are highly resistant to the labeling of their own work as a style or "of" a certain style. Similarly, critics are equally hesitant to use the term, for they often feel as if it is overly reductive or disrespectful to the architecture in question. The largest problem with style, however, is not that it cheapens architecture, but that *it might not actually exist*. Style is an intellectually weak concept that does not exist at the tectonic level of architecture; rather, it persists as a folk classification that attempts to process the diversity of buildings without saying anything about the buildings themselves. And yet, as a concept, it is popular and will likely remain so indefinitely. Its weaknesses have been overcome by its legitimization as a concept by a number of prestigious institutions and buildings, as well as its continual tacit acceptance. A thorough understanding of style must recognize that

style is maintained as a social construction that provides meaning at the social, as opposed to the tectonic, level of architecture. In this paper, I intend to show how architectural style functions as a social constitution in order to explain style's inability to withstand basic interrogation and continued existence as a pervasive concept in architecture.

Like architecture itself, style has enjoyed many definitions over the years, perhaps as partial testament to its ties to the vicissitudes of socially determinate culture. Twentieth-century architect Le Corbusier has described it as a "lie," "a feather in a woman's hat," and "a unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch,"(citation) among other things. Architectural historian *par excellence* Nikolas Pevsner referred to style "as an approach to the life that slumbers unconsciously within all of us"(citation) in a paragraph that dismissed the concept as inappropriate for the description of architecture. Style has also been described as mere "tendencies" by gothic revivalist Adams Cram.(citation)

Style as a genre comes from the definition that emerged in the seventeenth century. The

word is derived from the term *stylus*, which refers to an instrument used for writing. It has also referred to a piece of writing itself, or sections or paragraphs within a single document, as well as connoting textual qualities. By the fifteen hundreds, a more modern definition had emerged; style began to refer to form, or the manner in which something was done. By 1706, the Oxford English Dictionary records style as the way in which a work of art is executed. The emergence of this definition coincides with the emergence of scientific rational classification schemes across intellectual disciplines. It is hardly surprising, then, that the study of aesthetics would adopt the same taxonomy-based value systems that were appearing in a variety of pseudo-academic disciplines.

The folk understanding of style coincides with a general increased usage of the scientific method, as well as knowledge in the European world. During this time, European intellectuals were thinking more critically about art and the nature of knowledge itself. Archeological expeditions, as well as colonial activities and general travel, occasioned

encounters with exotic people and cultures, which precipitated a classification effort within the languages of the colonial powers. Knowledge of the world and of the past, greatly expanded during this time and, unlike at any other time, Europeans were acutely aware of their location within a broader and more diverse understanding of humanity. New words were needed to articulate the ideas that emerged to classify this outpouring of information about Europe's past and its global neighbors. The evolution of style's definition reflects these trends, as the term soon aided the classification of art, crafts, and architecture, pursuant to the European intellectual's need to incorporate the scientific method and classify everything according to the rational aspirations espoused by the enlightenment. For Peter Collins, the emergence of the awareness of styles "aroused a concern for classification whereby a new science of archeology was developed, which treated buildings like documents of historical research; it [also] introduced a fashion for imaging Roman compositions, however alien these might be to the purpose the new building was intended to serve." It is likely that the opposition to style in contemporary architectural practice and parlance is influ-

were constructed with such a constrained number of visual styles, the styles became abstracted from the original programs that the structural elements were once used to support. In other words, style was further reduced to aestheticism when it was no longer attached to the buildings that the constituent elements of the style in question were derived from. Thus gothic was divorced from its original attempt to covey the wonders of Heaven when it was used in the building of houses, parliamentary halls, and other secular buildings. Classical architecture as we know it today was also aestheticized and de-principled when it was applied to housing, churches, libraries, and other buildings in ways the ancient Greeks did not use it. It was once said that style should be the *result* of great architecture; however, it could be argued that style was the *cause* or inspiration for many of the major buildings at this time.

The intensification of style's usage coincides with the crystallization of the Victorian classificatory geist. During this time, great effort was extended to identifying and ranking styles according to their appropriateness for a variety of uses. Style, in its most vulgar form, reached its height in the nineteenth century as various architectural styles were applied to

Chartres Cathedral

important to realize the degree to which the use of architectural style was also involved in a broader nation-state movement where a national architecture was sought. This had the curious effect of many countries claiming for themselves architecture that was developed in the absence of the nation-state or for ecclesiastical purposes. In short, style was simply another aesthetic consideration that was supposed to accompany choices in language, music, and other forms of national self-representation.

During this time, a style was used as an inspiration for a building's image and prescribed the inclusion of certain features that came to be rigidly associated with the said style. Thus gothic architecture could be achieved by building something that looked gothic, giving the structure pointed arches, for example, as well as a number of other elements that came

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enced by a prolonged reaction to the excesses and abuses of nineteenth-century building. Ironically, it is arguable that the way in which people came to understand style as it relates to architecture also emerged at this time. The idea that there could be a discrete "gothic" and a discrete "classical" or "classicism" was likely legitimized by many of the buildings that were built during the nineteenth century. Given that so many different building types

a number of large and prestigious buildings without regard to historical accuracy or appropriateness. Trends in architectural education as well as the popularity of architectural pattern books helped popularize certain styles over others. Style, in the way architects tend to hate most, was used to justify the building of Gothic, Classical, Egyptian, Renaissance, and occasionally Asian buildings that accommodated a variety of programs. It is also

to be associated with the gothic look over time. Similarly, Egyptian architecture could be "achieved" by building with a certain heaviness, including battered walls, and specially ornamented columns. While the architecture was intellectual on some level—Egyptian architecture came to have funerary associations, and classical architecture remained popular for civic and public buildings—the impetus was largely aesthetic. A cursory study

"new-architecture" style which was inclusive of five particular points or elements. (citation) The Bauhaus school was equally suspicious of style but believed that Bauhaus architecture and design were discrete and indefinable; a building was categorized not by its look, but due to certain steps taken the design of the structure.

In most cases, however, style is a glib classification designated to buildings that look a

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of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture reveals the pervasive influence of purely aesthetic considerations on architectural practice as a limited number of styles are applied, comically at times, to an extremely wide variety of buildings.

Architects are right to generally object to style's use as it applies to architecture, albeit for the wrong reasons. The ultimate problem with style is that it does not exist in a tangible way. The most basic assumption of style is that it is believed to be generated out of the qualities of the building itself, but it is arguable that it is often the other way around; this is apparent in cases where ambiguous buildings are subsumed into a specific style. Over the years, a number of arguments have been put forth to support style as either a chronological, structural, or programmatic phenomenon, in addition to a purely aesthetic consideration. The architecture community has introduced several arguments that acknowledge something approaching style. However, these arguments tend to stress the more intellectually-prestigious *method* of design as opposed to the mannerist application of visual elements. While Le Corbusier was generally suspicious of the concept, he seemed to advance what might be called a

certain way or are consistent with our *idea* of what that particular style should be. Thus I would argue that style is not a structural or programmatic phenomenon, but a social one. It is not the buildings themselves that have style, but rather, our belief that they do. In actuality, *style is a mutable and socially constructed mechanism that allows us to bring non-identical buildings into intellectual coherence*. This assertion causes a number of problems due to the discontinuity between the folk construction of a style and the physical construction of any single building. For one, it is not known which parts of a building are determinant or generative of a style. The mutability of the style mechanism renders the distinction between the qualities of a building that are essential and those only incidental to its style nearly impossible. That two buildings could be of the same style and not look or function in the same way poses a problem for classifying them, because an arbitrary selection of qualities of either will have to be used to bring them into stylistic congruity. Hence, it seems as though style generalizes across cases, and also within them, because it is likely that many buildings "of" a certain style will lack some of the structural features conventionally associated with that style.

Consider an attempt to describe two buildings that many would tacitly agree are both legitimately gothic: Chartres Cathedral and Yale Law School. Chartres and Yale were built at different times and with different methods, proving that style cannot be a chronological phenomenon. They are also of different programs, which excludes that consideration. Chartres has flying buttresses and uniformly-pointed windows, while Yale Law School has a number of rectangular windows and lacks flying buttresses; this rules out fenestration and other surface attributes as determinant qualities. Yale Law School is constructed mostly of red brick with heavy quoins, while Chartres is made almost entirely of stone, so materiality cannot be used as the basis of style either. Finally, Yale Law has many crenulated eves, whereas Chartres does not. And yet, despite the fact that these buildings have considerable differences in both their appearances and in the execution of their basic structural qualities, one would be

Yale Law School

hard-pressed to find anyone who would disagree with the assertion that the buildings are not both of the same style, or at least related.

The challenge of finding "gothicness" is further complicated by buildings that have even less continuity. The Tribune Tower by Raymond Hood and the PPG Building by Phillip Johnson look almost nothing alike and are certainly very different from either Yale Law or Chartres, and yet each has been described as gothic. Admittedly, Yale Law looks

more gothic than the Tribune Tower, but the Tribuwne Tower has flying buttresses just like Chartres. Johnson's PPG Building seems like it should represent the biggest contradiction to its gothic classification, yet one could argue it does not because its glass construction allows for maximal light penetration, which was one of the principle attributes of gothic construction. Program cannot be safely relied upon lest the PPG Building is to be considered more gothic than Chartres.

The Baughnum Center at the University of Florida is also another serious challenge to the idea of style. The building looks gothic because it has the silhouette, along with several other features, of a gothic cathedral. However, the Center utilized rationalist construction methods to dematerialize the structure. It is also modern in its absence of ornamentation and general structural objectivity. This poses the problem of trying to decide where one style ends and another begins. Can a building be gothic if it uses modern means to execute a gothic principle? Its form cannot be relied upon, because there are other supposedly gothic buildings that do not share its cathedral

shape. Perhaps the building is "bi-styled," but this assertion lacks intellectual rigor since the two styles are so adulterated.

The differences in the aforementioned buildings expose the limitations of assigning a style to anything that has to do with the buildings themselves, despite our continual willingness to associate them with each other. The concept of style itself is the construct that allows us to group these and other buildings together by giving us a mutable mechanism to continue to act as if the styles themselves exist. In this way, the gothic style is functioning as a social constitution, insofar as it is a category that has become embedded into the institutional fabric of society and participates in our common stock of social knowledge. Its mutability allows us to arbitrarily borrow different features to subsume a building into a style.

The concept of social constructivism was first advanced by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckmann argue that people and groups interact with each other, and these interactions then become habituated into norms and reciprocal roles that are played out

over and over again. Eventually, these roles are institutionalized as more and more people tacitly act as though they exist. At this point these norms are said to be socially constructed, and they are maintained by people's willingness to let them influence their behavior. These networks form a social reality that is separate from the world of real things but influences our organization of the knowledge of the world of real things.

The process of the legitimization of social constructions occurs through a variety of mechanisms, but for my purposes, I will limit my inquiry to language and signs, since many styles have a word that designates a collection of signs into a discrete style. Architecture is full of signs, and styles can be thought of as

tion. The subjective nature of social reality allows us to arbitrarily and conveniently group non-identical buildings together into the same style by picking and choosing from a variety of characteristics until we bring the building sufficiently in line with our construction of what constitutes gothic, or any other style.

Despite the criticisms against the content of style, it would be foolish to dismiss its existence. The idea of style serves an important function in the social fabric of society because it allows us to deal with the vast diversity in building as well as maintain our ability to communicate with architecture. For instance, we have decided to accept as classical any architecture that is vaguely associated with the construction of a Greek temple like

Baughnum Center at the Univeristy of Florida

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collections of these signs. These signs—for example, pediments, columns, and capitals in classical architecture—run the risk of losing their meaning when outside of the sign system of a style. The social—as opposed to, say, the determinately structural—nature of style allows for some flexibility in classification. This is how non-identical buildings can still be of the same style, at least on an intellectual level. When there are not enough signs to support the desired sign system, the system breaks down because people refuse to tacitly behave as though it exists. So long as people are willing to refer to something as such, a style can continue despite the intellectual weaknesses and contradictions exposed above. Our language allows us to designate Yale Law School and Chartres, as well as the Tribune Tower, as gothic because there is not a mass critical movement against this folk classifica-

the Parthenon. Temples, however, were exceptional buildings and in no way communicate the diversity of building practices undertaken in the thousands of years of Greek civilization. However, by arbitrarily selecting a few qualities or examples, we can transmit other arbitrarily-associated ideas of Greek civilization in perpetuity. Hence classical architecture often uses pediments and Ionic and Corinthian columns to communicate democracy, civic participation, citizenship, and representative governments to people who tacitly accept these meanings. However, society could just as easily use amphitheaters and tholi to communicate the values of sexism, slavery, olive farming, or any other ideas that one might associate with ancient Greece. The reciprocal acceptance of the former architectural value set allows us to hone the notion of classicism until it is both entrenched and intuitive.

To deny style is to deny hundreds, if not thousands of years of collective efforts to legitimize and establish the social construction of values into our stock of architectural knowledge. Social constructions are, after all, heuristics that allow us to get beyond the particulars of individual cases. This may cause problems in other areas, but for architecture it can be our medium. Style may be a weak concept, but it will remain an important one as long as we want to allow architecture to participate in the social fabric of our collective system of signs and meanings. Architects may feel as though their work is above, beyond, or without a certain style, but they should be wary of the power of reciprocal interaction to form reified mutable categories that actively work to subsume style. And besides, I would venture to say that it is rather tough to defeat something that never existed in the first place.

Tribune Tower

PPG Building