On the Controversy of Classicism

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The subject of classicism has been the focus of numerous architectural debates in the last few years. While advocates proclaim its rational tectonic discourse an alternative to the eclectic practice of post-modernism, its antagonists reject its dogmatic principles as contradictory to the progress of modernity.
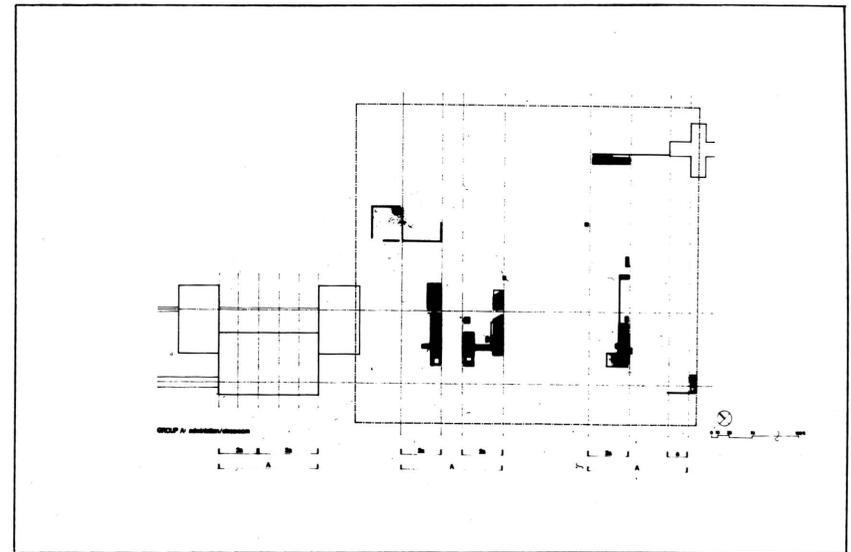
Earlier this year, the same controversy exploded in unprecedented magnitude during the jury of an international design competition when the four noted judges/architects tried to select a first-place winner. The following is an excerpt from the heated debate.

GROUP A: administration/classroom

A   I would like to recommend Scheme 101 for the first award. Its plan is beautifully composed with a clear sense of spatial hierarchy. Its elevations are meticulously proportioned to accent the overall and local symmetries. What a wonderfully classical solution to the problem.

B   I agree with you about its elegant composition. But how can you call this a "classical" solution when there is no architectural features derived from the Classical Antiquity? It does not resemble anything remotely classical to me.

C   I don't think, B, you should define the classical according to appearance. That is too superficial. Both Vitruvious and Alberti have attributed the harmony of parts as a quintessential character of the classical.

Even though the architectural features in Scheme 101 are plain and simple, it is the way that they have been unified that makes it classical. Therefore, I am with A that Scheme 101 deserves to be given the first award.
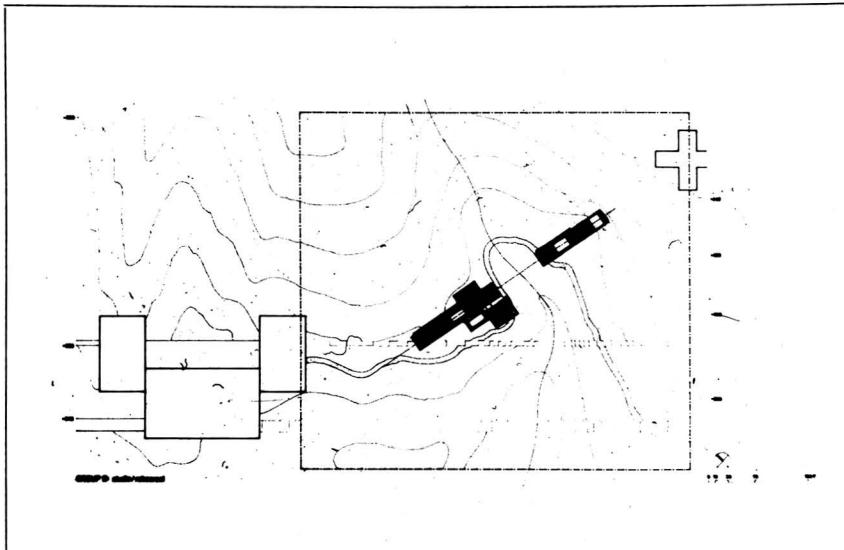
D   I don't think that this discussion is fruitful. I agree with both A and C that the classical is not a matter of style. Despite Scheme 101's abstract image, it is extremely classical in content.

But, let us not forget that the purpose of this competition is to recognize significant architectural contribution to the culture of late 20th Century. Therefore, I think that the first award should be given to a scheme that reflects the complex conditions of our time. In this respect, a more classical scheme may not be a better scheme.

Now if you will, let us shift our discussion to Scheme 5923. By giving the essential components of the architectural program distinct formal identites, Scheme 5923 has ingeniously ruptured the boundary of the monotonous building block with an ensemble of discrete component buildings.

Our design aims to recognize the hybrid character of the Media Arts Center by giving individual expressions to its different programmatic components. The site plan is generated from the superimposition of three distinct ordering systems, each responding to a specific contextual condition.

D Look at the variety of forms and spaces created by the loose configuration of its plan. Like a kaleidoscope, it evokes ever-changing perceptions and interpretations. To me, Scheme 5923 offers a much richer architectural experience than Scheme 101. I think that it should be given the first award instead.

GROUP B: studio/rehearsal

A I agree that perhaps we should not use the classical as a criteria for judging this competition. But, D, what is a "richer experience" to you is simply too confusing to me. It has no knuckles for connections, no unifying gestures for its different component buildings, and no hierarchy in its spatial and formal configuration. Everything in it is irregular and different.
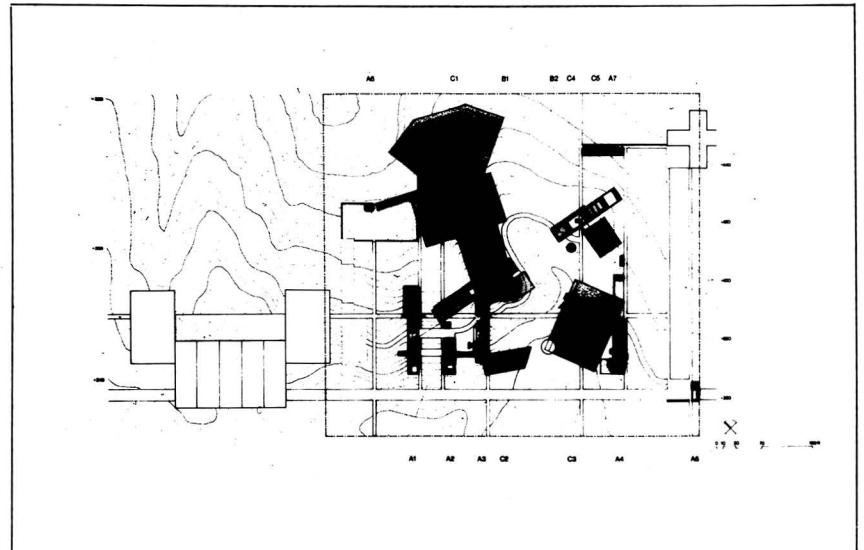
GROUP A + B + C

C Right on! I find it extremely disturbing that there is not a single ordering system to it. As soon as one begins to identify a possible parti in the scheme, another element would interfere to render a coherent reading of that parti invalid. It makes no sense to me.
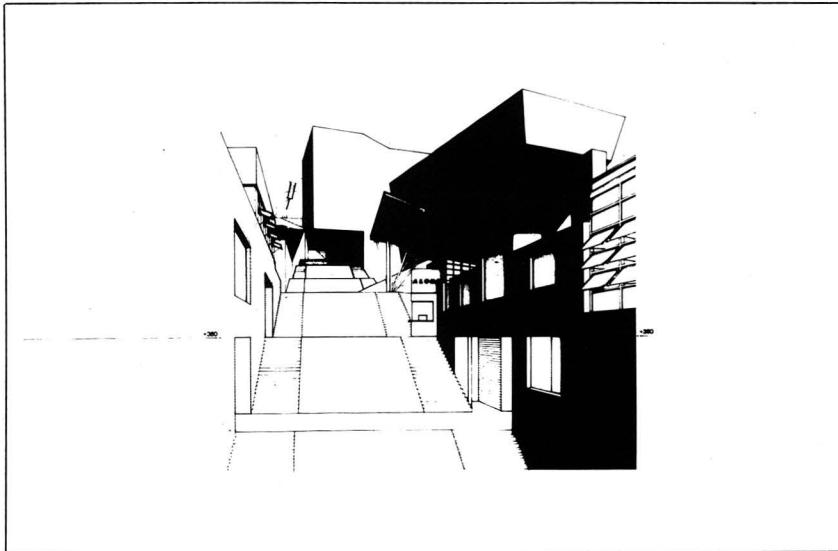
Group A: The administrative functions and classrooms are organized alongside a grid of steps and ramps derived and modified from the serial rhythm of the existing campus.

Group B: The studio and rehearsal spaces are assembled onto a pair of glass bars that slice across the topography marking the two hills on opposite sides of the swale.

Group C: The exhibition and performance spaces are articulated as a group of monolithic masses, an artificial archipelago that carefully, but subtly, map out the site's different vistas to its physical surroundings.

B There is no question that it is difficult to define a clear formal strategy in Scheme 5923. But I must confess that I am seduced by its ostensibly random configuration. I find it very poetic on a gut-feeling level.

Maybe what seems to be disorder to our eyes is simply another kind of order that we are not aware of.

D Precisely! If I may push my argument further, Scheme 5923 is the manifestation of an ordering sensitivity that we shall refer to as the anti-classical, for lack of a better term. The anti-classical is not the opposite of the classical. Instead, the classical and the anti-classical should be understood as the two sides of the same coin.
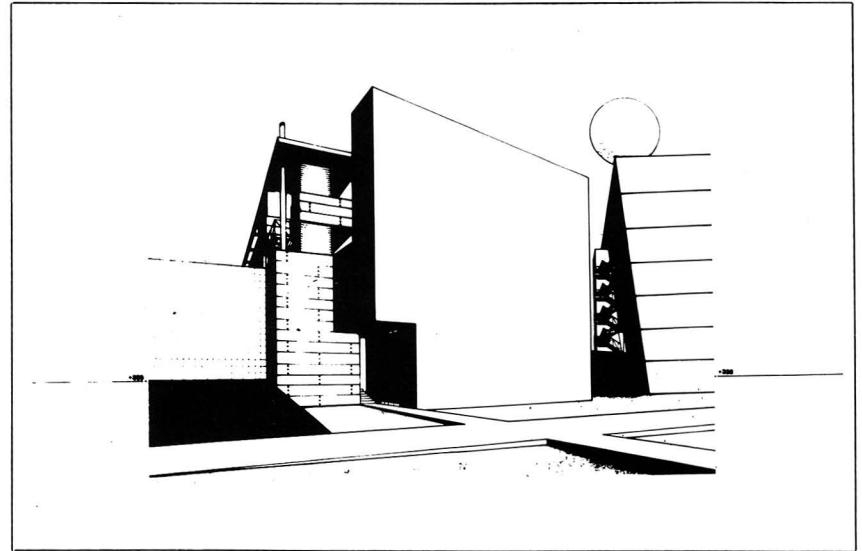

GROUP A + B + C

D The French theoretician Michel Foucault classified these two sensitivities as homotopia and heterotopia in his book *The Order of Things*. Homotopia is a state of mind where differences are put aside to seek unity. Heterotopia is the state of mind where unity is abandoned to celebrate the autonomy of parts.

B In other words, D, you are saying that Scheme 101 is classical because it is conceived by an ordering sensitivity based on similarity which in turns gives the architecture its integrity and unity. On the other hand, Scheme 5923 is anti-classical because it expresses the differences of its components which are stitched together by mere adjacency.

As a result, they assume similarity only by default through their formal and spatial superimposition.
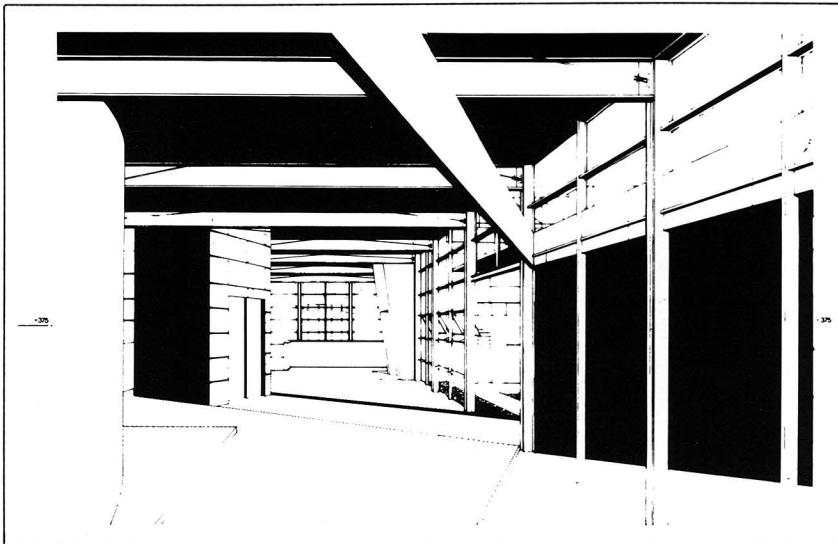

GROUP C + A3

Our scheme does not seek homogeneous unity. Instead, it is a heterotopic formation, animated with geometries, scales and textures of diverse origins. As a miniature campus, it provides a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces, making the Media Arts Center an exciting place to learn, to explore and to appreciate.

C All that intellectual gobble-ly-gook is very interesting. But how is this anti-classical order any more relevant than the classical order to the purpose of this competition?

D Very well. The classical and the anti-classical are, in fact, two distinct manifestations of culture.

On the one hand, the classical sensitivity establishes an empirical order that eradicates differences with a homogeneous identity. In doing so, it excludes any disjunctures and discontinuities and assumes a dominant condition of origin where form, meaning and context dwell in a coherent unity.

BI LOBBY + A3

GROUP B + C1

On the other hand, a more obscured order exists as a negative to this empirical order. This anti-classical sensitivity accommodates incongruities and misfits that are anterior to words and reason. In doing so, it denounces a dominant origin by embracing the hybrid. This explains why Scheme 101 delivers the impression of harmony while Scheme 5923 appears to be chaotic and less idealized.

But to me, Scheme 5923 is much closer to representing the reality of our culture, and that is more fulfilling.
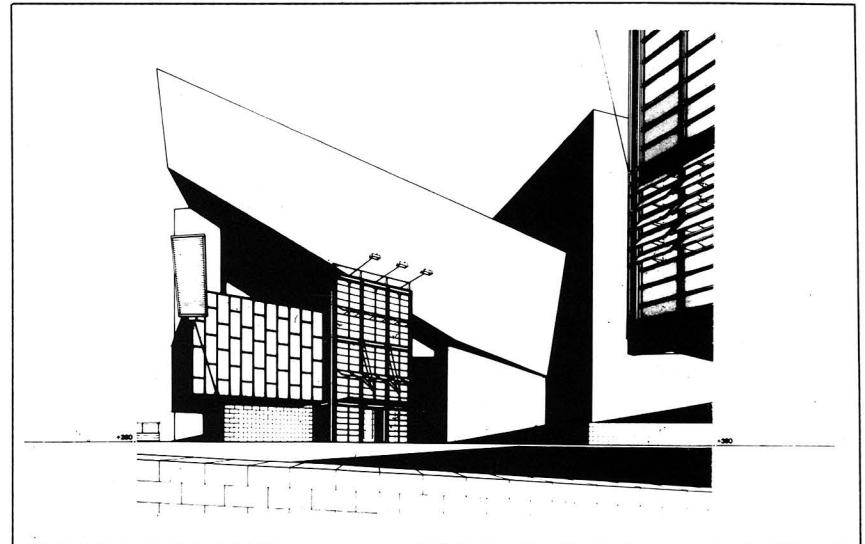
Despite Architect D's sympathetic argument, the jury concluded that Scheme 5923 was "inefficient programmatically and unrealistic within the given budget." Scheme 5923 was disqualified in the final round of judging.

Consequently, Scheme 101 was awarded the first prize. The jury praised the scheme as "examplary" for being able to "meet the complex program under budget," and more importantly, for its "Utopian vision in creating a complacent place to escape from the fragmentary reality of today."