

Ruins of the Baroque

William Mann



The Baroque was central to Dalibor's architectural thinking.

The exhilarating intellectual journey he sketched charged even the most contrived assembly of stones – the folly at Schonbrunn, for example - with a kind of electric energy.

A few slides of the Asamkirche in Munich, and he opened up vast perspectives of finitude and transcendence - with a very personal touch. It was personal for Egid and Cosmas; and personal for Dalibor too.

He returned repeatedly to the Baroque in his last few years, probing the phenomenon from all sides - embodiment, movement, landscape and light – and through different vehicles: Kuks, the Jesuit church in Antwerp, Santini and Hawksmoor

But isn't its place in his thinking also an ambiguous one?

- Mostly, he offered a cool, detached appraisal, presenting the period as a condition of extreme tension before an inevitable rupture.

- Yet at times Dalibor would speak of Baroque architecture with a warmth and reverence that suggested a state of wholeness before the Fall.

Was this a trace of ambivalence, or were these differing positions the legacies of his contrasting tutors, the dissident Patočka and the conservative Sedlmayr?

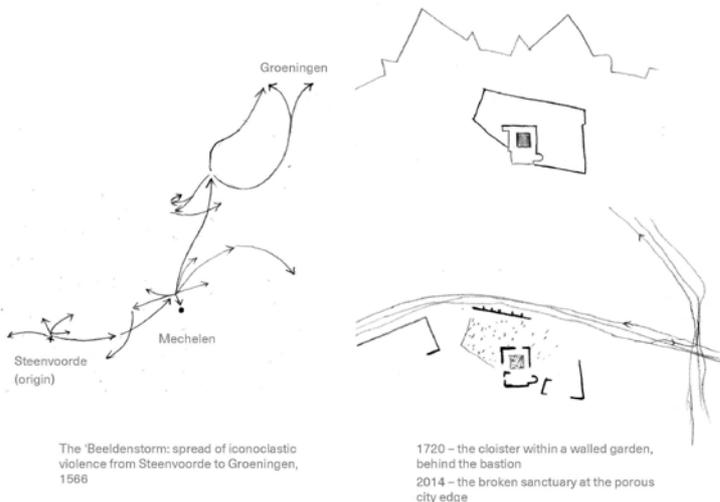
It was a rite of passage to engage with the Baroque, a symbolic renunciation of puritan England – but not one I was ever able to perform wholeheartedly. Despite Dalibor's charisma and intellectual agility, my mistrust was never entirely dispelled. Perhaps I never thought that my empathy for this period would be put to the test.



2

Twenty-five years on, I found myself in a ruined monastery in Mechelen,
 With a cheerfully upbeat competition brief for a public library.
 My lingering mistrust was dulled by a decade living amongst the Baroque churches and pulpits of
 Brussels.
 But it was the years of spiritual exercises at Cambridge - explorations of topography, fragments, and
 bodily experience – that enabled us to respond purposefully to this challenge.

In Flanders, the Baroque churches are not perfect choreographies of life or light
 But rather the stones on which multiple conflicts have scratched their mark. As Proust wrote,
*"...in all the stone's veins and bones and flame-like stainings, and broken and disconnected lines,
 they write various legends, never untrue, of the former political state of the...kingdom to which they
 belonged, of its infirmities and fortitudes, convulsions and consolidations"*ⁱ

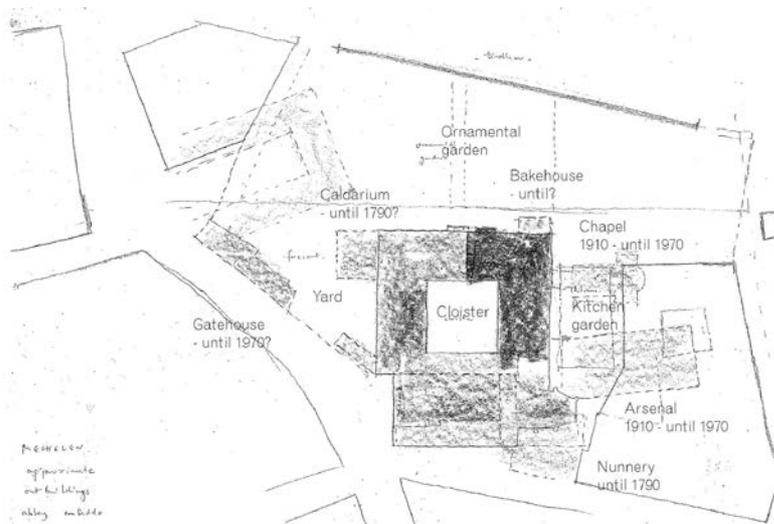


3

In Flanders, the Reformation was an uprising;
 the Counter-Reformation was an act of imperial force.
 As Kundera wrote of Baroque Prague, *"The thousands of petrified saints gazing at you from all sides
 and threatening you, hypnotizing you, are the frenzied occupation army that invaded...three hundred
 and fifty years ago..."*ⁱⁱ

The Dominicans from 'sHertogenbosch migrated to Mechelen at the end of this eighty year conflict.
 They had almost finished their church one hundred and thirty years later, when the French
 Revolution drove through, and pushed the monks out on the street. They turned the monastery into
 a barracks, cobbling the church floor to serve as a stable. When the Nazis used Mechelen as their
 railway hub for deporting the Jews of Antwerp, the Predikherenklooster was their barracks.

The reassuring ring of masonry bastions, enclosing wall and cloister were powerless against these migrating ideas, of a personal god, of liberty and fraternity, of racial purity. They left behind a sanctuary that was both incomplete and broken open – its broken, porous character prepared it for publicness.



4

Only the core of the monastery survived this trajectory. Without its outbuildings, the monastery floats free in the city edge, disengaged from the streets around.

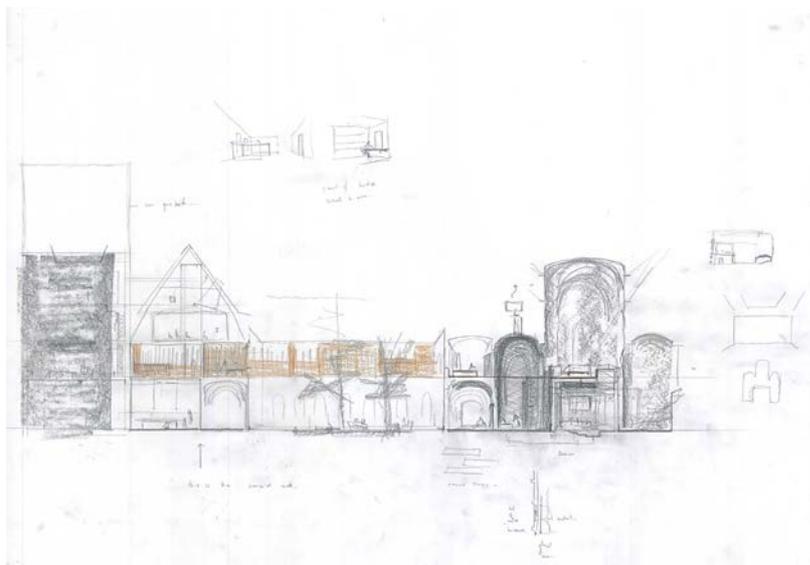
It is reduced to a crude type: a donut of cells around a cramped garden.

The demolished *caldarium* that had stood at the northwest of the cloister, was particularly interesting to us.

It was the sociable heart of the monastery, the only rooms that were heated.

We aimed to embed the library in the city, with single cell extensions to northwest and southeast.

We called on the authority of the past to reverse the building's insularity.



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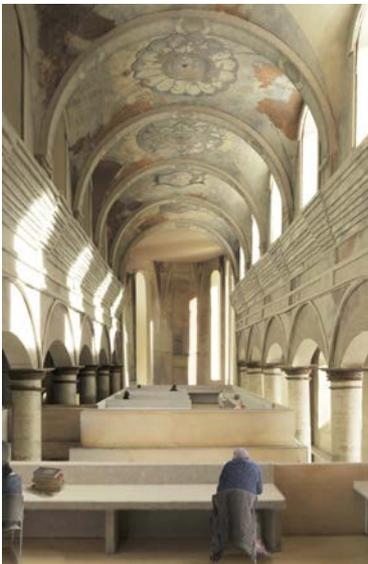
The monastery had all the charm of a Baroque office building – a set of generous but austere rooms around a vaulted cloister: good for bookstacks and computers – more active on the ground floor, calm on the first. Our *caldarium* was a stack of rooms for conversation – a café and meeting/seminar rooms above.

We imagined the church as a mix of the everyday and the reflective, with newspapers, internet and a lecture theatre at street level, and reading up in the vaults.



6

Our enclosed lecture theatre was a kind of wooden ark, moderating the vast stone barn into narthex, nave, apse and aisles. A covered passage would lead from the West door to the cloister, above linking the reading room with the stacks.



7

At the Asamkirche, the ascension from mortal to immortal is through faith and ritual. In our library, the readers would hover between the cobbles and the powder blue Bohemian vaults, poised between the thoughtless continuity of the everyday and the heavenly ruins.



8

The Dominicans were mendicants, urbanites, and above all preachers. Our lecture theatre would have been a small semicircular wooden theatre for 150, oriented across the nave, as if to the pulpit – but enclosed for warmth and ease of hearing. A space of the street and marketplace, but protected.



9

Between the Holocaust museum and the ruined church – both echoes of European conflagrations – would be our turret of discourse, of civilised dispute and casual talk: a tapering, spiraling tower of brick, sinking roots and climbing laboriously towards the sky.

We treated this battered vestige of the 1660s as an unfinished journey, not a dead artifact. We approached it unsentimentally, but with care.

Our project was neither an act of homage nor of revolt; but the local jury considered it a transgression, and marked us accordingly. Grand Bretagne, nul points.



10

Completeness in architecture shuts out time; even when dressed with the myriad clues and prompts to participation common to the Baroque, perfection is a closed circle.

The monarchs and the Church of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries enjoyed remarkable productive power, and finished much of what they started – Wurzburg, Zweifalten, the Belvedere Palace of Vienna, Melk, even Vaux-le-Vicomte or Blenheim. So many completed visions, and so many unaltered realisations – unlike the sketchy, partial works that have come down to us from the Renaissance, or those tapestries of the time, the Gothic cathedrals.

In the ruins of the Baroque, I found a way past the perfection that had shut me out until then. In its broken form, the echoes of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern age amplify – and the struggles and anxieties of the seventeenth century seem to assume a universal resonance.

Dalibor taught us to see the power of the fragment that *“has its origin in the disintegration of the Baroque visual language”*.ⁱⁱⁱ He was at his most eloquent best tracing the death of the Baroque he loved, and the emergence of the modern condition he perhaps mistrusted - this Big Bang at the origin of the modern world, whose echoes, thanks to Dalibor, we can still hear.

ⁱ Marcel Proust *Memory of a massacre of Churches*, transl. Hopkins G., London 1948, p.54 in Dalibor Vesely, 'Architecture and Metaphor', typescript

ⁱⁱ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

ⁱⁱⁱ Dalibor Vesely, 'The nature of the modern fragment and the sense of wholeness', in *Fragments: Architecture and the Unfinished. Essays Presented to Robin Middleton*