

R.M.E. MAGNÉE

Monuments and Flags

The invitation, you my ladies and gentlemen, and I got from the organizers of this sixth congress for vexillology, had one slight difference, which is, that you have to listen and I have to speak.

I don't know which one is going to have the most difficult part to endure. At least I myself came already to the conclusion that there is much to say about flags whereabout better qualified people, certainly here present, may have a word to say better than I am able to do. But the title I was given, MONUMENTS AND FLAGS, gives me as an architect and townplanner more foothold because this year is proclaimed to be the year in which architectural monuments are focused, and besides, as a born Amsterdammer, it is also the centennial commemorating the birth of Amsterdam as a fishing hamlet 700 years ago, this gives me courage to deliver this address to you.

When I was preparing for this little talk I suddenly realised that we are on the brink of the last quarter of a tumultuous century of which I myself have covered already half.

This is even a "holy year" in which, according an idea of the United Nations, is also the beginning of a reconsideration of the eternal relationship between man and wife, with the accent of the weaker sex. So I thought it appropriate to start with the attention to the eternal feminine. And in my mind came the portrait of the lovely wife of Signor Zanobi del Giocondo - the smiling Mona Lisa - in order to draw a smile from a part of my audience. But, gentlemen, it is also said that she smiled because someday she would be heiress to an unlimited fortune, as a rational explanation of that smile !

But, more seriously, this gives no clue for the more than usual attention that face attracted, even when it was painted a hundred years ago and now smiling in Japan.

It may be noted that it radiates a kind of "energy" which transgresses time and space...

This notion could be used to evaluate our subject of today about monuments and flags because they are also still radiating "energy" as beauty and meaning.

Moreover, in a way, we are also heirs to an unlimited fortune, which brings us together here.

But alas, thinking of it we are not all smiling...

It is said that we are living now in an age of anxiety in which neither relics of the past, nor a bright perspective of the future motivates our deeds.

Is that true ?

The famous French painter MANET once said:

Si ça y est, ça y est.

Si ça n'y est pas, il faut recommencer

Tout le reste, c'est la blague.

It is true that in many times we have eaten our way across our lands as a swarm of locusts with little regard for beauty and symbols.

It is also true that in the same time and nowadays as we become aware of our limited supply of "fossil energy" - according to the Club of Rome -, many of us also reconsidering our society and its products in terms of "moral energy" as a "creative force" And therefore are trying to block the deterioration of our environment.

This leads to a new moral concept by accepting the original creative force and energy with its properties and laws - being the principle expression of its creation.

We are still able to build up a world conception which shows more than ever the beauties of life and eternal values which could symbolise it. It is the emotional process which should be cultivated.

It is the undescribable emotional process in our body which we call "admiring something".

It gives man more strenght in periods of anxiety, polarisation and hatred. It is also the fundamental reason for which you came here from all over the world !

Now all the cards may be on the table and plainly visible, we may start playing our game and let me explain a few of my own beliefs and prejudices within the realm of our subject today.

In the first place there is the question of these objects to society. A part of my career I spent successfully as an adviser to the UNESCO in foreign countries to evaluate their ancient monuments and sites, in order to boost their consciousness of their past and to profit from by showing them to other people. Dealing with that we are called "emerging nations" I learned sideways the feelings about their national flags as expressions of their new identity, although the way of displaying their flags betrayed their former masters.

For instance the Anglo-Saxon tradition or the Roman-Gallic way, compared with the tradition-bound way in Thailand or Japan.

Even there is a religion-bound way, as I saw with the Muslims or on Tibetan monasteries where even the colours, as elsewhere in China, have a symbolic meaning as a rose of winds, together with the gods, patrons of each direction of the compass, i.e. the northern half from West towards East yellow, green, black, blue and white; and pink, red, orange for South-east, South and South-west.

Being around the globe I found in my homecountry my friend KLAES SIERSMA and he told me a lot more about the folklore of that "energetic" element in relation to buildings.

He made me understand flags as born of man's desire to understand and control the process of mankind.

Now in Amsterdam you might have the opportunity to see our monumental buildings along the famous canals which are on special occasions festooned with flags in a traditional true Dutch manner, unique in the world.

Also expressing us as a nation of individuals.

Imagine the curved fronts of original colourfull individual houses, with tiled roofs perpendicular towards the canal along the quais lined with trees.

Large flags hanging from openings in the doors leading to the attics thus forming a canopy fluttering in the wind above the crowds beneath.

We are proud with such a setting where elsewhere lampposts have to be decorated to obtain a similar effect.

Still we are not smiling because compared with this outstanding example there are bad ones and our new housing schemes are lacking opportunities to express our mutual feelings.

Of course we are attracted by the highlights of the built past, but nobody might forget that time turns from past towards the future and that therefore it is more important what people are capable in making new values than keeping old ones.

That calls for "creative energy" which this congress might promote in a proper way. Together with a fresh appreciation of monuments and monumentality.

As far as any has particular ideas about it, I am aware there is much misunderstanding about monumentality and in particular this idea does not suite the Netherlander as a humble democrat and he even abhors specific aspects of it.

But well understood, monumentality is not superfluous, it is true expression of harmony and order.

It is an expression of creative energy; a dominant force not only in a materialistic sense, not bound to pompe and bombastic expressions of wealth, but mainly in the spirit, because even a small object could be a called monument. Better one flag, than a decoration of flags, especially in harmony with the building, not too short, or too small, or clumsily placed.

And then there are true traditions to be observed, traditions to the spirit the flag represents: flag-protocols.

The Foundation for Banneristics and Heraldry at the occasion of this year of the architectural monuments has just edited a booklet about the proper use of flags. A wealth of information for architects, boards of supervisors commissioned with aesthetic affairs, government officials etc.

What could I add in this particular field to bring you a smile of undersnading on your face ?

Perhaps by elaborating idiosyncracies, of misuse of monumentality and flags ? It would be an easy job these days and that could be better done lateron, with a glass in our hand for an indefinite time !

Better I would like to conclude as an architect and townplanner with a few remarks about the context in which this coming discussions will take place: the culture of our cities around the former Zuydersea. Your trip will bring you to them over the sea, which brought their inhabitants far into the world showing our flags in maritime tradition, of which is much to be said.

I like to point out that most of their houses were built by shipcarpenters. With this in your mind you will observe an analogy between a ship and a house; in fact they are built likewise.

For instance contrary to building customs elsewhere in the world these houses were built from the inside together with the windows, and the fronts were applied afterwards like the shipshull.

Staircases resemble those used on ships steeper then elsewhere in the world, with ropes as handrails.

For the townscape the outer design of the houses was strongly silhouetted against the horizon in our country as flat as the sea, with churchtowers carved into the sky, like the masts of a ship with its flag in top.

The use of vivid colours contrasting the greyness of the sea, as on ships. The traditional costumes of the fishermen are as bulky as their ships. And their jenever - our national drink - is as sturdy and potent as their character.

I am sure that, when you have tasted it, you will smile as heavenly as Mona Lisa did and you know the secret then.

And finally for the ladies, if the gentlemen's drink is too spicy, order for "a gentlemen", an advocat or "boerejongens" whatever that means to you.

