The Masonic Temple between Universal Model and Cultural Tropisms

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The masonic temple appears as consubstantial of a ritual practice, which seems immemorial and immutable. However, the historical study of freemasonry has widely shown that, if its origins are very varied, its fixing in the early 18th century was organized more in taverns (in England or in France), chapels (in Scotland) or private homes rather than in places intended for this specific practice.

During the second half of 18th century, the masonic temple, as an architectural object, becomes stabilized at the same time as the rituals themselves are fixed. The setting down in writing of words and gestures, but also of the description of the lodge, itself shown in a drawing frequently named « plan de la loge », will little by little fix the form of a place reserved to the single use of masonic rituals. During the 19th century, this architectural model is spreading at the same time as colonial empires are spreading themselves all around the world: North and Latin Americas, South Africa, India, South-East, Australia and New Zealand.

However, the analysis of numerous examples shows that this model, in principle universal in its internal organization – if we except the two fundamental forms bound to Modern or Ancient tradition – is actually under strong adaptations from one country to another, following building or stylistic aspects, and their visibility from the public space.

In a way, the study of masonic architecture allows a new look not only at the place of freemasonry in the different societies all around the world, but also at the construction of these societies. Shown or hidden, the masonic temple is not just the product of globalized rituals, it is also the reflection of the culture in which this practice can develop. From egyptomania in the middle of Australian desert to trapper’s log cabin in the Rocky Mountains, from Milwaukee’s Taj Mahal – Tripoli Shrine Temple – to hidden temples in Brussels, each architectural object tells, in its way, and beyond the universal aspect of freemasonry, a new piece of the history that made it.

More than freemasonry itself, masonic architecture is rarely or never studied at all; even if it appears as a unique and often exceptional heritage. However, a general study and analysis would probably show that this exceptional heritage is at the same time precious and endangered. Precious as the reflection of a specific history of a place, a city or a nation, and endangered more or less everywhere in the world, notably due to the decline of frequentation of lodges. In the same way that we changed churches to masonic temples in France, it is extremely important to find a future for these buildings that are threatened by destruction, particularly in the USA.

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