From "Beginnings" to Modernity

The Contemporary Relevance of Jerzy Sołtan's Cubist Theory

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> Yes, the cathedrals were white, completely white, dazzling and young—and not black, dirty, old. The whole period was fresh and young …And today, yes! today also is young, fresh, new. Today also the world is beginning again.[1]

Opening a reflection on reference and contemporaneity with Le Corbusier's words from *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches* (1937) puts us at odds with one of the conclusions reached at the Reference and Contemporaneity in Architecture conference that forms the basis of this volume. Should we accept the claim that "while reference relates in large part to the past, contemporaneity is focused primarily on present and future . . . originality, innovation, and problem-solving"?[2] Does reference really tie us to the past in this way? Le Corbusier's words, along with the cubist architectural vision of his Polish collaborator Jerzy Sołtan, suggest that—on the contrary—reference bridges past and future.

Jerzy Sołtan worked with Le Corbusier from 1945 to 1949 then spent the rest of his career in Poland and the United States, teaching and designing according to principles he had absorbed in Paris. His importance as a tea-

1 Le Corbusier, When the Cathedrals Were White, trans. Francis E. Hyslop Jr. (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947; repr., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), xxi–xxii; originally published as Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches (Paris: Plon, 1937).

2 Carsten Ruhl, email to the author, October 4, 2023, and see also the Introduction.

cher and a theoretician becomes clear when we consider his decades-long involvement in architectural education from 1949 onward—especially his twenty years as a faculty member at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, where he served as chairman of the School of Architecture from 1967 to 1973. Through his work as an educator and his involvement with Team 10, Sołtan developed ideas that offer a valuable but often overlooked take on twentieth-century architecture, particularly in relation to the question of reference and contemporaneity. Central to his thinking was the concept "grassroots architecture."[3] Unlike today's understanding of the term—with its associations of activism and bottom-up organizing—Sołtan meant by "grassroots" the essential spirit of modern architecture that draws from specific historical moments while pointing toward the future. For him, modern architecture leads to contemporaneity, and neither stands opposed to history. What they reject is historicism—the kind embodied in Beaux-Arts classicism and postmodernism. Sołtan saw postmodernism as nothing more than an unfortunate detour, an obstacle (or a "dead-end," among other dismissive labels) that had temporarily knocked modernist architecture off course.

This paper explores Sołtan's cubist vision of "grassroots architecture" and the dialectical relationship it creates between reference and contemporaneity. It begins by examining how Sołtan defined this concept, then discusses why it remains relevant today, and finally analyzes it within a broader interdisciplinary context. The analysis draws on doctoral research[4] into Sołtan's legacy as designer, teacher, and theoretician, using archival materials including letters, articles, lecture notes, and teaching programs, as well as his personal notes and diary entries, supplemented by oral history interviews with former students, friends, and colleagues. Because Sołtan's "grassroots" concept draws heavily on ancient references, the paper also examines his theory in light of recent scholarship showing that ancient civilizations were more interconnected than previously understood, with similar architectural and cultural developments—akin to Sołtan's "grassroots"—occurring across different societies.

3 Szymon Ruszczewski, The Life and Work of Jerzy Sołtan: The Last Modernist Architect (London: Routledge, 2024), 97–109.

4 Szymon Ruszczewski, "Finding Sołtan: Legacies and Heritages of the Last Modernist Architect" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2022).

"Grassroots Architecture" According to Jerzy Sołtan

For Sołtan, "grassroots" meant beginnings—the foundations and the true essence of architecture. He also used the phrase "architecture of the burgeoning cultures." In his view, grassroots architecture emerged from the raw forms that appeared when the language of a given culture, era, or style was just taking shape. This explains his frequent references to "early" moments in architecture: early Romanesque, early Christian architecture (Fig. 26), early Chinese architecture, and the very first civilizations of the Mediterranean and Middle East—Mesopotamia, early ancient Egypt, and archaic Greece. These examples appear throughout his texts, articles, and lectures. The slides he showed his students at Harvard included Sumerian cities, ancient Greek architecture at Sounion, Delphi, and Athens, early architecture in Ravenna, the medieval palace in Avignon, and the city walls of Aigues-Mortes in southern France (Fig. 27).[5]

Sołtan also classified the vernacular culture of many distant peoples as "grassroots architecture." Following art critic Herbert Read, whom he often quoted, Sołtan believed that "in the primitive art we see so clearly what is so difficult to perceive in the complex products of highly cultured civilisations—the directly expressive quality of the artist's vision, its objectification in solid shapes."[6] Vernacular constructions in Cameroon and the rougher examples of Neolithic villages similarly represented for Sołtan the freshness of forms and pure ideas he identified as "grassroots architecture."[7] For him, these raw, fresh, and simple forms captured the essence of human civilization in its initial stage, unspoiled by decoration and added layers. The initial phases of different epochs represented the moment when human creation was at its simplest and purest. These moments, he claimed, were inspiring and electrifying. He often recalled his first visit to Wawel Castle in Poland to illustrate this sense of awe and inspiration:

5 Jerzy Sołtan's slides for lectures, Harvard University Archives, Jerzy Sołtan Collection, CB series, 11A-1, 12A-16, 12A-17, 12A-18.

6 Herbert Read, Art Now, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 45–46.

7 Jerzy Sołtan's slides for lectures, Harvard University Archives, Jerzy Sołtan Collection, CB series, 9A-1.

> Today the visitor enters a handsome, colonnaded Renaissance-Baroque courtyard and then—the Renaissance-Baroque interiors. Duly impressed, I was led through these classicist rooms and halls. I was however—I remember it well—not moved by what I saw. Yes, yes, all this is fine… but—I felt—it is not 'mine'. Orderly rigorous and not 'helpful' to me. And then something strange happened. I just became elated…. . . . Quite a few years later it was given to me to realise that this change of mood occurred when entering the mediaeval part of the castle—[with] the white-washed raw stone walls, the a-symmetric volumes, the window-apertures cut out here and there, seemingly haphazardly but somehow providing light and view right where it was needed.[8]

While we could argue that Sołtan was simply rationalizing this memory to fit his theories, the story clearly had lasting impact—he continued telling it even seventy years later. This interest in raw and fresh forms was widespread in the mid-twentieth century. Through his contacts with various artists in Paris and Le Corbusier's connections, Sołtan became familiar with the work and ideas of Constantin Brancusi and Pablo Picasso, while also taking painting lessons with Fernand Léger. Working for the architect Claude Laurens gave him opportunities to meet his father, sculptor Henri Laurens, and Georges Braque. Most of these artists drew on the ancient past in their cubist work—Picasso's polychromic sculptures referenced Greek art,[9] while Brancusi showed interest in exoticism and the ancient Greek art of the Cycladic Islands (Fig. 28), visible in works like Mademoiselle Pogany.[10] This same fascination with Cycladic art appears in Henri Laurens's work, like the Head of a Young Girl, which has been also linked to Mesopotamian art and tribal African masks[11]—uniting both ancient "grassroots" and vernacular traditions. Léger and Braque, by contrast, focused more on pure and simple forms as a way of expressing changes in the modern world, as seen in Léger's robotic

8 Jerzy Sołtan, untitled notes from March 1995, Harvard University Archives, Jerzy Sołtan Collection, AC007.

9 Nicholas Chr. Stampolidis and Olivier Berggruen, eds., Picasso and Antiquity: Line and Clay (Athens: Museum of Cycladic Art, 2019).

10 Sanda Miller, Constantin Brancusi (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 92.

11 Jane Castel, "Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Art Sculpture," in Canadian Art Review 9 (1982), 94–98, here 98.

figures in works like Soldiers Playing Cards—a connection that proves important for understanding Sołtan's ideas.

For Sołtan, the cultural shift accompanying the emergence of modern architecture represented one of these "grassroots" moments: a burgeoning culture of tomorrow, a culture pointing to the future of humanity. However, he claimed, architecture had not yet found how to convey the spirit of this new era. To find its expression, we must look at other beginnings, other "grassroots" moments. In his view, there is a correspondence between these historical moments and the present day, when we are witnessing a moment of change where a new culture is being born. Therefore, he argued, we need to return to the foundations of other epochs to research, understand, and feel these essential forms—and therein find a way to express this new era. "Beginnings of cultures—unite!" was one phrase Sołtan would deliver, half-jokingly, at architectural conferences over the years. Through this union and understanding—however long and laborious it might be—Sołtan believed humanity could find a way to reflect recent revolutionary changes in science and society. When illustrating these ideas with concrete examples, he referred in particular to the work of architects like Le Corbusier, Ivan Leonidov, Giuseppe Terragni, Louis Kahn, and Berthold Lubetkin. He noted Le Corbusier's own interest in beginnings—early Christian architecture, villages in Southern Europe and the Middle East, and Romanesque architecture. Ronchamp chapel (Fig. 29) thus stands as a reference to Roman catacombs and early Christian constructions carved from rock. Similarly, Ivan Leonidov's design for the Ministry of Heavy Industry referred, according to Sołtan, to ancient Mesopotamian architecture with its ziggurat-like podium. Terragni's work, particularly his unbuilt design for the Danteum, illustrating Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, reinterpreted the classical column and used geometric ratios based on the golden rectangle—proportions known also to the ancient Greeks, and which for Sołtan represented another example of "grassroots architecture." Likewise, the interest in essential forms and pure solids characteristic of architects like Louis Kahn and Berthold Lubetkin also related to this tendency.

Sołtan's own design work followed similar principles throughout his career, regardless of time or location. In two unbuilt designs for churches in Poland (1957–1958), he linked religious buildings to raw materials, rocks, and caves, referencing early churches and basilicas in Palestine and Syria—simple constructions or spaces carved from rock—and the tradition of early

Christian gatherings in Roman catacombs.[12] Similar "grassroots" references appear in his later designs for schools around Massachusetts (1970–1977), where buildings become medieval walled cities (Fig. 30), resembling Aigues-Mortes in southern France through their staircase towers that give rhythm to their elevations and brick-layered walls.[13] For Jaqueline Tyrwhitt's house in Sparoza, Greece (Fig. 31), the main façade composition references early Greek temples (Fig. 32), with a similar tripartite division.[14] In some projects, he also referenced historical building techniques: at Sparoza, for example, he relied on traditional stonemasons' craftsmanship rather than modern concrete technologies, while for a house in Laconia, New Hampshire (1967–1968), he drew on New England's vernacular carpentry traditions.[15] The importance of raw and unpolished forms appears in his design for the Polish Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels Expo (1956–1957), which featured children's drawings of Polish history displayed on a hundred-meter undulating wall.[16] Whether through direct references to "grassroots" moments, simple forms, or raw ideas, what mattered for Sołtan was the tangible connection between primal, basic elements across different times. For him, all these example represented the "rebirth of architecture."[17]

From Common Themes in Ancient History to New Beginnings

Similar ideas about interconnectedness and parallelism have emerged in the field of ancient history. Scholars now point to the "global" aspect of the ancient world, where either direct contact or parallel developments can be observed. Michael Scott's research, for example, dismantles the Mediterranean-centric vision of the ancient world by focusing on similar patterns across different civilizations.[18] The idea of "classics" as tied to Mediterranean and

12 Ruszczewski, The Life and Work of Jerzy Sołtan, 181.

13 Ibid., 221.

14 Ibid., 203.

15 Ibid., 206.

16 Ibid., 176.

17 Ibid., 100.

18 Michael Scott, Ancient Worlds: An Epic History of East and West (London: Windmill Books, 2016).

broadly Western culture now seems outdated, and French writer Raymond Queneau's assertion that "literature . . . begins with Homer . . . , and every great work that follows is either an Iliad or an Odyssey"[19] sounds troubling—not because literary works lack similarities, but because this linear vision of civilization no longer seems viable. As Scott argues, thanks to contact between ancient civilizations—in flourishing kingdoms like Bactria in present-day Afghanistan or commercial hubs like Palmyra in the present-day Syria—the exchange of ideas, concepts, and stories in antiquity was vibrant and decidedly bidirectional. He claims that "across ancient worlds, both myths and histories . . . were rearticulated and re-presented over time," pointing to the fact that "such narratives, from very different societies, often have common themes."[20] Despite the long-established view of ancient history as a series of isolated chapters—the result of infrequent travel—Scott claims that there was an "emerging world consciousness in our ancient past, which in many ways mirrors the position we find ourselves in today."[21] Amongst such recurring myths and stories, we can point to similarities between the Mahabharata and the Iliad, where scenes, themes, and archetypes overlap:[22] an invincible valiant warrior who refuses to join a conflict (Arjuna and Achilles); a contest of suitors (for both Draupadi and Helen); and the idea of alignment of deities with opposing sides.[23] Further parallels could be drawn between other epics and archetypes, but the key point is that these similarities may stem from common roots, given the shared origins of Indo-European languages.[24]

Given this vision of a connected—and to some extent global—ancient world, the similarities Sołtan identified between different "grassroots" mo-

19 Raymond Queneau, "Preface," in Gustave Flaubert, Bouvard and Pécuchet, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Dallas: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 25.

20 Scott, Ancient Worlds, 348.

21 Scott, Ancient Worlds, 8.

22 N. J. Allen, "Mahabharata and Iliad: A Common Origin?," in Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 83 (2002), 165–77.

23 Pankhuri Aggarwal, "An Extravagant Depiction of the Human World: Through the Characters in The Mahabharata and The Iliad," in Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Social Science, Humanities, and Education (2019), https://doi.org/10.33422/2nd.icshe.2019.06.308.

24 Ken Dowden, "Greek Mythology 3500 BC to AD 2014," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCaDjvcaWpo, accessed February 22, 2024.

ments find support in historical research. While these overlaps often have historical explanations, and scholarship increasingly documents interconnected networks in the economic, political, and cultural spheres of the ancient world, some events and processes cannot be explained through contact alone. Following Scott's ideas in Ancient Worlds, we can observe separate yet similar developments in different ancient civilizations—a fact that could point to what he calls "shared human dignity." For example, comparing the Roman Empire with ancient China at the time of Confucius reveals similar patterns in the connection between divine and human worlds, particularly in the relationship between religion and rulers.[25] Given that these tendencies appeared simultaneously in geographically distant areas, Sołtan's "grassroots" hypothesis gains strength. Could such parallel developments occur without some shared, almost unconscious human sensibility?

Sołtan illustrates this idea by examining the 1947 modern art exhibition in the Papal Palace in Avignon and the permanent collection of the Picasso Museum in Antibes Castle.[26] In both cases, he focuses on the harmonious relationship between modern artworks and raw medieval interiors. Since both the art and the buildings share what he saw as the raw essence and spirit of "grassroots" moments, Sołtan found no visual conflict between them. The 1947 exhibition, organized by French art curator Yvonne Zervos during the first Avignon Festival, included works by Georges Braque, Jean Gris, Paul Klee, Fernand Léger, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso. For Sołtan, the seemingly chaotic arrangement of the artworks enhanced the exhibition by creating visual dialogue between the rough medieval walls and the modern art. He called it "a happy 'cohabitation'," noting that "they somehow belonged to the same world"[27]—a feeling that pointed to the shared essence of both modern art and raw medieval construction.

While Sołtan responded positively to both the Antibes and Avignon experiences, he was far more critical of the idea of mounting similar exhibitions in places like Versailles or the Elysée Palace. Neither neoclassical nor

25 Scott, Ancient Worlds, 352.

26 Ruszczewski, The Life and Work of Jerzy Sołtan, 103.

27 Jerzy Sołtan, draft of the book On Architecture and Le Corbusier, November 1955, 75, Warsaw, Museum of the Fine Arts Academy, Jerzy Sołtan Collection. Similar ideas appear in notes "Can Tradition, History, and Modernism Be . . . Friends?" (1988) and notes on religious architecture in Poland (June 1990), both in the same collection.

baroque architecture possessed the simplicity and essential character of his "grassroots" concept. Given the decorative and visually complex character of neoclassical or baroque interiors, the simplicity of modern art would clash dramatically in such spaces, making the result "only thrilling as a surrealistic, perfidious cultural joke—a visual salto mortale."[28]

The Present as a Reflection of Past Beginnings

On account of these examples, Sołtan believed modern architecture represented the early stages of a new epoch. Educated during the final years of modern architecture's heroic period, when functionalism and new approaches challenged the traditionalist Beaux-Arts vision, he saw modern architecture as the only viable solution for embracing new discoveries, the possibilities offered by industrial and technological innovations, and ongoing social changes. Referring to the French philosopher and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's identification of modernism as a civilizational shift comparable to the Neolithic Revolution,[29] Sołtan considered modernism inextricably linked to the future of architecture and its users. He was not alone in this assessment. William Curtis, for example, argues that "epic adventure of modernism is clearly not over, especially in a world of a global economy, the universalisation of technology, [and] the redefinition of identities and territories."[30] Curtis's reference to changes in the economy, politics, society, and science suggests that modernist architecture and modernist ideas are not only current but urgently needed. Similarly, Anthony Vidler claims that "historians of the modern movement might then be seen not only as contributing to our historical knowledge of earlier phases of the modern, although this is important, but equally as instances of the processes of modernity's self-reflection, themselves to be opened up as unanswered questions."[31] Modern architecture should therefore not be dismissed as a dead movement

28 Sołtan, draft of On Architecture and Le Corbusier, 76.

29 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, Race and History (Paris: UNESCO, 1958), 35; originally published as Race et histoire (Paris: UNESCO, 1952).

30 William J. R. Curtis, Modern Architecture since 1900 (London: Phaidon, 1982), 686.

31 Anthony Vidler, Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 200.

from a bygone era of naive fascination with scientific and technological progress. Instead, it should be understood as vital to the future development of architectural practice.

Sołtan's reading of modern architecture as "contemporary architecture" clearly reflects his agenda of extending its influence into the future. In his mind, this overlapped with promoting Corbusian ideas, as considered Le Corbusier among the few "truly modern" architects who embodied the "grassroots" ideal. In notes for an early lecture delivered in 1946, he writes, "to express oneself = to express modernity."[32] This statement links modernity to both "us" and "now," bringing modern architecture closer to both present and future. While the concept of new beginnings might seem poetic or romantic, Sołtan grounded it in scientific and technological progress.[33] He argued that in a world where human reality was being revolutionized, a historicist and conservative attitude is impossible to sustain. Drawing frequently on Lévi-Strauss, he maintained that the world had undergone revolutionary changes since the mid-nineteenth century—unprecedented since the Neolithic Revolution—demanding a similar shift and new beginning in culture and the arts. For Sołtan, the contemporary world still lacked its own culture and needed development. The "grassroots" concept offered a means to build it. Although Lévi-Strauss's reflections dated to the mid-twentieth century and addressed concepts from 1920s modern architecture, Sołtan believed the changes brought by new discoveries and technologies were so profound that even in the 1990s, building a new culture for such a revolutionary moment remained urgently relevant. Forty years later, he repeated the same conviction: "[N]ew times are worthy of new environment,"[34] leading directly to his call for a new architecture suited to a burgeoning new epoch.

Similarly, historians studying the classics often emphasize that their research is not an end per se, but a form of inquiry that allows us to reflect on our present and future. This means that "the past . . . is always a work in progress, a malleable tool that contributes to self-understanding and

32 Jerzy Sołtan, notes for a lecture at YMCA in Paris, 1946, Jerzy Sołtan Collection, Museum of the Fine Arts Academy, Warsaw.

33 Ruszczewski, The Life and Work of Jerzy Sołtan, 111.

34 Jerzy Sołtan, lecture in Montreal, September 1990, Warsaw, Museum of the Fine Arts Academy, Jerzy Sołtan Collection.

identity,"[35] a concept that gradually displaces the eighteenth-century notion of the past as a closed, immutable, and frozen.[36] Following the same logic, architecture's task is to examine the past, references, and "grassroots" moments in order to project a new architecture that can help build a new civilization—an aim recalled by some of Sołtan's students at Harvard.[37] In his lectures, he often compared architecture to "litmus paper" for society, meaning that architectural forms serve as reliable indicators of a society's cultural and spiritual health. A new architecture would therefore serve, in his view, as a pathway to the brave new future of society as a whole. He emphasized this point in a 1965 Harvard lecture:

> New sensibilities have to be developed, new sources of imagination uncovered, new forces of association mobilised. . . . A new culture has to be built up. This does not occur overnight. . . . Frankly, how much time do we architects, the majority of us, dedicate to the activities I am speaking about? How much do we even know of even the most simple, basic, merely visual language and grammar? And supposing that we do know, is this kind of very basic grammar sufficient to move to the new world? Was it sufficient for the moderns of the early twenties? A total attitude, a culture—that is what is necessary.[38]

With these words, Sołtan emphasizes architecture's fundamental anthropological role in building a new culture that engages with other historical moments of beginning. To express this new culture, he argues, contemporary architecture must enter into dialogue with the architecture of these earlier beginnings, creating connections that link it to the past without resorting to mere historical revival. For him, researching "grassroots" and seeking references there does not mean focusing on the past; rather, his approach aligns with de Certeau's ideas. It means building something new, transgressing

35 Scott, Ancient Worlds, 354.

36 See Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); originally published as L'écriture de l'histoire (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

37 Ruszczewski, The Life and Work of Jerzy Sołtan, 112.

38 Jerzy Sołtan, lecture "The Eternal Seesaw" at Harvard, April 1965, Harvard University Archives, Josep Lluís Sert Collection, SA503.

boundaries, and moving toward a new culture—toward contemporaneity. The "grassroots" concept can thus be considered part of his legacy—and that of cubist artists—serving as a guide for creating the culture of tomorrow. When modernism is viewed through his lens, radical postmodernist critique loses its force and meaning, since "grassroots" architecture connects to history and draws on the elementary forms of emerging cultures. Sołtan's interpretation of modernism opens it directly toward the future as an attempt to build a new culture and identity that reflect modernity. This vision keeps modernist thought vital and underscores its importance for contemporary architecture, challenging scholars like architectural historian James Stevens Curl who attack modernism and blame it for architecture's current problems.[39] Owing to his wholehearted commitment to modern ideas, Sołtan should be considered a missionary of modern architecture, correcting its errors, cleansing its reputation, and eliminating flaws in its interpretation.

39 James Stevens Curl, Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Fig. 26.
The ancient rock-cut city of Uplistsikhe in Georgia, exemplifying early "grassroots" architecture and serving as a potential reference for religious buildings. "Uplistsikhe view" (photo: Evgeny Genkin), Wikimedia Commons, 2007.

Fig. 27.
The fortified city of Aigues-Mortes as an example of "grassroots" medieval architecture that Sołtan referenced in his lectures. "Aigues Mortes—a fortified town" (photo: Mike McBey), Wikimedia Commons, 2019.

Fig. 28.
An example of Cycladic art that influenced many cubist artists, including Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Laurens. "Kiliia-type figurine, 4360–3500 BC, Museum of Cycladic Art" (photo: Zde), Wikimedia Commons, 2019.

Fig. 29.
Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel, with openings that reference early Christian churches and gathering spaces cut into rocks. Photo: Szymon Ruszczewski.

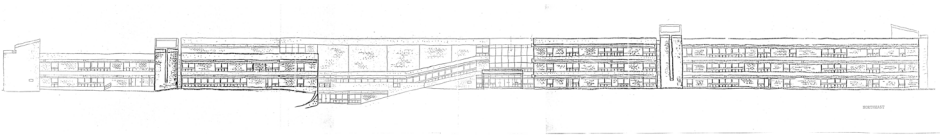

Fig. 30.
Jerzy Sołtan's design for Salem High School in Massachusetts, featuring a brick-layered façade with staircase towers that reference Romanesque and medieval architecture. Drawing by Jerzy Sołtan, Joanna Sołtan private archive.

Fig. 31.
Jerzy Sołtan's design for Jacqueline Tyrwhitt's house in Sparoza, with a porch facing a private garden that references ancient Greek architectural models. Photo: Szymon Ruszczewski.

Fig. 32.
Example of an ancient anta temple type, as seen in the Athenian Treasury in Delphi, showing a façade composition similar to that of Jacqueline Tyrwhitt's house in Sparoza. "Reconstruction of the Treasury house of Athens in Delphi" (photo: Davide Mauro), Wikimedia Commons, 2018.