Bruno Queysanne is a professor at Ecole d'Architecture de Grenoble, France.

The respective ways in which the traditional and the modern world situate themselves with respect to time are generally considered to be radical opposites. Tradition is seen as being total subjection to time whereas modernity stands for total rejection of it. It is the violent contrast which we wish to question: to recognize in tradition that which calls to mind characteristics considered exclusively modern and to discover in the modern that which springs from the world of tradition.

But let us begin by clearing up a misunderstanding about traditional architecture as expressed in a passage from Heidegger about the Black Forest farm in his well-known essay, "Building, dwelling, thinking." A whiff of nostalgia is perceptible in spite of the philosopher's denial, "We in no way wish to say that one must, or can, revert to building those houses." Tradition is here seen as being purely conservative. It is this text which enables Bourdieu to give rent to his sarcasm for another particularly caricatural example of the almighty power of the "essential thought." If we read the text of this 1951 lecture, "Building, dwelling, thinking," we find that the crucial housing situation is "superseded" in favor of the state of the ontological meaning of "dwelling." While rejecting Bourdieu's conclusions, we would like to demonstrate the shortcomings of Heidegger's description of traditional architecture.

"It is only when we can dwell that we can build." Let us think for a moment of a peasant farmhouse in the Black Forest: that a peasant notion of dwelling was still building as two hundred years ago. Here what raised the house out of the ground was the survival on the spot of a certain power, that of summoning earth and heaven, gods and mortals. It is this power which set the house on the mountain slope sheltered from the wind and facing south between the meadows and near the spring, which gave it its greatly overhanging shingle roof which bears its loads of snow at a suitable angle, and, coming down low, protects the rooms against the storms of the long winter nights. It
did not forget "the Lord's corner" behind the communal table, it made room in the chamber for the hallowed places which are those of birth and of "the tree of death" -- thus is called the coffin in these parts -- and thus, for the various ages of life it fore-shadowed the imprint of their passage through time under one and the same roof. A workmanship, itself born of "the dwelling," and which still uses its tools and structures as things, built the farmhouse. It is only when we can dwell that we can build. If we take as an example the Black Forest peasant house, we in no way wish to say that one must or can revert to building these houses, but the example shows us in concrete fashion a "dwelling" which has been.

For us the weakness of this description resides not so much in its "conservative agrarian" atmosphere as in its disregard for one of two fundamental dimensions of dwelling, namely the path. Here it is a question of standing. Only Hestia is catered to in this house, which leaves no room for Hermes. But in fact standing, without moving, does not offer these two widely differing gods the possibility of "living in friendship" as the Homeric hymn to Hestia recommends. In his description of a traditional house, in which resides the "survival" of a possibility of dwelling, Heidegger lacks the Hermetic dimension of displacement; he forgets the path which surely leads to the door of the house, and by which one comes and goes in the restful setting it provides. Tradition is drawn uniquely from the preservation, conservation side, and this forgotten path is the sign of our dissatisfaction. But on the other hand, all the texts which exalt modernity by an exclusive love of movement -- such as the Italian Futurists -- fall short of maturity. Quite clearly the radical contrasting of tradition and modernity is what brings us to grief.

The word "tradition" comes from the Latin verb trado-transdo, which means to pass on to another, to transmit, to hand over. This Latin verb is derived from an Indo-European root "do," which means to give or transmit possession of something. Thus, the conservative connotation that tradition calls to mind in our day was originally completed by the notion of transmitting. Tradition is thus better conceived of by means of a double process of preserving/transmitting. And this is exactly what the study of so-called traditional societies teaches us, where the processes of handing down knowledge is surrounded with such great attention. In order to preserve, it is necessary to pass on, and, in this entrusting movement, it is impossible to ensure absolute preservation, the un-changing of that which is passed on and given in safekeeping to the other generations. Experience shows that the task of guarding does not rule out change for as much as tradition remains alive.

It seems to us, therefore, that in dealing with tradition as a process, that the additional task of free transmission invalidates the contrast too often drawn between tradition and modernity.

The tradition versus modernity contrast allows us to construct a list of polar opposites: cyclical time versus linear time, permanence versus change, routine versus invention, necessity versus accident, local versus international, remembrance versus oblivion, collective versus individual, anonymous versus identified, prejudice versus freedom, myth versus reason, and natural versus artificial. Each reader may extend this list for their own account, pondering on which side they would situate themselves. We feel it is always others that one spontaneously tends to place in the traditional column. It is the other, because we turn it into a "foreign, scientific static object" that has difficulty entering our contemporary world. But, if we reject this black and white view and give serious thought to the ambivalent nature of tradition, we can no longer operate these pairs as opposites. On the contrary, it becomes of the utmost interest to consider how and to what extent these characteristics, instead of being mutually exclusive, are complementary.

In a 1935 issue of the then avant-garde Italian magazine Casabella, Edoardo Persico dealt in an editorial with the Czech architects of the twenties and thirties. He wrote: "The main significance of the new architecture in Czechoslovakia resides in its capacity to establish a new artistic tradition; in its universality with all the inherent practical implications. This is the 'primitivism' of world architecture." Persico was addressing a cautious, conservative Italy at a time when Mussolini was coming down uncompromisingly on the side of the "imperial regionalistic traditionalism" of Piacentini.
We may maintain a distinction between tradition and modernity in their way of treating origin. In the traditional world, the original spring out, the epistemological break, is surely the work of the ancestors. For the latter, it is contemporary humanity which accomplishes the leap. In other words, modern man is in this view his own ancestor, his own primitive man! From a modern standpoint the temporal distance established by Tradition between the present time and the moment of origin is abolished in a flash.

But does this distinction hold in the light of recent ethnological research? One might think that tradition sees itself as the product or effect of an act of receiving, while modernity considers itself as the source. But Jean Pouillon has shown that traditional thought, far from passively accepting what is handed down to it or what comes from the past, adopts on the contrary a contemporary standpoint. In the traditional world it is not so much the past which comes towards the present as the present which goes to the past, informing it and remodelling it in function of contemporary interests. Out of all the elements and information, which the past offers, traditional man effects a choice, a re-ordering of things, by which he enacts his own history and his own kinship. He invents his ancestors and gives himself his forebears. Thus, far from being the native son of the ancestors, it is the ancestors who are the children begotten by tradition "in the present." This "traditional" looking back on time seems not far removed from its "modern" condensation.

One of the pairs which characterizes the "traditional" opposition between tradition and modernity has been recently studied by the great historian of Gothic architecture, Jean Bony, namely necessity and accident.

"Our understanding of History and of the forces which have determined its course varies with the temporal distance that separates us from the past events we are considering; and this change of perspective seems to affect in particular our evaluation of the element of accident in history. While we are perfectly aware of the importance of the unpredictable, of chance encounters, of the impact of individual temperament in the course taken by painting over the last hundred years or so, the deeper we move into the past, the more events tend to lose that coefficient of variability and fall into large scale patterns. And if one reaches back to before the fourteenth century, when documentary evidence becomes extremely scarce, then the flow of history tends to be presented in large waves, reflecting the action of a sort of irresistible inner mechanism, as if individual men in those times had been mere tools in the hands of a superior destiny, which now can be deciphered only in terms of general concepts and of developing principles."

This immediately raises a fundamental question: was the pattern of forces that constitutes history so different in those early days from what it is now? Was the working of artistic creation really of such a different nature? For the first "historians of architecture" of modern times, Alberti, Filarete, Raphael, Palladio, Gothic architecture was considered barbarian, devoid of "good taste," hardly having shaken off the matrix out of which it was born in the wild forests of the Northern Alps countries. Admittedly, those men of the Renaissance, the second generation of pioneers who rediscovered the true Greco-Roman origin, also claimed to have imitated nature in their architecture. But, here, it was not the "natural" wild nature of the Gothics, but the "good nature," arranged according to new laws. For those men the Gothic process of artistic creation was radically different from that which presided over the renaissance of Classical architecture. For them, and for many others subsequently, the Gothic cathedrals raised themselves towards the sky as mushrooms growing out of the ground! This naturalness of Gothic architecture was seen as contrasting with the controlled artificiality of "modern" renaissance. On the one hand, natural wildness, on the other civilized artificialness.
In this view, the difference between Gothic architecture and 'modern' architecture stands out in additional characteristics like the anonymity of its builders, and the traditionality of its processes. For Jean Bony, this "difference" of the Gothic, its traditional nature, the spontaneous fashion of its coming as the product of a social necessity, is only the effect of our ignorance of the concrete conditions of its development. Incapable of tracing individual intervention in its advent, we transform the weak points in our knowledge into the essential nature of the object of our research! It seems that what is true of our relationship with things distant in time, is equally so of what is distant in space? Do we not tend to consider as traditional anything which is foreign to our world and of which we do not succeed in finding the keys to its understanding? Incapable of recognizing individual differences, the effect of chance, we are very quick to credit anonymous necessity with all that is distant from us. Through making too great a distinction between Tradition and Modernity, as many of us do, we take the risk of failing to understand our contemporary reality. Maybe it is our modern knowledge that we now have to turn to.

REFERENCE NOTES
3. Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking."
6. While I was preparing this text, I was fortunate enough to come across the October 1987 issue of the revue "Terrain - Carnets du Patrimoine ethnologique," in which Gerard Lenc1ud of the Laboratory of Social Anthropology goes back on the notions of "tradition" and "traditional society" in ethnology. I found in Lenc1ud's work a confirmation of my amateurish hypothesis in this matter.
8. The famous letter of Raphael to Leon X.