

ARCHITECTURE, MEMORY AND METAPHOR

By Richard MacCormac

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Designing a building to house Ruskin's work and his collection of books, paintings and photographs precipitates a question - a Ruskinian question - about architecture, Is there a relationship between the language of 'modernism' and the historical tradition represented in Ruskin's thought? On the one hand, modernism has been seen as deliberately dislocated, an abstract, technological language from which historical associations have been banished. On the other hand, the historical tradition is locked into a taxonomy of style, isolated from other contemporary discourses about architectural theory, and irrelevant to the typological, spatial and constructional characteristics of late twentieth century architecture.

The question itself defines a familiar conflict and says something about the discontinuity in our culture; the past is preserved but not made part of the future. Our purpose, as architects, must be to rediscover how our inheritance can become vivid and relevant to what we make now. The Ruskin project has allowed us to do this in a very special way.

The sixth chapter of Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* is the *Lamp of Memory*, in which he says "we cannot remember" without architecture. The chapter resonates with analogous words - monument, memory, history, historical, story (1) - all of which emphasise the idea of recall - and invite us to find the means of recall - without losing the authenticity of the architecture of the present. And this, in turn, stimulates the realisation that architecture, like literature and landscape, is part of our collective memory, which we must incorporate into our present experience.

Ruskin's concern with memory, with the memorial and monumental, was complex. He saw architecture as a text of cumulative history. He believed that architecture could convey information metaphorically, through its surface decoration, and he likened buildings to books - he referred to St Mark's as "a vast illuminated missal". Today, it is difficult to dissociate Ruskin's ideas from the stylistic legacy of pseudo-Gothic and, in particular, the pseudo-Venetian style which he himself recognised as "an accursed Frankenstein monster of my own making". And this admission is interesting for, when Ruskin calls upon the architect "to render the architecture of the day historical", we perceive that he is addressing an issue more fundamental than style, which is the potential for architecture to say something through its antecedents, rather than simply to describe its own structure and function.

This Ruskinian reminder is particularly important for the mainstream of late twentieth century British architecture, which tends to subsume all aesthetic and symbolic issues within innovative structural and programmatic arguments. There are reasons for this but, looked at in a wider context of the visual arts, sculpture and painting, this is uncharacteristic of British modernism which has synthesised metaphor and formal invention in, for example, the work of such artists as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Paul Nash, and today in the work of artists contributing to what has been called the 'unpainted landscape' - Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Long and Ian Hamilton Finlay.

In the works of Nash and Finlay, objects may be recognisable but their juxtapositions are surprising and, as in the fiction of Garcia Marquez, it is as if a basis in practical reality is needed to set off the metaphorical and dream-like. This is important for architecture because it has to be real. The potency of a metaphorical image lies in its ambiguity, because, not being one thing, it can be many. It is neither literal nor abstract. Looked at in terms of architecture, this ambiguity is what distinguishes a metaphorical use of the past from the adoption of an historical style. It allows a creative relationship between present and past and an active rather than passive engagement with history. This is the possibility which the Ruskin project and its progenitors in our work have sought.

The Ruskin Library has two main antecedents amongst our projects, the unbuilt library for King's College Cambridge, and the chapel for Fitzwilliam College Cambridge (2), which both contribute to the development of a series of themes. All three projects express the idea of protection through the use of curved walls and all three consist of buildings within buildings, with the inner buildings evoking an architectural presence within the space.

The curved masonry outer wall of the King's library was to consist of tiers of galleries, displaying the college's collection of ancient books and manuscripts as a kind of memory bank of knowledge, monumental in the sense of being a 'reminder', from the Latin *monere*, to remind or warn. In contrast, the undergraduate library, a free-standing object, constructed of wood was to be a kind of grove of transient information standing in the internal space. The project explored dualities and ambiguities of inside and outside, under and over which are reiterated in both the chapel and the Ruskin Library.

The chapel combines the linear and circular origins of Christian church architecture, the basilica and the Pantheon. It does this with abstract forms which draw on the two typological traditions without stylistic recourse.

In cross-section, the building is also traditional, consisting of a crypt with the place of worship above. But here it is the object within the space, defining the duality between what is above and what is below, which is the principal symbol of the building; it is a vessel, an ark, which floats over the dark underworld of the crypt, and holds above, the place of worship. This image of a vessel was precipitated by visits to the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, in which the concave interior surfaces of the space protect the sensuous elegant wooden ships, and the Vasa Ship Museum in Stockholm, where the wonderfully preserved seventeenth century ship is like an enormous toy in its box. But it was not until the design developed that the power and universality of the ship metaphor became apparent. The vessel is the *nave di chiesi* where the congregation come together for a shared rite of passage. In medieval manuscripts the images of Christ seen in a ship are metaphors for his transforming and redemptive journey. This idea of transformation is also the meaning of the Viking and Egyptian burial ships and of the story of Noah's Ark and, in a special sense, of Jonah and the Whale, the transforming experience of what Jung called "the night sea journey".

The Ruskin Library

The Ruskin Library is the further development of an architecture combining seemingly abstract formal language with a series of narrative ideas. It is Ruskinian because it alludes to Ruskin and because, by doing so, it fulfils Ruskin's expectation that architecture should be metaphorical. The building avoids historical style but is 'rendered historical' in the Ruskinian sense. The actual concrete construction is exposed internally in its true character, in the giant portal frames which span longitudinally. But externally, it is 'encrusted' - to use another Ruskinian term - with white masonry and dark grey/green courses, joined with stainless steel bosses, the equivalent of the visible fastenings used in the cladding of Italian buildings, which Ruskin called "confessed rivets". The construction of the archive cabinet, standing within, mimics this combination, but with different materials - polished red plaster, oak frames and bronze fastenings - 'encrusting' the concrete box.

The building, in plan, appears as a succinctly abstract idea - two arcs, split apart, to contain the rectangular archive. But it is also symbolically and literally a 'keep', a refuge for Ruskin's bequest, appearing as a secure tower, and fulfilling the verb 'keep' by preserving the collection. It is also a monument celebrating the memory of the life of Ruskin, a life monumental in itself in the sense that Ruskin's life's work was continuously to remind.

The building is an island like Venice. Islands are also refuges and medieval Venice was Ruskin's moral refuge. So the building, as a symbol of Venice, is separated from the university by a causeway which crosses a dry moat representing the lagoon.

This causeway enters the building and the metaphor of island and lagoon is replicated with the archive itself emerging through an underlit transparent glass and slate floor to convey the perilous maritime

condition of the city and to allude to Ruskin's dream of looking into its waters, and seeing the horses of St Mark's being harnessed.

The archive, a building within a building, or keep within a keep, recalls a visit made to the cathedral of Albi, in the south of France, a fortress-like cathedral within which the masonry choir formed a further internal line of defence. This idea has been transferred analogically into an environmental proposition which uses the thermal stability of the two masonry 'keeps' and the large volume of air between them to protect the collection and create the first passively conditioned major archive in the UK (3). In terms of the building's symbolic and visual intentions, the memory of Albi also precipitated a church-like plan in which the archive stands for the choir separating the public entrance and the aisles on each side from the sanctuary/reading room situated in the most secure location at the west end of the building.

The centrepiece of the building is, of course, the archive itself and, like the vessel in the Fitzwilliam Chapel, it is loaded with associations. In an abstract sense it is a large object which gains its presence from blocking the axis through the building. Richard Serra's *Weight and Measure* exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1992 had a similar effect. It is the great treasure chest, in Venetian red plaster, the cathedral chest strapped together with oak and bronze. It is also a cabinet, like a giant piece of furniture by William Burgess which acquires the scale and character of architecture - a building inside a building. It is an ark or reliquary, a tabernacle, a bookcase or, by inference, a great book; the "a vast illuminated missal" and corpus of Ruskin's work. Shutters can be opened to hint at its interior. At the east end, facing the public entrance these open to reveal a hugely amplified image of one of Ruskin's daguerreotypes of St Mark's, a Proustian fleeting or, as Ruskin would say, a "fugitive" image, a symbol of the fragility of memory (4) and its capacity to recall the past.

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1. I owe this observation to Professor Michael Wheeler, director of the Ruskin project at Lancaster University. *The Lamp of Memory: Ruskin, Tradition and Architecture* edited by Michael Wheeler & Nigel Whiteley, Manchester University Press, 1992
2. Exhibited in the 1992 Venice Biennale Architettura e spazio sacro nella modernità
3. The Ruskin Library: Architecture and Environment for the Storage, Display and Study of a Collection pre-print, Ottawa Conference 12-16 September 1994, Institute for the conservation of historical and artistic works
4. Proust's, *A la recherche du temps perdu* is arguably the literary monument to Ruskin's concern with memory