

ARCHITECTURE AND THE MORAL TEMPER OF THE TIMES by Richard MacCormac

This paper first appeared in the Boston, Melbourne, Oxford Conversazioni on Culture and Society's Winter Conversazione for 1990, 'On the public face of architecture'

"Ruskin reminds us of the conditions for the aesthetic dimension of human culture to flourish".
Peter Fuller, The Geography of Mother Nature.

I find parts of The Stones of Venice deeply moving and, of course, marvelous to read. Ruskin, from what seems to me a youthful and innocent frame of mind, a spiritual Garden of Eden, calls out to our sense of wholeness, to the bright, clear, elemental, good and truthful world, which he feels architecture and the allied arts will represent.

What remains important about Ruskin, which even his opponent Geoffrey Scott allowed, was that he raised the value of architecture and reminded us - and I quote Scott- "that the arts are justified by the way they make men feel". This may be so obvious as to seem platitudinous, but architecture has served, or pretended to serve, many other purposes than art and the various nineteenth century fallacies which Scott opposed in his book The Architecture of Humanism remain surprisingly alive in this century. It was only twenty five years ago that a Fabian pamphlet was in circulation entitled Architecture, Art, or Social Service.

As a practising architect, this central meaning is immensely important to me because it seems to proclaim the integrity of architecture against the forces which oppose it - materialism, bureaucratic accountability, expedience, apathy and social conformity. Few outside the profession are aware of the extent to which architecture is determined by financial considerations and the extent to which architects are agents of this system, unequipped with some commensurate conviction which they can use in opposition. I know this because I was recently forced to resign from master-planning the redevelopment of Spitalfields, an important, historic part of London, because the developer/client wished to pursue a commercial policy which I believed to be fundamentally unsympathetic to the area.

The difficulty with Ruskin's book, particularly if you are an agnostic, as I am, is to determine the modern equivalent of his peculiarly nineteenth century moral quest and make the connection between his extraordinary rhetoric - what Yeats might have called 'the will trying to do the work of the imagination' - and his examination of Venetian architecture, with its almost botanical exactitude. Ruskin raises connections between architecture and morality, architecture and nature, and architecture and the integrity of the artist, which were contentious in the nineteenth century and remain even more so today.

Ruskin followed in the steps of Pugin in giving moral significance to architectural style. Part of Geoffrey Scott's argument in The Architecture of Humanism is that not only is such an association irrelevant, but it actually discourages a real discourse about architecture and the

obligations which architecture has to itself as an art, because it is concerned with extraneous issues. Curiously, this issue is still alive in Britain, but now the style is classicism and some of its proponents, notably Quinlan Terry and, to a lesser extent, Leon Krier, believe in its divine justification, now coupled with the magic of royal support.

Ruskin's moral position may have its origins in the distrust of architecture and the allied arts in England which followed the Reformation and the subsequent need, which is particularly English, to try to describe and justify the visual arts in terms which are substitutes for their actual intentions. Mark Girouard, in his excellent book on the great Elizabethan architect Robert Smythson, suggests that the moral temper of the Reformation in England suppressed architecture in gentlemen's education because it was Papist by association and seemed to have powers of immodesty, enchantment and extravagance associated with a profligate church and state. 1

Of course, the aristocratic patronage of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries restored the Italianate indulgences of architecture, and it is with the emergence of Pugin that we meet again a puritanical polemic about architecture as a moral force which Ruskin inherits. One can see that, in the English climate of ideas reacting to the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, architecture as a social art, rather than simply an aristocratic one, was seen to be insufficient in itself to oppose the new forces. The appeal to morality would shake people's conduct more than appeals to art, so architecture as an art was subsumed within a moral crusade. I think the English are still of a mind that the arts are somewhat extraneous unless some higher power tells them otherwise. Is this, I wonder, the force of H.R.H. The Prince of Wales' intervention. I think, to some extent, it is.

Ruskin wrote "We usually fall into much error by considering the intellectual powers as having dignity in themselves and separate from the heart". Nevertheless, I feel that Ruskin's form of criticism and attitude to architecture is remote from the actual implementation of the arts of which he writes. It is, perhaps, part of that presumption in British education that writing and talking about the arts has a higher status than accomplishing them. Most universities in Britain have departments of Fine Art. Fewer have departments of Architecture and in some of these architecture is concealed within Faculties of more social and maybe moral relevance, like Sociology at the University of Edinburgh. The subject of architecture is more presentable to the university community, not as an art in itself, but subsumed within a more readily accountable academic discipline.

Without wishing to lay this entirely before Ruskin's door, or to digress too far, I think it is worth recollecting the curricula of architectural schools in the 1960s and 70s, which developed this kind of moral substitution and displaced architecture into various academic studies, planning, social science, environmental science, psychology, and occasionally aesthetics, as a carefully separate topic. The most complete course of this kind was, perhaps not surprisingly, at University College London, Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarian Foundation, where I spent two tormented years. Here the seeming inexactitude and subjectivity of architectural education was replaced with what Professor Llewellyn Davies referred to as "a new body of knowledge" which re-defined the subject. He had, indeed, re-defined architecture as a void at the centre of his curriculum - an architecture-shaped hole.

I do not intend to dwell here on the various moral poses struck by the modern movement. They have been recorded admirably in David Watkins book *Morality and Architecture*, 2 and ludicrous much of the polemic sounds today! However, one needs to be cautious about what artists and architects say they are doing and the relationship between what they say and what they actually do, which is likely to be rather unreliable. Perhaps what occurs is analogous to Jung's theory about alchemy. The alchemists describe their works in terms of conscious material objectives. What is really going on, Jung claims, are a series of subconscious processes with their own psychological structure and objectives. David Watkins included James Stirling in his version of the ethical fallacy of modernism. His book was published in 1977, the year that Stirling won the competition for the Stadtsgerie in Stuttgart, with a proposition which fused the neo-classicism of Schinkel with a playful sense of those original purist forms of the modern movement, the syncopated curves and unexpected collages of Ozenfant and Le Corbusier. This single building shed the moralising tone of modernism and suggested a language of architecture which could freely use history without pastiche and incorporate its immediate past in an unexpected way. It both confirmed and subverted Watkins' argument. Architecture continuously produces its own imperatives which force their way up through intellectual prescriptions like wild plants appearing through paving. Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* barely addresses this capacity of architecture itself to move us, but instead sees architecture, and perhaps challenges architecture to be, the matrix of the other visual arts. For me, Ruskin does not address himself to the real force of European Gothic architecture which lies in its ever-changing expression of structural energy within highly developed and changing geometric disciplines, which infuse the whole building as a work of art. Had this been his intention, Ruskin would surely have found his gothic in France or England, instead of Venice where the influence is as much from Islam as from the north. Indeed, in one of the few analyses of structure which he introduces he attributes the cusp form of a gothic arch to the requirement of structural stiffness, whereas, in fact it is a decorative device derived from the section of an Islamic pendentive vault.

Ruskin inspired the creativity of architects such as Burgess, Butterfield and Street, each of whom, in different ways, offers polychromatic visions combining architecture with the other applied arts - something almost lost today in Britain, except perhaps in the output of John Outram. But these architects, like Gaudi in Spain, developed their own architectural language, for in his idea of gothic, Ruskin only offers an attitude which was to become an easily assumed dress, much like the appliquéd classicism and post modernism of today. Ruskin eventually regretted the effect of his Venetian enthusiasms. In a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1872, he wrote:

I am proud enough to hope that I have had some direct influence on Mr Street. But I have [also] had indirect influence on nearly every cheap villa-builder between [Denmark Hill] and Bromley; and there is scarcely a public house near the Crystal Palace but sells its gin and bitters under pseudo-Venetian capitals copied from the Church of the Madonna of Health of Miracles. And one of my principal notions for leaving my present house [and fleeing to Brantwood in the Lake District] is that it is surrounded everywhere by the accursed Frankenstein monsters of, indirectly, my own making.

This, I suppose, is the risk taken by any historian or critic who decides to promote a style.

One nineteenth-century architect who profoundly understood and sympathised with the dilemma in Ruskin's idea was Voysey. Voysey understood the difference between the promotion of an attitude and the need of architecture to speak with its own voice and convey its own meanings. Voysey made a distinction between what he called the associative and the intrinsic in architecture, recognising that gothic, as a superficially applied style, might carry an associative connotation, but would not necessarily have intrinsic character or what he called artistic fitness. "There is all the difference", he wrote "between such associations and that inward intensity of feeling that produces an object", and he went on to consider the kinds of feelings which architecture and furniture might really evoke through their appearance, such as dignity, grace and calm. Voysey was trying to bring Ruskin's high-flying psychology of architecture down to the specific case of domestic design.

Between the idea of moral temper and the aesthetics of the physical object is human life, which tests and fulfils and, one might say, consummates the connection.

Voysey believed that good qualities could be infused into objects by design and by craftsmanship and that the objects would then convey these qualities to their users. As an architect and furniture designer, Voysey can be much more specific than Ruskin about the kinds of qualities which construction can convey. His attitude is founded in the virtues of domestic life and its expression through architecture – "the house should be the most peaceful, restful, simple servant we possess", he wrote. With other architects of the arts and crafts movement, he arrived, under the influence of Ruskin, at the quintessentially English image of domestic life which was to become universally known throughout Europe and America. The Boston Architectural Review in 1904 commented that "it is not too much to say that no other nation has succeeded in developing a domestic architecture having the subtle and intimate charm which in the English country house makes so strong an appeal to love of home, as well as to the love of beauty".

Voysey produced work of great beauty and serenity, in some ways reminiscent of the Shaker tradition and, not surprisingly, a number of his clients were Quakers. Here is a source of a recurring sensibility in modern domestic architecture represented too in the work of other arts and crafts architects, such as Mackintosh, which tends to be eclipsed by the purist and mechanistic arguments of European modernism. This is the sense of simplicity or perhaps one should call it "sufficiency" to give a particular moral overtone. In Voysey's work, the roofs, chimneys and traditional materials speak of a vernacular architecture which responds to essential, rather than to superfluous, needs. Wide doorways and large fireplaces express generosity. Long, horizontal runs of continuous casement windows admit light and air, suggesting an openness and easy relationship with nature, and white walls inside and out, and sparse decoration, confirm a restrained domesticity.

These inherent qualities in Voysey's architecture, also in the work of Mackintosh and Bailey Scott, were widely published in the magazine *The Studio*, influencing in turn the Swedish

painter Carl Larsson. Larsson is important because he conveys an image of life conducted with aesthetic simplicity through the poetic images of his painting, which fuse the spiritual and the physical into images of happiness, often represented through records of his own family living out the events of their lives. Here is a resolution of art in life in a Ruskinian sense, although it could hardly be further from The Stones of Venice.

Architects tend to associate these virtues of simplicity with the noisy polemic of Le Corbusier and with his aphorisms, such as "espace, verdure, soleil" but I think that Larsson, a painter not an architect, had a wide influence, not sufficiently acknowledged today. In 1910, he published a book called *At Solsidan - On the Sunny Side* - and he went on to publish a number of books in Scandinavia and Germany which were widely read before the First World War. Larsson was a conscious propagandist, a crusader in the Ruskinian mould, illustrating his own house as the example, and it is said that no other house in the world has been as widely publicised as his.

These ideas form part of what one might call "the spiritual economy of modernism," which developed from the arts and crafts movement into the production of industrially manufactured buildings and furniture. In England the social meaning of this was highly ambiguous and continues to be so. There is the continuing sense that the elegant sufficiency represented by well-made and simple things is a reaction against the over-ripe, opulent, stifling clutter of the late nineteenth century. Fastidiousness appears as an antidote to satiety. On the other hand, perhaps this is a middle class perception and in the public sector of housing, for instance, the stripped aesthetic of Modernism carries connotations of meanness and poverty and lack of choice. For those who can choose as consumers, the context in which modern design has been acceptable has been one in which its machine-made simplicity has been combined with the plainness of old things - quarry tiled floors, Provencal cooking pots, wicker chairs and so forth - a combination which has been facetiously referred to as "conspicuous thrift".

The other inheritance of the arts and crafts movement which comes through Voysey is the sense that the significance of buildings is not just in their appearance and aesthetic, but in the quality discovered in their use, in the use of places, not spaces, and in the use of things which convey their sense of fitness in the way they are made. This is entirely distinct from architectural disciplines which impose external form on internal organisation, or largely concern themselves, as Post-Modernism does, with the spectacle, rather than the experience, of buildings. Gillian Darley and Peter Davey, in an editorial for the *Architectural Review* entitled "Sense and Sensibility", which included a discussion on our building for Worcester College, Oxford - The Sainsbury Building - wrote: "In contrast, the romantic pragmatists [this is how we were described] continue the Modern Movement or [more precisely] the Puginian Gothic Revival belief that structure should inform space, construction inform detail, and that the interior should inform the exterior - and that inside and out must be intimately related in an organic way."

Even office buildings, we believe, are susceptible to this approach, which puts the social organisation of the building before the conventional, commercial idea that offices are a Taylorist human factory of standardised spaces. We have recently completed an office building for Hampshire County Council which, in some ways, is more like an Arts and Crafts movement country house in which the clerical work is conducted in airy, top-lit halls from which staircases

ascend to landings serving clusters of individual offices. The idea of the building has been derived from an idea of how life might be conducted within it and, although the office worker is unlikely to achieve that creative personal freedom which was the birthright of Ruskin's medieval craftsmen, we have at least set the County's employees free from the enslavement of the regimented office plan, and the people who work in the building are surprised and delighted by this.

With other nineteenth century thinkers, Ruskin believed that nature was good as it showed Divine order and proved the existence of God, and just as God made nature, so, he believed, the artist and architect would, by their actions, mimic natural creation and the way in which God had gone about making things.

It is this profound sense of nature which inspires Ruskin's most deeply moving prose, for he sees, in what he calls the "Redundancy" of Gothic Architecture, the profuse and prolific energy of nature channelled through the craftsmen as "the rude love of decorative accumulation" and "magnificent enthusiasm". A poignant passage conveys Ruskin's feeling that man's work can barely match the work of nature: 3

...the minute and various work of Nature made him [the craftsman] feel more forcibly the barrenness of what was best in that of man... and where he saw throughout the universe a faultless beauty lavished on measureless spaces of brodered field and blooming mountain, [he grudged] his poor and imperfect labour [until] the Cathedral front was at last lost in the tapestry of its traceries, like a rock among the thickets and herbage of spring.

But, in spite of this extraordinary vaulting prose, Ruskin's manner of studying architecture in Venice was like that of a student of botany, classifying his types and arranging them in rows - the orders of Venetian arches, capitals, roofs, leafage and so on - an approach to architecture which was to become commonplace in academic text books, such as Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method. 4 From the types he described characteristics of style - savageness, changefulness, naturalism etc. There are beautiful descriptions and illustrations of natural and man-made forms, but no realisation that architectural organisation might itself have deep affinities with Nature. There is a chasm between the objective and the description.

The term "organic architecture", which has one of its roots in Ruskin, is now widely and loosely applied. It includes the current concern for ecological ways of building, using natural materials and energy conserving techniques. Examples are David Lea's and Richard Burrton's experiments with saplings and forest thinnings, and there are a number of architects who are committed to the use of renewable building resources. At a more symbolic and abstract level, architects like Reima Pietila, working in the tradition established by Alvar Aalto, are producing work which is imitative of natural structures with the forms of plants, crystals and rock formations. There is an analogous tradition of structural design which evokes naturalistic description - petal-like, tree-like, bone-like. Gaudi developed such a language of form in Catalonia and in the last decade his kinsman, the sculptor/engineer Calatrava, has produced a range of work, including a proposal for a new bridge across the Thames, which often

originates in analogies with plant or animal forms.

Ideas such as these emerged in the nineteenth century, going further than Ruskin in finding affinities between architecture and Nature, and making connections between attitude and observation which Ruskin failed to do.

Both Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright saw the creative process itself as part of nature and architecture as part of natural law. Sullivan's terminology is highly idiosyncratic and perhaps deliberately mystifying, but in his polemic, *A System of Architectural Ornament According with a Philosophy of Man's Powers*,⁵ he manages to convey an analogy between natural growth and the creative process of the artist. "Hence for the germ of the typical plant seed, with its residual power, he [the artist] may substitute, in thought, his own will as the seat of vital power in the figurative or imagined seed germ, which shall be the utterly simple energy basis of a theory of efflorescence involving plastic control over the inorganic."

Sullivan accompanies this wordy text with a series of extremely interesting illustrations which show the development of various patterns, some derived from stages of actual plant growth, probably taken from Asa Gray's *School and Field Book of Botany*, 1869, and others derived from geometry. In each case patterns are elaborated from simple structures, such as a square, pentagon, triangle, through a series of stages which have their own aesthetic order based on the underlying geometry. Sullivan called this process "efflorescence" and although the product sometimes has a feverish Celtic intensity, the residual structure is always there holding the thing together, like a Gothic rose window.

Wright was deeply affected by Sullivan's ideas about geometric and natural forms – "this innate or organic property of all form," he wrote, "if not merely looked at, but looked into as structure, absorbed me". The connection here, for Wright, which I have written about elsewhere, was Wright's Froebel's *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*. Froebel, like British contemporaries such as Philip Gosse, Adam Sedgwick and Ruskin, was convinced that the natural world was God's work, and that in it could be found an "original unity" a "logic of nature" which would make the basis of an educational system through which mankind would grow in harmony with Nature itself.

"God's works reflect the logic of his spirit" wrote Froebel in the introduction to the 1877 American edition of his *Kindergarten* – "and human education cannot do anything better than imitate the logic of Nature". Frank Lloyd Wright, in an article of 1908, was to say "given inherent vision, there is no source so fertile, so suggestive, so helpful aesthetically for the architect as the comprehension of natural law".

Wright inherited a Ruskinian sense of the sanctity of Nature, but it was through Froebel and through Sullivan's confirmation of what Froebel stood for, that this sense of nature became integral with his work as an architect. Froebel was apprenticed to the crystallographer Christian Samuel Weiss [1780 - 1856], who was a founder of the science of crystallography and whose observations influenced not only the subject of crystallography itself, but theories of natural structure in general. Froebel's *Kindergarten* exercises are based on various crystalline nets or

grids in which sequential transformations of symmetrical patterns can be set out. The geometries include the arrangement of squares, rectangles and diamonds, which make an increasingly complex combinations of axial and rotational symmetries, intersecting crosses and squares, pinwheels and pentagonal and hexagonal forms.

Wright's early work, particularly the Prairie Period up to 1912, shows plans, such as that of Unity Temple for example, which are directly comparable with the rectilinear cross in square patterns of the Kindergarten. Later, more complex forms like his unbuilt project for St Mark's Tower in the Bowery, in which squares and cruciforms are rotated in relation to each other, imitate the rotational structure of crystals and Wright seems to acknowledge this source in a development of the idea for a site in Washington which he called "Crystal Heights" - an unbuilt project of 1940.

Wright was the child of that same great sense of Nature which inspired Ruskin, but he fills out what Ruskin could not, and realises with the energy and plasticity of the great artist, the actions which lie between aspiration and observation. He wrote of his Froebel education: 6

The virtue of all this lay in the awakening of the child-mind to rhythmic structure in Nature - giving the child a sense of innate cause-and-effect, otherwise far beyond child comprehension. I soon became susceptible to constructive pattern evolving in everything I saw. I learned to "see" this way, and when I did I did not care to draw casual incidentals of Nature, I wanted to design.

This seeing into things went beyond the Kindergarten prototypes and beyond Sullivan's decorative theories. Trained to see in this way, Wright was forever observing new analogies between Nature and structural design. The lily pond outside the Tokyo Imperial Hotel became the great clerical administration space in the Johnson Wax Building in Racine, the stems and pads of the lilies becoming the columns and capitals, the tubular glass spanning between the effect of the surface shimmer of water above. The helical structures of plants and shells became the Guggenheim Museum. At Falling Water, the great rocky outcrop of the site itself seems to be extended and cantilevered as a building which floats amongst the trees.

The society which Ruskin sought and which he felt to be the necessary condition for art and architecture in his chapter entitled "Gothic Architecture", did not come about and it remains as it was conceived - an imaginary ideal with which to continue to judge the conduct and the products of industrial society.

But, in his conclusion, Ruskin also describes the necessary temper of the artist himself, the inner integrity of his actions and the function of art "to rouse the imagination from its palsy" and he goes on to make his celebrated attack on classicism: "an architecture intended as it seems, to make plagiarists of its architects, slaves of its workmen..." This text is a reminder of the integrity of the artist's or architect's own thought, and of the danger of succumbing to conventions and superficial uses of style which substitute for real architectural thought. Once again in Britain the convention of classicism is being used in commercial architecture. Its authenticity as an architectural language is atrophied by inappropriate scale and structure. But it satisfies a

certain kind of social approval, what Ruskin called “the dim eyed proprieties of the multitude”.

The very difficult question in Europe, particularly in Britain where we hang on to our cities as a physical memory of our past, which we try to preserve and confirm, is the place of inventive new architecture and the extent to which it should be constrained in manner by the situation in which it is built. Much of my own practice’s work is in historically sensitive sites in Oxford and Cambridge. Although we feel constrained, to some extent, by traditional materials, scale and form, we avoid imitation and pastiche and seek a relationship with the context through what I call a narrative.

Our best known building in Oxford, the Sainsbury Building, looks nothing like the early eighteenth century buildings which form the College quadrangle, but offers a similar sequence of experiences, which are reactions to places, rather than to elevations. The old buildings form a threshold between the College and the City. The threshold itself is a loggia under the library, and once you enter the loggia you become aware of the magic park in the College grounds, and as you progress beyond, you find what has hitherto not been revealed, a serpentine lake. This unfolding sequence is discovered in our own building, which also forms the threshold between College and city and stands at the other end of the lake, opposite the original quadrangle. These ideas derive, to some extent, from eighteenth century landscape theory, but need no support from the superficial imitation of architectural style.

We live in a period, in Britain, of architectural ingratiation, which I think Ruskin would have despised. Post-Modernism has encouraged a kind of over-talkative conversational architecture which tries to be polite to everything around it, but usually lacks any inherent conviction of its own.

We confuse the appearance of architecture with its spirit, as the criteria for approval, particularly in the area of planning legislation, become increasingly mundane and trivial. I can hardly imagine a great architect like the late Louis Kahn getting a building accepted in England today. I have often ruminated over what would have happened if he had lived to be able to make a submission for the extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. He did not know how to ingratiate himself or how to play the dextrous contextual games of his best known pupil, and perhaps the best known betrayer of his principles, Robert Venturi. The Yale Museum, which houses the Mellon Collection of British Art is not pretty, nor is his library for St Phillip’s Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. Both are noble works by an evidently noble and spiritual man, a Ruskinian affirmation!

Architecture remains a moral adventure and I believe it has to keep transforming tradition to re-awaken meanings, rather than imitate old forms. I feel this personally, having recently been refused planning permission for a new Chapel for a school in the south-east of England. The proposed building accommodates a congregation in a great timber structure like an ark, comparable with the idea of a gothic choir separately contained within the larger masonry envelope of the church and roofed with a ribbed structure of timber and stainless steel, derived from various sources, including the late Gothic Divinity School in the Bodleian Library. The opposition want either a restoration of the burned out Edwardian Gothic Chapel, or an

imitation-Gothic building. For me, the choice is between imitation and the spirit of the idea. I wonder whether Ruskin would be on my side!

Richard MacCormac

1 M Girouard, Robert Smythson and the Architecture of the Elizabethan Era. London, 1966.

2 Oxford, 1977

3 The Stones of Venice, 2, 1853. p208

4 First published, London, 1896

5 New York, 1924

6 Frank Lloyd Wright: Wright: Writings and Buildings, Selected by E. Kaufmann and B. Raeburn. Meridian Books, New York, 1960, p19.