

CHAPTER 1

How To Write About Buildings?

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The chatter about architecture goes on and on. Adrian Forty was perhaps the first person to propose that the surprise answer to the missing term in the old equation, architecture = buildings + x, was *words*. If that's right, as I am increasingly persuaded, it explains why so much talk and writing envelops the practice of design. The theory of architecture is a species of moral rhetoric, there for architects to convince clients, the public at large and most of all one another that lives will be enriched and beneficially altered by placing bricks in this direction rather than that. And Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier are really the Demosthenes and Cicero of architectural modernism, not its Plato and Aristotle. The dumber the building – and most buildings are mercifully silent – the more it seems to cry out for an accompaniment of words.

Suppose that is as much as half-true, another question arises. If words matter to architecture, how come they are so often poorly put together? To express it another way, why is there so little persuasive and beautiful writing about architecture these days? That is what I found myself asking recently when contributing to an anthology on a critic who is perhaps as far from Adrian's enthusiasms as you could get: Ian Nairn. There has been a revival of interest in Nairn recently, and for good reason: he writes so well and at his best (as in the well-known guidebook *Nairn's London* (1966)) for a compelling missionary purpose. His words still make people look and reflect and react, they propel them out of their seats and into the streets in search of *architecture*. How few writers writing in English can do that, I thought. Ruskin, perhaps? It is not

what Pevsner does, nor the vast preponderance of scholars and theorists. They offer fact and comparison, and perhaps they prod the grey matter. Meanwhile the reader stays fixed in his chair.

Writing and jawing about buildings is of course infinite in variety, and so it should be. A lot of the talking, in architecture schools particularly, is of the preaching type, there to engender confidence in those who are daring to design. Later comes the enormous complexity and exchange of data necessary to get a building up and on its feet. There is little reason for either type of discourse to be coherent or beautiful. The most seductive of architectural theories have often taken the form of vatic, staccato or metaphorical utterances (Pugin, Le Corbusier, Loos, Buckminster Fuller). As for the plethoric information surrounding the business of building, there is seldom the time or luxury to render it better than clear and effective; people would look askance if you tried to make it otherwise.

All the same, a great deal that is written about architecture these days has, so far as one can see, no fixed or ulterior purpose. About much, perhaps most of this, I want to ask: why is it not better written? The unfortunate answer seems to be: because the audience for such writing is unclear, and so its manner of expression does not really matter. Academic journals, for instance, feed off the self-perpetuating system whereby their authors justify themselves by publishing in them. For architecture-as-science that may be fine, since the accumulation and analysis of information can be regarded as progressive and useful. But for architecture-as-art the case is otherwise. An audience, a listener beyond some picky and prosaic peer-reviewing committee, ought always to be in the author's mind.

It may fairly be urged that most writing about the history and theory of architecture should be as modest in language and recessive in tone as the writing about its science. You can after all draw effective attention to something special or beautiful without making a song and dance about it. Nor should you try to edge it out of the picture you are drawing. But if Adrian's notion is true, and buildings and words are complementary, there must be occasions when the writing rises to meet the architecture and does not stand too abjectly in its shadow. The reason why Ruskin and Nairn at their best or, to take two other examples at random, Goethe on Strasbourg Cathedral and Wordsworth on King's College Chapel, Cambridge, are so exciting and moving is because they have the guts to try and respond to, even emulate, what they are talking about.¹ That is architectural criticism at its best and highest. When it really comes off, it

achieves an exalted harmony, as in the famous Rilke poem that begins *Wie soll ich meine Seele halten ...* [How shall I contain my soul ...]:

*nimmt uns zusammen wie ein Bogenstrich,
der aus zwei Saiten eine Stimme zieht ...*
[drawing us together like a bow-stroke
that lifts a single voice from twofold strings ...]²

This doesn't have to be as arrogant or ambitious as it may sound. It can come over as well by attending lovingly to a detail as by attempting the rhetorical description of a cathedral. But it is certainly difficult, rare and precious.

One reason this level of criticism is getting even rarer these days may be the inversion of the relationship between writing and architectural imagery. Pictures cost less than words to publish nowadays on the whole, and are much more rapidly exchanged and absorbed. Architectural scribblers have become wallpaper providers. And if no-one is looking at the interstices between the images, why bother about the quality of the writing? Isn't architecture a visual subject anyway? A single picture can obviate a thousand descriptive words, takes less time to digest, and gives greater passing pleasure to all but a few.

Undeniable though that may be, it actually makes the choice and quality of the words more important. The heresy that architectural value resides in the image or concept of a building rather than in its creation, experience and use has been around since the rise of printing and the subsequent diffusion of treatises by Palladio and other architects. Never have its attractions been so easy, so superficial, and so corrupting as they are today. We can best combat that heresy not with more images but with more imagination – by means of the honourable rhetoric which only well-chosen words can supply. Architecture = building + *good* words.

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Notes

¹ Goethe's essay *Von deutscher Baukunst* [On German Architecture], first published in 1773; Wordsworth's untitled sonnet of 1820–1, beginning 'Tax not the royal Saint with vain expense', which is often referred to in collections as 'Inside of King's College Chapel, Cambridge'.

² Rainer Marie Rilke, *Liebeslied* [Love Song], first published in 1907. The translation is my own.