

INTRODUCTION

Garbett's *Treatise*

In 1850 Edward Lacy Garbett (1824-1900) published *A Rudimentary Treatise of the Principles of Design in Architecture as Deducible from Nature and Exemplified in the Works of the Greek and Gothic Architects*. The aim of the *Treatise* was to search for constants in the relationship between meaning and form in architecture and to use those constants to obtain standards of design based on the author's experience of nature and from his reading of the architectural forms of the past.

The purpose of my commenary is to question the desire, the assumptions needed and the methods involved in that search. My reasons are twofold. On a theoretical level I am interested in the mechanisms appropriate to belief and knowledge. On a practical level I am concerned with how the resulting attitudes and views are made to work on buildings.

Before I explain that I would like to justify the choice of my case history.

Garbett's *Treatise* enjoyed considerable success. From the time it was first published in 1850, it went through no less than nine unaltered editions; the last appearing in 1906. Despite the undoubted success of the book, it is difficult to assess Garbett's real, or immediate influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture or architectural theory. Few people in England have given him the credit for a change in their own attitudes and ideas. America was more generous in this respect; Garbett was praised by seminal thinkers of the time such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horatio Greenough, John Welborn Root and William Le Baron Jenney. Through their mediation Garbett's ideas directly influenced the course that architectural aesthetics was to take in the surge of modernism. Some of his attitudes even show a homological resemblance to Louis Sullivan's ideas but I have not yet been able to prove even the slightest connection.

In any case Sir Nicolaus Pevsner judges the *Treatise* to be one of *the most advanced statement[s] of architectural theory of the whole mid-nineteenth century*.¹ Later he adds that *it is the only book of its date in England to face fully what architectural theory ought to involve. It is in its setting of problems much more like textbooks on architectural design today than like any of the writings so far examined*.² and again: *He is the most intelligent, the most rational, the most far-seeing of the prophets of an original style of*

1. Pevsner (1972) p. 189. The quote actually goes: *These [referring to the essays by Horatio Greenough] are the most advanced statements of architectural theory of the whole mid-nineteenth century, except for those contained in 'Mr. Garbett's learned and able treatise'*. cf. Horatio Greenough (1947) pp. 20-22. For the sake of brevity I have paraphrased Pevsner's compliment to bring out the implication.

2. Pevsner (1972) p. 189.

the future...³ When reading this praise from one of the most devout and dogmatic modernists, it would seem paradoxical that many of Garbett's propositions similarly anticipated the arguments used by the critics of modernism. But then the contradiction implied in a paradox is never more than a trick of perspective, as will become clear in the course of the arguments presented here.

Many of the issues which Garbett discussed in the *Treatise* were themes which have concerned historians from Charles Eastlake until the present. But Garbett's way of addressing them did not necessarily conform to the way that historians and polemicists like to divide their material into opposing camps involved in *battles of styles*. It is not that Garbett was a coward or indecisive in that battle, remaining on the fence when others were taking sides; it is rather that he disputed the legitimacy of the border which the fence enforced. This

3. Pevsner (1972) p. 193.

made him too complex a figure for the dialectical approach of most histories.

In a teleological reconstruction of history justifying the rise of the modern movement Garbett's clear prophecy of a new style of architecture based on a new style of construction, for instance, might have accorded him a more significant role in the emergence of modern architecture. The problem is however, that he failed to reject the past out of hand, nor was he able to provide a compelling model of a style for the future. In any case, most of the *Treatise* appeared to be concerned with a reappraisal of Greek and Gothic architecture. The book ends, without due preparation, with the rather sudden and unexpected recommendation to contemporary architects to abandon both the Greek temple and the English Parish Church as appropriate models for the present and to adopt instead an Italianate Renaissance style! Should Garbett then have been allowed to play a greater part in histories of the battle of styles as a devout renaissancist? No! Again, Garbett tried to

avoid the problem by reformulating the question. He did not take a stand which was thoroughly sympathetic to any historicist camp, he was not a revivalist, nor was he an eclectic in anything but an abstract philosophical sense. His recommendation to architects to adopt an Italianate style was too obviously meant as a quick, short-term solution to a problem which he knew would not go away so easily. To call him Italianate, or anti-Goth would be to have misunderstood his position completely. His problem was not: *Welchen Stil?* but: *what is style?* And he wanted to know that in order to know what to look for in his attempt to find a style appropriate to his sense of time and place. He did not succeed. Nevertheless he went a long way.

But the complexity of his position does not constitute the only reason he was ignored by contemporaries in England and later historians. The surfaces of his theory appear, on a first reading, to coincide seamlessly with many of Ruskin's ideas. Much of the blame for Garbett's obscurity

and the difficulty of assessing his place in history must be due to the unrivalled success of Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* which appeared a year before Garbett's *Treatise* in 1849. It is fair to say that Ruskin's book overshadowed everything within its vicinity. But to call Garbett a Ruskinite as many have done, is patently wrong. The latter's influence on Garbett was subject to many conditions as we shall see. More interesting than the question of Ruskin's influence on Garbett is the fact that Garbett's *Treatise*, together with William Whewell's extensive review of *The Seven Lamps* in *Fraser's Magazine*, represents one of the earliest and most penetrating critiques of the notions advanced by Ruskin during that period. That in itself is a good reason to take a closer look at Garbett. A similar issue is Garbett's relation to the slightly later publications of Viollet-le-Duc. The Frenchman's far more rigorous rationalism eventually won the day causing Garbett's rather more cautious and esoteric attitudes to pale in the comparison.

Although the issues talked of above, his place in history, his relevance to the Modern Movement and his relationship to two superstars on the nineteenth century architectural stage, etc. are important to my analysis of Garbett, they do not constitute my main interest in him. I like his obscurity and have no real wish to change it. My primary concern is more abstract. The urgent theme of this book is the relationship between society and its shell, its architectural setting. In this text I want to take Garbett as my case-history. My aim therefore, is to investigate the way that relationship was experienced by Garbett. I want to do that by tracing the assumptions and implications contained in a single question Garbett posed his readers in the opening chapter of the *Treatise*, namely:

*Whence the necessity for architecture
proper?*⁴

4. *Treatise*, p. 3.

The question reformulated to hint at the context in which it was put would go something like: Why does society need works of Architecture as opposed to making do with mere buildings. This was a popular distinction at the time which, despite its horrible and judgmental logic persisted right up to Pevsner's introduction to his *Outline of European Architecture*,⁵ where a bicycle shed was inexplicably denied the right of constituting architecture, a situation which is intolerable to a Dutchman.

The various assumptions on which Garbett's concept of architectural value and expression was based reveal a curious personal and rather pragmatic

5. Pevsner (1981) p. 15. Pevsner's use of this archaic distinction shows his thinking and that of many modernists to have been firmly rooted in the nineteenth century. Kostof in his *History of Architecture, Settings and Rituals*, (1985) finally rubbished that distinction irrevocably in the first chapter.

metaphysics which could explain how an artefact could be thought to possess moral content. I will try to argue that architecture was allowed such a moral content on the basis of an analogy with the concept of justice with special reference to the concept of (material or intellectual) property. Because of this analogy a building was able to participate in certain aspects of life by which it could assume an *attitude*, by proxy. For the spectator the building thus became a symbolic extension of the (material or intellectual) owner. If that interpretation is correct then Garbett's theory has to be placed within the more general developments in English utilitarianism on the one hand and the psychology of associationism on the other.

On top of that every one of Garbett's ideas is guided by an all-pervasive theological paradigm; one in which nature, as God's second book knowable through its language of symbols, was held to be purposive and rigidly structured according to a chain of being.⁶ On that basis Garbett

6. e.g. *Treatise*, p. 8.

used the question *why do we need architecture* to launch an architectural doctrine grounded on the supposition that society has not just a physical and sensual desire for beauty but that beauty constitutes a moral necessity. This dual purpose for beauty was subsequently polarised, creating a spectrum of values arranged according to a chain of beauty; a scale of architectural worth, differentiating the aesthetic priorities of each design dilemma. At the lowest and most fundamental level Garbett demanded that a building be polite and benevolent in its *attitude* to its surroundings and conciliatory to its onlookers. With each anabatic step in the chain the emotive possibilities, a building could become more and more *refined and noble*, eventually achieving architecture's *highest* aim which was to be poetic and didactic; endowing time and space with national and temporal identities.

A highly original idea of his, strongly reminiscent of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, was that Architecture should

be considered an *inherent evil* forced on a meek and powerless environment. Aesthetic concern to invert this evil into a positive and beneficial good to society was no mere luxurious indulgence but became a social imperative. To improve society one needed, among other things, to improve its shell and to control that shell's language so that it would be allowed to confirm, enhance and guide the process of civilisation.

This program involved Garbett in a philosophical odyssey which started with the recognition of the need to find an adequate normative definition of *good architecture* founded on an organic conception of the Vitruvian triad *Firmitas*, *Utilitas* and *Venustas*. Not only did Garbett insist that these three *conditions for good architecture* were completely interdependent, but he even went so far as to insist that the one was really no more than a special case of the other.

Such conceptual interpenetration was achieved by two steps. Firstly Garbett

adopted a residue of medieval scholasticism whereby beauty, through its abstraction to- and identification with, perfection became a meta-quality which in turn was able to represent all the *virtues* architecture could contain and express. This definition of beauty could then follow out its implications to formulate a number of precepts according to an epistemological framework derived from contemporary physiology.

The second step, already implicit in the first, was achieved by extending the traditional boundaries of Functionalism. Classic Functionalism extrapolated a sense of beauty from the appropriateness of an object's form with regard to the mechanical functions allowing that object to perform efficiently. Garbett felt that this excluded the broader social purposes and obligations of architecture. He therefore extended the conceptual reach of Functionalism to include the moral and psychological functions of an object's

experience.⁷ For example, the column was only so beautiful if it confined itself to supporting the roof. It could be considered far more beautiful if it was able to provide adequate compensation for interrupting the environment by becoming a symbol of the owner's benevolence towards his surroundings. It became even more beautiful, indeed poetic, if the column was able to give expression the wider implications of that act of support, by, for example, confirming the order of nature or of nation and glorifying a divine purpose. In other words Garbett submitted architecture to the various levels of meaning embedded in the Bible interpretation industry ranging from the literal to anagogical.

The possibility for that extension of Functionalism was directly derived from the behaviour of the concepts of *use* and *purpose* in English eighteenth- and nineteenth century ethical thought. This

7. cf. Colin St John Wilson (1992) pp. 20 ff. for a similar attempt to extend the concept of Functionalism.

allowed Garbett to consider beauty a purpose as basic to architecture as, say, structural excellence. The idea of beauty being nothing more than perfection meant that the beauty of a building was dependent both on its structural excellence as well as its usefulness to owner and society as a whole. By extending usefulness to include expression and beauty, the outward appearance and setting of architecture became an issue as basic to society as construction and planning was to the owner. This hybrid body of ideas ultimately served to politicise and engage the object of art, more especially the object of architecture, into social and political discourse.

Garbett's place in an intellectual tradition

If my personal interest in Garbett is confined to his explanation of architectural value, I was forced to recognise that it would be a wasted opportunity not to take things a few steps further. Garbett was an eclectic thinker, every one of his ideas participates in a complex web of connections. In its deliberate critique of other thinkers the

Treatise is as much an essay as a compendium. Many of the ideas he discusses derive from books by persons who have remained on the sidelines of contemporary architectural and intellectual historiography. This makes an analysis of Garbett's theory transcend the narrower purpose of this book as discussed above.

His *Treatise* represents a knot which ties together a number of architectural doctrines from the eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries, incorporating the undercurrents from the relevant developments in many other disciplines such as moral philosophy, science and theology. Garbett's explicit reliance on those sources make him an interesting case-study in the investigation of intellectual cross-pollination during the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact Garbett's definition of architecture derives to a large extent from what I have identified as a loose grouping of architectural thinkers who have not been given adequate historical attention. This

group includes figures such as John Robison (1739-1805), Samuel Ware (1781-1860) Alfred Bartholomew (1801-1845) as well as others such as the better known Robert Willis all of whom acknowledged and made use of a profound influence of German, French and Italian theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite the fact that the authors just listed are mentioned together in a number of works on architectural theory of the period and despite the fact that they were highly regarded during their time, they seem to have been lost to recent histories of the period, forgotten in lieu of the traditional frame of reference of architectural history. Their place in English architectural history must however be re-examined. They represent part of what may in the broadest sense be identified as a "movement" and that movement concerned itself with the concept of style and its relation to structural and organisational issues.

The identification of style with structure is traditionally thought to have prepared the ground for modernism. Far from being a

conceptual break with the past, modernism was born out of the theoretical attitudes formed during the nineteenth century. There is nothing new in those two assertions. What this dissertation does hope to show however, is firstly that the figures just listed, including Garbett, played a far more significant role in that development than has hitherto been credited to them, and secondly that the rationale of modernism as it was being prepared in the nineteenth century was far from straightforward. Much of it rested on assumptions that look very uncomfortable when analysed using the critical apparatus of post modernism.⁸

There are two further reasons not to confine this dissertation to an analysis of Garbett's concept of architectural expression alone. The first is that the problem of architectural expression only occupies a part of Garbett's *Treatise*. A further objective object of this

8. This conclusion with regard to the more recent pioneers of modernism was put forward by Banham (1972) pp. 320 ff.

dissertation therefore must be to analyse the *Treatise* as a whole.

The second is that it is time to devote a study to Garbett as a person. That is not easy. Edward Lacy Garbett is an obscure figure. Even in the relatively small world of nineteenth-century architectural history he is remembered only on account of a single, small octavo book with a long title and few illustrations. It is only because of this book that his name occasionally crops up in the various histories of nineteenth-century architecture. More often than not he is mentioned rather perfunctorily, crowded together with other historical wall-flowers in a single often dismissive sentence or paragraph. To make matters worse his identity has been consistently confused with his father, his grandfather as well as with an over-zealous preacher of the same name. Whether his historical status is justified or not does not concern me; as I said earlier, I like his obscurity.

The primary objective of this book must be to reconstruct his thought for its own sake and to evaluate its practical use

to architecture. As such this dissertation must be seen as an act of understanding of his mind, or at least an attempt at such an understanding. Some of the ideas which Garbett introduces or adapts from others deserve to be excavated and re-evaluated with regard to their possible relevance to contemporary design problems. These include, of course, his argument for the need for an architectural etiquette encapsulated in the concept of the polite and the poetic. They also include his refinements of the concept of architectural style as well as his lively and occasionally brilliant analysis of Greek and Gothic architecture. In the end all these issues were just part of Garbett's larger scheme which was to relate the purpose of art and architecture to the purpose of society as a whole.

The end of Garbett

Eventually Garbett's intellectual eclecticism reciprocated and drew back on itself. In the *Treatise* he had taken from every possible intellectual discipline, processed the ideas attached to each by way of

sophisticated analogies and applying them to architecture. As a result his architectural theory, right from the start, was being prepared to be transformed back into something more general, something larger: a complete and more generalised view of the world as a whole. It is a lovely cycle. He took from all sorts of disciplines to formulate his thoughts on architecture and then used those thoughts to formulate solutions to more general problems. A complete reciprocation.

The *Treatise* already contains indications of this development. His basic concerns to improve society would eventually spill over from architecture into every discipline he initially brought to bear on his architectural theory, including optics, geology, astronomy and biology. Architectural theory provided the basis but was ultimately not sufficient to satisfy his drive to propound and impose. He spent most of his mature years on exercises in biblical exegesis and the construction of tortuous utopias. His thinking piled itself up, remaining largely unchanged. In the end

his strong and inflexible opinions would squash most of his early perspicuity. If he began as an architectural theorist, he ended as prophet or even a self-proclaimed messiah. But even when Garbett came to the end of his journey towards self-apotheosis, one can still sense the preoccupations that dominated his architectural thinking just as one can sense the bitterness about a career which looks, to all intents and purposes, as if it had never really taken off. The *Treatise* represents the fountain-head of a progressively mystical and contorted philosophy which tried to syncretize a bricolage of different beliefs increasingly coloured by personal grudges and loneliness.

He ended his life in Baku, Azerbaijan, presumably preparing, or returning from a mission to Ararat to convince the world of it's momentous mistake in rejecting God in favour of his shadow: theism for atheism; genesis for evolution. Like some before and many after him, he was going to prove that the Flood and Noah's Ark were literal truths, not just backed by the Bible, but by

science. He was fully convinced that his explanation of events would be enough to bring the world to order.⁹

The source for this gruelling recipe of interests is contained within his architectural theory. Here Garbett first tried to systematise aesthetic judgement into rules for conduct. One of the aims of this dissertation is to show that this development was linear, accumulative and curiously consistent.

The route

The several and largely opportunistic purposes for this book make it difficult to think about the presentation and relation of each separate part. In the end Garbett himself supplied the answer. The structure of the text follows his chain of beauty when I want to analyse the *Treatise*. Nevertheless a number of more or less arbitrary choices

9. I refer the reader to Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, (1907) for a remarkably similar obsession.

had to be made guided by no more than a vague and hesitant sense of relative significance. Edward Lacy Garbett did not become less elastic through my ignorance of him as a person. If the task of the biographer was made difficult by the lack of data concerning his personal life, that of the monographer was made frankly impossible by the immense wealth of intellectual cross-breeding that his thinking exhibits.

I interpreted my brief, as I have said before, as an act of understanding, not as an act of historiography. Therefore I thought it best to confine the core of the present study to an investigation into the precipitation of intellectual residues visible in Garbett's text. While analysing and assessing the theories themselves, I have tried to look for their sources, examining the range of thinking that helped him to form his opinions rather than actively trying to defend Garbett's right to an historical role as one of the many precursors of later developments.

Enveloping the analysis of the *Treatise* there is the cyclical development of Garbett as a mind. Folding out from his background and his attitudes to all sorts of issues in youth which lead to the *Treatise*, and folding back in when his architectural ideas lead back to wider issues such as social welfare and the science of faith.

The text then is divided into 6 parts. The first two chapters making up part I, give a short biographical sketch of Garbett and attempt to place him within an intellectual context relevant to an analysis of the *Treatise*. The next four parts constitute a critique of the *Treatise* itself. The framework in which Garbett presented his ideas and the sequence of his arguments were an essential support to the ideas he wanted to get across. The *Treatise*'s structure provided an anabatic progression of values from low beauties to high ones. That structure was itself part of the program as an expression of the order of Garbett's world. For the sake of clarity I have remained faithful to that order. The last three chapters making up part VI, are concerned with the reception

of the book, an appreciation of Garbett's further writings, his intellectual development and the manner of his death.

Jacob Voorthuis, Kingston Jamaica, Friday,
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