

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

THE DISSECTION OF TRUTH AND PURITY

Truth is content, when it comes into the world to wear our mantles, to learn our language, to conform itself as it were to our dress and fashion...it speaks with the most idiotical sort of men in the most idiotical way, and becomes all things to all men. John Smith, *Discourses*, 1673.

Society sails through the infinitude on Cloth. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*.

Nobody with a good car needs a justification. John Huston, *Wise Blood*.

Introduction

There can be no such thing as a truthful or honest architecture existing by itself. If one asks an architecture to be truthful, pure or honest, one is asking stone to wear our clothes. Truth with reference to the inert and inanimate, can at most be an index of the relationship between man and his buildings.

From the middle of the eighteenth century the ideas of truth, veracity, honesty

and their opposites such as deception, the lie and the falsehood play an increasingly important role in architecture.¹ Why was this? What were the assumptions needed for a truthful architecture?

In this chapter, which deals with the second half of the fourth chapter in Garbett's *Treatise*, I shall argue that the increasing concern with truth in architecture from the eighteenth century onwards is linked to the desire for a personally defined external reality. Stylistic truth and purity preceded other design strategies against the arbitrary such as industrial standardisation and empirical averages. But the concepts of truth and honesty as abstractions of an external reality were still linked to a theological paradigm. Despite its reputation for nihilism, modernism accepted those abstractions wholeheartedly without consciously accepting the assumptions upon which they were based. If issues such as truth and

1. Oechslin (1983) 21-32 and Meier (1983) p. 10-15.

honesty, purity etc., became important elements in the ethics of modern design then that was because modern architecture was never freed from the residues of another world order which it tried to overcome. In fact those very residues became the main justification of modernism in its attempt to rid itself of history. What had been forgotten is that architectural truth and honesty had been conjured up to come to terms with the stylistic pluralism of the historicists. To explain Garbett's use of the words truth, purity and honesty, is to show how the translation from metaphysical to normative truth was effected and how the metaphysical assumptions went completely unquestioned.

Truth as a way of talking

The dilemma of style introduced by figures such as Horace Walpole during the middle years of the eighteenth century, sublimated the concept of truth so that it came to designate a formal consistency categorising national and temporal

identities. There was Englishness and Frenchness, manners and styles. In calling them true they became types. Truth, in this sense, really meant type. Because of the process cell division called historical differentiation, the choice in available historical styles, and therefore of types, increased dramatically during the nineteenth century. This led to a problem. The profusion of types prevented the nineteenth century from seeing their own type. Within this atmosphere the continuous redefinition of style in the face of this onslaught of styles became an increasingly important process in the formulation of design norms and justifications. The word style became the focus of architectural discourse, the *tyrant of the hour*, the medium towards the new.

Style was something you had to own. Modernism erupted from this obsessive concern with the ownership of style. Modernism, as Reyner Banham has shown, was to a large extent a formal creation, a creation of forms abstracted from a wide diversity of deeper concerns. A number of

theorists in the nineteenth century, the cauldron in which a desire for the modern in terms of an ownable style became so traumatic, believed the concept of style (which they had only just invented) to have been already hollowed out by the emphasis on surface treatment and the use of ornament. For some reason clothing structure had become less and less acceptable. In the profusion of possible styles, they felt there to be a lack of style. In the profusion of possible surfaces the supposed lack of substance became acute. That was the cliché. In fact the surface had become the substance, but they were not going to admit that. It was felt, by many, that the historical styles were being subjected to gross trivialisation by being badly applied. Truth became the authentic. It was felt, by some, that the styles of the past simply did not belong in the nineteenth century. Truth as the authentic became the complement to a separate identity. Some took this a step further and were not satisfied with the fact that the forms pertaining to each style were

being categorised only according to time, place and social function. They wanted these forms related to causal principles, such as structure or culture, that is technology in the service of vision.

Reading through the architectural theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were concerned with this reduction of truth to cause, one gets the general impression that architectural truth was primarily defined by the individual theorist's loyalty to a theory, a causal principle he had isolated with regard to a particular style, and very little beyond that. No cynicism is intended here, loyalty to that causal principle was paramount as it provided normative discourse with a measure of consistency. The word truth as it appeared when theorists were talking about causes, really stood for loyalty to a cause.

Loyalty to a cause discourages hybridisation and discourages relativity. The concept of architectural purity was born out of loyalty to an account of architectural

origins. Each theorist, therefore, was in a position to define his own purities. Even hybridisation could be made pure if it was seen as a super-factional syncretic ideal. That was the case with Eclecticism. Eclecticism tried to institute its own purities by collating the impure and unifying it into a system. It never managed to succeed fully, always having to defend itself against the charge of being a *mixed* style. The hybridisation of styles could be considered wrong as long as some form of national or temporal, functional or structural *purity* could be presupposed. This was made all the more easy with the truth which stood for structural cause.

In the end truth really stood for persuasion. A truthful architecture convinces on the basis of premises shared between the maker and the beholder. For the last two hundred years theorists have been able to convince the general public that a truthful or honest architecture is philosophically possible. It is a remarkable feat of logical coercion.

Garbett truly believed that those shared premises indicated a universal and timeless validity. For him truth was something tangible, existing outside the mind like absolute forms. Garbett's concept of truth in architecture was the product of his view of the world as a rigid, complex structure which could be overcome and standardised by the refinement of language. Truths represented values which made possible a natural and permanent language of nature which was also applicable to architecture. Truth represented a corpus of assumptions which related the owner to the perceiving subject through the artefact. This implies that the concepts of truth and purity in architecture were further affected by the psychology of associationism. This is indeed so, truth in architecture consisted in a building's ability and skill to make the perceiver follow the *intended* direction of a particular train of thought. The idea was that that train of thought could be controlled by the forms and the setting of the building. As such, truth in architecture has to be understood

as one of the implications thrown up by the concept of character and working itself out.

Truths I: Truth of character

Garbett's text reveals three basic variations in the use of the word truth. The first idea conforms to the idea of honesty, integrity or sincerity. Truth in this context is merely a question of veracity. An architectural assertion such as a wall proclaiming that it is made of marble, must, in order to be truthful, be made of marble. True art should not try to deceive. The notion that art was essentially illusionistic was rejected by Garbett who once again let Reynolds speak for him:

Connected with the error that imitative art consists in the imitation of what is commonly called nature, i.e. of particular or individual nature, is also the most destructive notion that its perfection is to "deceive the eye"²

2. *Treatise*, p. 122. On the Platonic residues in this statement compare Beardsley (1975) pp. 36-38.

The whole truth-debate may be seen as part of a Platonic urge in Garbett's aesthetics with its hostility against mechanical copyism. It is not surprising therefore that Garbett was quite happy to follow Ruskin on the subject of veracity as set down in the "Lamp of Truth".³ Garbett rehearsed all of the former's well-known arguments about gilding, marbling etc., demanding that the material should not be asked to sacrifice its own *character* to appear too much like something it is not.⁴

Garbett, however, departed from Ruskin's authority with regard to the

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3. *...though falling into many dangerous fallacies, [Ruskin] has truly treated on this subject. Treatise*, p. 124.
 4. Ruskin's position with regard to truth and deception in architecture is contained in his *Lamp of Truth*. For an historical and critical treatment of Ruskin's concept of truth see Ball (1972) Chapter 2: 'Ruskin and "The Pure Fact"' and more generally Garrigan (1973) and Landow (1972).

application of *natural* forms in architecture. This was primarily because Garbett's principle of imitative generalisation and exaggeration got in the way:

*No one thing in nature, Garbett wrote, is natural enough for decorative use.*⁵

We have already seen how this paradox is resolved by the identification of the word *natural* with the generic rather than the specific. This is then supported by the Platonic directive that architecture *must not copy a natural form, but a natural idea*.⁶ The use of flowers as direct models for architectural ornament, without an antecedent process of generalisation was thus made into a taboo not unlike the second commandment.⁷ It was however, precisely this process of generalisation and exaggeration which was ridiculed by Ruskin

5. *Treatise*, p. 128.

6. *Ibidem*.

7. *Exodus*, 20,4: *Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor the likeness of any form that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath etc.*

in his Lectures at Edinburgh and in his *Stones of Venice*.

Garbett meekly returns to Ruskin's sphere of influence when the problem of veracity starts interfering with the demand for architectural politeness, which subsequently realigns itself as a moral criterion with Ruskin's desire for sacrifice with regard to buildings. It could not be considered a lie to turn one's best side outward. To do so was in fact an important part of the courtesy of building. Having said that it was important to do so honestly:

*...to proclaim at the same time 'This is my best side.' (...) If you cannot beautify without deceiving do not beautify at all. Rudeness is better than a lie.*⁸

An honest architecture could conceal if it so wished, it was not bound to exhibit its construction. But in hiding, it had to avoid deception. The first is merely a question of

8. *Treatise*, p. 126.

reticence, the second was a question of pretence.

Decoration was particularly sensitive to pretence: gilding on wood was acceptable. The spectator knew that gilded wood could never look like real solid gold. But gilded iron, on the other hand, was considered deceptive. Gilded iron was judged to resemble gold too closely, and could be accused of trying to defraud our system of value as based on supply-, or rather scarcity and demand. Both Ruskin and Garbett were heavily influenced by Alison with regard to the problem of deception. Alison had argued that the discovery of pretence in an object causes disappointment. This disappointment was caused by the realisation that the object was in fact unfit or unworthy of exhibiting the character of the thing it pretended to be.⁹

9. *Treatise*, p. 71.: *It is possible, for instance, [Alison] proceeds, to imitate the winding of the ivy, the tendrils of the vine, or the beautiful curves of the rose-tree, in iron or in any other metal. It is possible, also, to colour such imitations in so perfect a manner as at first to deceive the spectator. If I am not mistaken, however, the moment we are undeceived, -the moment we know that the subject is so different from that which characterises such forms in real nature, the beauty of*

Garbett adopted this reason wholeheartedly, as well as the morality behind it. Deception in architecture was morally wrong as it opened the values of society up to inflation. Deception therefore became the basest purpose of art: a form of prostitution. Rising to his pulpit Garbett chanted that it was as if a man who had learnt writing in order to write sermons, should employ his skill in committing forgery.¹⁰ True art did not consist in manual dexterity, or illusionistic effects: *The object of all real art, as of all science, is to elicit truth.*¹¹ In other words, art is, or should be, like science and philosophy, another probe in the analysis and reconstruction of reality. Art forces man to withstand a further stage

the forms is destroyed, and instead of that pleasing sentiment of tenderness which the delicacy of the vegetables excites, a sentiment of disappointment and uneasiness succeeds; of disappointment, from the absence of that delicacy which we generally infer from the appearance of such forms; and of uneasiness, from the conviction of force having been applied to twist the subject into so unnatural directions. Alison (1825) chap iv, sect. 1. part 2.

10. *Treatise*, p. 122.

11. *Treatise*, p. 123.

in the test distinguishing the artificial from the real.¹²

Truths II: Useful truth

A second use of the word truth in Garbett's *Treatise* refers, quite simply, to a higher reality and requires the theorist to project an ideal. This type of truth served a

12. Alan Turing devised a test to distinguish artificial intelligence from natural intelligence which consisted of an endless series of random questions. The longer the computer was able to disguise its artificiality, the closer it approximated a natural intelligence. The object of computer technology is to ultimately to wipe out the difference between real and artificial intelligence, so as to be able to establish the difference between computer and man on another basis. Alan Turing's test is useful as an allegory of the development of culture in relation to nature, or architecture in relation to nature and the process of its humanisation.

pragmatic purpose in that everything which was considered useful or beneficial was also *true*. This form of truth was used in the *Treatise* as an adjective for all Garbett's irreducible likes and dislikes. Everything that Garbett considered good and beautiful he used as axioms on which his principles could construct themselves. Nature, as the *living garment of God*, also derived its authority from this type of intuitively held truth. Truth here refers to a paradigm based on an immediate and opaque authority usually in the form of a personal desire to have things so, subsequently disguised by words such as natural.¹³ Despite Garbett's

13. To illustrate what I mean I have the following anecdote. I was watching children's television during the autumn of 1993. A short bulletin in the *Jeugdjournaal* (children's news bulletin) concerned the pollarding of willow-trees. The journalist interviewing the man doing the job, asked jokingly, *is such a haircut subject to fashions, is this one for example*, pointing to the bald willow

elaborate reference to science and the teleological construction of his histories, his truths referred just as often to his own personal beliefs. Truths of this sort represent values connected with tradition and the concept of permanence, but have a very unstable character.

Truths III: Truth by dissection

The conceptual dislocation of the Vitruvian triad into separate principles, had encouraged the concept of architecture as clothing. This in turn had eventually caused *the battle of styles*. Ware, Bartholomew and a number of other theorists did not like the idea of architecture as clothing. Instead they wanted to conceive of architecture as an integrated organism; a body where the form was the

behind the man which had just a few sprouting branches left on its head, *a bit punky?* No, replied the man decisively, *it is a natural haircut*. The man and the journalist, fully appreciating the joke, both appeared oblivious to the irony.

necessary product of content. The grammar of forms symptomatic of a style had to be seen as the eruptions of a structural cause. The truth content of these forms therefore necessitated dissection. Here is Ware on the subject:

It is true, he wrote, elevations of the exterior and elevations of the interior of very magnificent buildings of the Middle ages have been made with scrupulous accuracy; but these drawings have served to amaze the unlearned, rather than to instruct...The most useful drawing to a builder in erecting an edifice, the most difficult drawing for an architect to make, and the drawing least intelligible to the gentleman, and which makes least show in a collection is a section. It is from sections (...) that a knowledge of the construction of buildings is to be obtained.¹⁴

The dissection of a building allowed architecture to be conceived as a body, rather than as a frame with loose hanging clothes. Dissection allowed the theorist to discover the causal principle of style:

14.Ware (1809) p. 58 ff.

*the improvements naturally arising out of the frequent use of vaults during the middle ages, would have led to the discovery of the pointed arch; whether Norman walls had, or had not been ornamented with intersecting circular arches.*¹⁵

Only once a building had been dissected could the elevation be considered physiognomically interesting as referring to correspondences between the *inside* and the *outside*.

This particular conception of architectural style descended from a large and complex pattern of influences which centre around the rationalisation of the Gothic. It begins, perhaps, with the mathematicians of the seventeenth century such as Robert Hooke, David Gregory and Sir Christopher Wren. Later this pattern of influences embraces the writings of Cordemoy, the teaching and subsequent interpretation of Lodoli and the work of the engineer of Giovanni Poleni. A prominent

15.Ware (1809) p. 61.

member of this group is Soufflot who specifically admired Wren's gothic construction of St. Paul's and used the ideas for his St. Geneviève.

Ware, Bartholomew and Garbett used this structural cause of style to rewrite architectural history in terms of the changing size of the gap separating the decorative and constructive aspects of building.

The separation of the organic conception of the Vitruvian triad had, as far as Garbett was concerned, inaugurated the possibility of the stylistic pluralism so characteristic of the architecture of Rome and the Romanesque and the Renaissance, the Baroque and the nineteenth centuries.¹⁶ This pluralism was

16.Samuel Ware had already criticised Vitruvius on this score writing: *Vitruvius, who has treated on all the subjects which appeared to him to have any relation to architecture, has been wholly silent in respect to the advantage to be obtained from mechanics, in acquiring a*

only possible when the separation between the decorative and the constructive aspects of building had become complete, that is to say, after the death of a particular *style of construction*. In fact that pluralism was the instrument of murder. Construction was sensitive to the parasitical tendencies of decoration. Decoration began to take over the mind of an ambitious architect as soon as he felt himself to be unable to contribute further to the perfecting of a style of construction. As soon as he

knowledge of, and in decomposing forces, and in determining the point to sustain them. The art of construction does not form any part of his Treatise. From this circumstance alone, were not their buildings in confirmation, we may conclude that they were employed, like many modern architects, in the pleasing investigation of interior and exterior decoration and internal arrangement, leaving the question of stability, and the details of the means of execution to the workman. Ware (1822) p. 44.

switched his attention to matters of detail and surface, the style had eclipsed its perfection and was launched into a painful process of degeneration. All this because of an undue emphasis on decorative ingenuity. This was the disease of which both the Greek and Gothic styles had died of. Once construction was lost sight of its forms became separated from their cause. Once the forms symptomatic of a style became no more than applications the choice of a style was allowed to be determined by other criteria than a structural truth. Stylistic truth could therefore only be delivered by dissection.

All three truths address an issues which is larger than their particular target. They concern the need for constructs and the consequent projection of metaphysical realities which defend against the arbitrary. Beauty is the vision of necessity. All three truths are not really any different, they represent various stages during the nomadic wanderings of a single concern,

that is with the desire to have cracked the mystery of the way the world works. It may sound a little frivolous to tie architecture to such enormous metaphysical concerns. But aesthetics is primarily a metaphysical discipline. Each definition of beauty proclaims its discovery of the mechanics of the mind and the creation. Each system of philosophy claims to have reconstructed the way things are and proceeds to formulate ethical norms of behaviour with reference to that reality. Those so-called discoveries are full of the pathos of certainty and serve as the basis for the theorist with which he can start to work out its practical implications.

Constructive truth & constructive unity

Constructive truth, as discovered by the anatomical dissection of a building, brings us to the normative meaning of the word truth. This truth is dependent on the idea of consistency, or that which exhibits unity. It is a form of truth which is derived at by following out the implications of the interdependent assumptions given above.

Furthermore it is based on the irreducible axioms which have the concept of nature as their ultimate authority:

I am convinced, Garbett wrote, that if we really understood this principle of contrast, and determined to embody it alone without compromise, in a vertical pressure building, we should be led to the complete Doric order, though we had never seen it.¹⁷

Garbett wanted to demonstrate the completeness of the perfection of the Doric order by subjecting its rational to an inversion. The process of design, being based on reason, must be completely reversible. The quotation explains the nature of purity as understood by Garbett. Purity signifies conformance to a self-consistent set of principles which are believed to be *a priori* and so rigorous as to be completely reversible. The Doric order is an inevitable eruption during the purposive analysis of truth. There is nothing arbitrary in its genesis, it is the necessary result of a

17. *Treatise*, p. 142. cf. Steadman (1979).

meticulous search for the implications of a self-consistent set of principles.

This way of thinking lead to two important normative principles which eventually led Garbett to make a remarkable prophecy with regard to the emergence of a modern and self-consistent style of architecture. These are the principles of constructive truth and constructive unity:

The principle of constructive truth coincided largely with the idea of structural honesty as implied by Laugier, explained by Lodoli and promoted, among others by Pugin's *True Principles*. It required that *a building [should] never appear to be constructed on different statical principles from those really employed in its construction.*¹⁸ To break this principle was to lie. Garbett used the principle to formulate an accusation against the contemporary building world: *The whole of modern Gothic architecture is a constructive falsehood* an assertion which

18. *Treatise*, p. 130.

he based on an adaptation of Samuel Ware's definition of Gothic which stated that *the peculiarities of this style [the Gothic] grew from the practice of constructing a vaulted ceiling of stone.*¹⁹

The second principle is that of Constructive Unity, which says that what is true for construction is also true for decoration. Constructive unity requires a uniform style of ornament throughout the same building. But, he wrote, *Architecture is not mere beauty of form, mere eumorphy; if it were so a beautiful form would be beautiful wherever exhibited.* The beauty of form must be subordinate to *statical fitness* and in order for that to be seen, *it is necessary that the various pressures be perceived.*²⁰ And if it is necessary to treat form consistently, it is even more necessary that the treatment of pressures is consistent. This leads us onto the concept of style.

19. *Treatise*, p. 130. For Ware see bibliography.

20. *Treatise*, p. 131.

Unity of style, as formulated by Garbett, consisted in applying a single principle of construction throughout a building. Alfred Bartholomew, following John Robison's articles on structural mechanics in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, defined three styles of construction. That is, three methods of applying force to solids: by Cross strain, by compression and by tension. These three modes could be divided into three styles of building namely the depressile, the compressile and the tensile.

The depressile system involved the exclusive use of cross-strain, i.e. of vertical pressure. Greek architecture used this system most consistently and may therefore be called pure. The compressile system involved the exclusive use of oblique pressure and in order for it to represent a unified whole it had to avoid any hint of cross strain. The purest use of this principle is exhibited by the Gothic of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as exemplified by the great cathedrals in England, France and Germany. The tensile system was thought to combine the advantages of

both previous systems. This was because all its active pressures would be vertical like the depressile system. Yet it would avoid the necessary wastage of material by avoiding cross strain like the compressile system.

Now there were three available systems of building. And yet, Garbett observed, there had been only two systems of architecture, i.e. only two systems which exhibited a constructive truthfulness and a constructive unity. These are the Greek and the Gothic. The third system has yet to be elaborated into an architectural style:

*The first two systems are passed and dead; we may admire the fading vestiges of their loveliness, but can never revive them. The third is the destined architecture of the future.*²¹

Style, like his third use of the word truth, is for Garbett the logical result of the consistent

21. *Treatise*, p. 135.

application of underlying ideas and not the mere sum of details.²²

22. Summerson (1970) p. 86.

Jacob Voorthuis