Building
Ruskin's Italy

Watching Architecture

STEPHEN KITE

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ASHGATE

Based on extensive fieldwork, and research into John Ruskin's still little-interpreted archival material, notebooks and drawings (in the Ruskin Library, Lancaster University, UK and elsewhere), Stephen Kite offers an unprecedented account of the evolution of Ruskin's architectural thinking and observation in the context of Italy where his watching of building achieved its greatest intensity. Venice naturally figures large in a work that also examines other key sites including Verona, Lucca, Pisa, Florence, Milan and Monza; here, the fabrics are vividly read in their contexts against the rich evidence of Ruskin's diaries, his pocket-book sketches, architectural worksheets, drawings, and daguerrotypes (the early form of photography), and the drafts and published editions of the texts. Kite presents the complex story of Ruskin's visual thinking in architecture as a narrative of deepening interpretation and representation, focusing on the humbler monuments of Italy. He shows how Ruskin's early picturesque naturalism was transformed by the realisation that to understand the built realities confronting him in Italy demanded a closer engagement with the substance of the stones themselves; reflecting Ruskin's sense of his task as a near-archaeological gleaning and gathering of remains 'hidden in many a grass grown court, and silent pathway, and lightless canal'.

Stephen Kite is Reader at the Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, UK.

For Tricia, my twin

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Notes

1. The Ruskin Foundation, which has care of these materials, has sought to establish the copyright for John Ruskin's unpublished literary manuscripts, but has been unable to do so on the basis of all the information currently known to it. It would therefore welcome contact from any person or persons who can show they hold this copyright.

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Introduction

Today when kings go to hotels and saints on a journey have no special costumes and live in no remarkable architecture, the inn has inherited the poetry of the old seigneurial and monastic abodes. Moreover, it is often made from a palace, as in Venice; it often contains a chapel, as on the borders of the Mediterranean. An apostle can thus speak there, as in his natural setting, and his grand gestures can be exercised at leisure. Ruskin is this apostle of the cosmopolitan caravans. He comes forth as the archangel of *Cook's Tours* and the prophet of the *Hotel Terminus*. Before him march, night and day, thanks to the locomotive, the column of fire and the column of smoke. In other times, when lives were sedentary and destinies rooted, no one would have understood this function of an aesthetician leading the populace. But today when wandering humanity has thrown down its household gods, extinguished its home fires and strays over every beach, at the foot of every mountain and into dead towns transformed into reliquaries in order to know better this earth that it finds too small and this past that it finds too short ... this aesthetic guide has become, like the priest, a purveyor of the infinite .... He dispenses to us the life of dead ages and peoples unknown. His words give us life: they are the very life that we live and above all that we would wish to lead. They are analytic like our scientific life; they are suggestive like our cosmopolitan life; they are uneasy like our social life. They have life's mobility, having touched on all subjects, having impelled us to every shore. They have life's contradictions, having reflected all impressions and all systems. They have life's plasticity, having mingled enthusiasm with irony and humour with love.[1]

This remarkable portrait of Ruskin as wandering interpreter of ancient architecture – one that also mingles 'enthusiasm with irony and humour with love' – comes from *Ruskin and la Religion de la Beauté* (1897) by the little-known French commentator on Ruskin, R. de la Sizeranne. It captures a number of the themes explored in the following pages. Matters such as Ruskin's troubled relationship to modernity for example; he certainly proved to be a cicerone for a mass tourism advanced by the spreading rails of the locomotive, but despaired at its effects. The rail causeway to Venice of 1845–46 destroyed the romantic lagoon setting of the city at a crucial moment, as we shall examine, when Ruskin decided to turn his attentions from the history of painting to a serious study of architecture that was more than picturesque.

When la Sizeranne avers that Ruskin's criticism is 'analytic like our scientific life', 'suggestive like our cosmopolitan life' and 'uneasy like our social life' he hints at the complex and multivalent readings of architecture the following chapters aim to disclose. Ruskin learns to adapt the analytic instincts of the natural scientist and geologist to his interpretation of architecture as he probes beyond the surface suggestions of the picturesque. As his material and tectonic understanding of architecture deepens, his perceptions and his words give us deeper suggestions of the life of building, based on embodied experiences of touch, measurement, weight and construction. If the unease places him apart from any urbane *Cook's Tour* cultural guide, la Sizeranne's 'archangel' rings true. For, like an Old Testament Jeremiah, Ruskin wants to provoke and disturb; his readings of bits of stone become admonitions of good and evil.

When la Sizeranne mentions palaces made into inns, as in Venice, students of Ruskin will be reminded of his and Effie's honeymoon hotel at the Danieli of 1849–50, where the bride was left to the attentions of the officers of the occupying Austrian forces as Ruskin devoted his energies to an unparalleled documentation of this city. Venice naturally figures large in this book which examines the evolution of John Ruskin's scrutiny of architecture in the context of Italy wherein his *watching* of architecture – as he defined it – attained its greatest intensity. But, as we discover, other sites are also of great importance; in the Veneto – Verona; in Tuscany – Lucca, Pisa and Florence; in Lombardy – Milan and Monza. The arguments of the chapters are founded on extensive archival research of Ruskin's still little-interpreted notebooks and diaries, data evidence that comprises: manuscripts of the diaries and notebooks; notebook sketches; architectural worksheets; drawings and renderings; daguerreotypes (the early form of photography) and, of course, the drafts and editions of the published texts. Ruskin invites pilgrims, and I have followed with my own sketchbooks, to discover and closely read this material against the buildings and artefacts themselves in their specific contexts.

The book presents a complex story in the art of visual thinking as related to architecture, both as a narrative of development and evolving representation. The following chapters will show how Ruskin's picturesque naturalism was transformed with the realisation that to understand the built realities confronting him in the peninsular required a close engagement with the facts of the stones themselves. As he came to declare in 1866: 'I have made no drawings at any time but for notes of fact; never for pleasure of sketching ....'

In order to understand the material and political truths evidenced by this architecture of Italy, we shall see how Ruskin approaches the methodologies of various disciplines – those of the architect, the artist, the evocative writer, the natural scientist – but never fully identifies with any of them. If this hybridity of approach reveals the tendencies of the *amateur*, and the non-'professional', it is emphatically also a strength. For much architectural criticism and

observation remains thin in its representation, barely approaching Ruskin's thick descriptions based on close tactile analysis and intense emotional and ethical engagement, sustained by his incomparable *ekphrasis* – the capacity to re-evoke artistic experience. As Ruskin's watching of architecture develops, his fluent deployment of these varied modes of scrutiny, delineation and suggestion resonates between the mathematical and the metaphoric. Reflecting Ruskin's sense of his task as a near-archaeological gleaning and gathering of remains 'hidden in many a grass grown court, and silent pathway, and lightless canal' the focus of the research presented here also tends towards the everyday, the secular or the smaller monuments of Italy, rather than the more discussed monuments such as St Mark's, or the Doge's Palace.

Chapter 1 opens in 1832, with the thirteenth birthday gift to Ruskin of a copy of Samuel Rogers' *Italy* illustrated by J.M.W. Turner – a work to which he attributed 'the entire direction of [his] life energies' in all at once revealing both the allure of Italy and of Turner's artistry. Culminating with Ruskin's first long tour of 1840–41 – where he followed a classic Grand Tour route to Italy with his parents – this chapter variously examines the first sketchbooks (which already interleave native instincts for architecture and natural science), Samuel Prout's lessons in the progressive method of working from fragment to whole, and those early essays that constitute *The Poetry of Architecture*. At Venice in 1841 he already senses that his romantic feeling for Venice is going; but we shall see how that loss becomes a gain, as new registers of depiction and analysis supersede the picture-making gaze.

In 1841–45 Ruskin very much learns to watch the architecture of Italy through his own eyes, rather than through those of Prout, or even Turner. The second chapter of this study tracks Ruskin's journey towards Venice in 1845 (his first tour unaccompanied by his parents), again through close readings of the published texts, the diaries, drawings and the buildings themselves. Writing to his father from Beauvais on 2 November 1845 – comparing 'the effect of the pure Gothic with the Byzantine and Lombard schools I have been used to lately' – Ruskin notes: 'I am surprised to find the quickness of eye I have gained by my six months study': 1845 was a crucial year in shifting Ruskin's perception, from a surface picturesque towards acuity of the mass, space and surface of Italian architecture. Thus the fourteenth-century Palazzo Agostini in Pisa is the subject of both atmospheric views and detailed studies, supported by meticulous notes, that seek out every subtlety of rhythm and moulding. Then, at Lucca he also records the spatiality of San Frediano with a new architectonic sensibility – with that sense of mass, chiaroscuro and moral import, for which Turner's engravings in *Liber Studiorum* had prepared him. Here, the argument is made that by the end of this 1845 tour Ruskin has essentially acquired the methodological tools that he will apply *a fortiori* in the great winter campaigns of 1849–50 and 1851–52.

As Ruskin gets closer to building in these collaborative acts of eye, hand and mind, his seeing appears to break down architecture into a collage of sections and elements, much to the puzzlement of his father who had loved to frame on the household walls the imitations of Prout. But such elegant enframings of architecture are irretrievably shattered as Ruskin closely watches the palaces of Byzantium to urgently decode the commandment written on the heart of things. By 1849 Ruskin's turn to the study of architecture, away from the *Modern Painters* project, is now confirmed, and Chapter 3 takes us to the heart of his work to discover the constructional precepts of Byzantine-Gothic architecture, and the related typology of Venetian arches that declares its language of structure and ornament. And here the focus is again not only on Venice, as careful consideration is also given to Ruskin's preparatory work in Lombardy – at Milan and Monza.

Chapter 4 continues this work in studying how Ruskin further evolves a taxonomy of the Gothic orders of architecture, linked to his stratagem of straying or 'watchful wandering'. Aside from the famous set-pieces of *Stones of Venice* such as the approaches to Murano or St Mark's, the lesser known journeyings within the city of Venice – both by gondola or on foot – are examined to discover how, through a continued envisioning of the fragment, Ruskin deepens his interpretation of the Gothic. It is argued that Ruskin's wandering operates at a cusp between a historical literature of travel, and the imminent leisured Henry James-ian world of the *flâneur*; partaking both of a pre-modern earlier tradition which – following Byron, Wordsworth and others – utilises the *leitmotif* of the journey, while foreshadowing the aleatory gaze of the modern spectator of the city. Again, it is shown how these readings of architecture are as much ethical as constructional – good building denotes the good city. So, there is much in the theorem of *The Stones of Venice* that anticipates Ruskin's later preoccupation with the political economy of cities.

In his typological deconstruction of Italian medieval architecture Ruskin seems to leave us with a city of bits; tellingly one of his notebooks is labelled 'Bit Book', and hence the title of our fifth chapter – 'City of Bits'. His theory also appears to deconstruct architecture itself, recognising only building where no ornament is added, and moreover dividing colour from architectonic form. Here an interpretation of Ruskin's account of colour is offered, in both its incrusted and stratified forms. We also probe into Ruskin's troubling building–ornament divide, which on the one hand might be dismissed as old-fashioned or misconceived, yet on the other is presciently modern and Semper-like in the theoretical space it opens up for notions of building and cladding. This section of the work concludes by looking at those elements of cornice and capital which bring to focus many of the these issues, especially in what became something of an icon of modernism – the columns, signed by their maker, at the entrance to the crypt of San Zeno, Verona.

The stones of Verona are also the subject of the last chapter of this book – chiefly for three reasons. Any study of Ruskin and Italy cannot neglect Verona as his 'dearest place' in that country, often superseding Venice in his affections. It is also a good place to examine those later representations of architecture produced by Ruskin, characterised by impulsive rhythms and mark-making. Verona also provides opportunities to look at Ruskin's legacy within the evocative tradition of architectural criticism, by comparing his responses to those of Adrian Stokes (1902–72) – regarded by a number of commentators as Ruskin's twentieth-century heir. In the founding book of his theory of art – *The Quattro Cento* (1934) – Stokes records the remarkable fact that 'even pavements in Verona are marble': while, for Ruskin, Verona was also the 'beginning of lovely building' owing to this superlative material, 'coloured by iron into a glowing orange, or pale warm red – to the peach-blossom marble, of which [the city] is chiefly built'. In both writers, it is the case that the qualities of the stones of Verona largely did much to inspire the deep response to material on which their theories of art and architecture are predicated. At first sight Ruskin and Stokes seem to have explored two different cities in treading the marble pavements of Verona's relatively small historic core. In basic terms, the former sought a Gothic city, the latter an early Renaissance one. But in examining these two sensitive commentators on architecture's material and making on their very homing ground, this chapter probes deeper than such stylistic differences might suggest.

In microcosm, the Castelbarco Tomb at Sant'Anastasia, Verona, has an iconic status for Ruskin not far removed even from St Mark's, Venice. As Ruskin's many studies of this small monument record the progress of his architectural watching, it is used as a conclusion to the book to recapitulate the aspects of things studied in the preceding chapters.

Notes

1. Stephen Bann, 'Proust, Ruskin, Stokes and the Topographical Project', in Peter Brown and Michael Irwin (eds), *Literature and Place 1800–2000* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 129–46, p. 136.