

Architecture, Postmodernism, and the Language of Landscape

John Ruskin commands our attention anew more than a century after his death.

AN INTERESTING FEATURE OF intellectual history is the way ideas operate across the apparent boundaries of time. John Ruskin, a Victorian polymath, dedicated his life to understanding the culture, architecture, arts, and politics of his own time, but his greatest achievement may be the light he sheds on ours.

Ruskin died in 1900, his last years, like Friedrich Nietzsche's, shattered by madness. But at the height of his powers as a critic, imaginative writer, polemicist, and philosopher, he engaged controversies that form the foundations of postmodern urban debate.

Ruskin's life and work throw into sharp relief such issues as the relationship between the natural and built environments, the role of the architect, the multidisciplinary nature of urban thought, the place of the arts in society, the concept of nature, and the interplay among science, technology, the arts, and politics. He criticized industrialism both aesthetically and socioeconomically, uniting this critique with a fierce advocacy of a closer relationship between man and nature. His views shaped ideas of art and architecture on both sides of the Atlantic well into the 20th century, inspiring creators like landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. But while he wrote in the prose style of his period, his anxieties, energies, range of interests, and philosophical tendencies startlingly foreshadow the 21st century.

Although it is a mistake to project the agendas of one age artificially onto another, it is not difficult to relate Ruskin convincingly to current paradigms. His publicized personal tribulations alone would not look out of place on the front page of a supermarket tabloid or in a Woody Allen film. The painter James McNeill Whistler sued him for libel, but

Ruskin could not take the stand to defend himself because of psychological illness. His wife successfully petitioned to annul their marriage, claiming nonconsummation, and later added insult to injury by marrying Ruskin's friend, artist John Everett Millais. Ruskin had to resign his Oxford University chair because



of mental problems. But looking beyond these vicissitudes to his intellectual productivity, one can find more substantive reasons to see him as strikingly postmodern.

One reason is his creative range. He was a published poet at age 11, and at 20 won Oxford's Newdigate Prize for poetry. In strenuous disagreement with other critics, he insightfully promoted the then-avant-garde painter J.M.W. Turner. He championed the pre-Raphaelite painters, criticized and philosophically discussed both painting and architecture with enormous clarity and eloquence, wrote a beloved fantasy tale that is still read with delight today (*The King of the Golden River*), lectured at the Working Men's College, wrote on popular science, produced studies in political economy and mythology, and served as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford.

Born in London in 1819, Ruskin was the only child of a well-to-do couple that had made money in liquor. They proudly encouraged his talents, home schooling him until age 12. His many publications include *The Art of England*, *Modern Painters*, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, *The Stones of Venice*, *Lectures on Architecture and Poetry*, *Architecture and Painting*, *The Harbours of England*, *The Elements of Drawing*, *Lectures on Art and Its Application to Decoration and Manufacture*, *Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy*, *Lectures on Sculpture*, *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, and *Lectures on the Relation of Natural Science to Art*. The varied topics of these works and others converged, in Ruskin's mind, in a concept of artistic, social responsibility calling for a conceptual vocabulary that would enable working architects, the public, painters, and other fine artists to find common intellectual ground with scientists, political leaders, and economists.

The Victorian era was notable for its creative encyclopedists—what are now called Renaissance minds. The latter term is somewhat misleading, because the curiosity of the Renaissance was closer to enthusiastic dilettantism than to the creative mastery of several disciplines by a single charismatic personality that is generally meant by the term today. This latter sense evolved over the 17th and 18th centuries and came into its own in the 19th.

To appreciate Ruskin's distinctiveness, it is necessary to consider the intellectual climates of his time and the era that followed. His age was rich in figures aspiring to the status of Renaissance mind, sharing a desire to reflect and, in turn, help redirect an entire society. Composer

Richard Wagner illustrates this quintessentially Victorian ambition. Wagner has no counterpart today, not only because of the unique genius his admirers rightly or wrongly attribute to him, but because the contemporary milieu is not structured to accommodate his kind of creative persona. To imagine him in today's media climate, one must think of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Steven Spielberg, and Ayn Rand combined in a single individual, producing multiple creations that are simultaneously highly original works of music, stagecraft, literature, and popular philosophy.

Wagner is a particularly conspicuous example of the 19th-century polymath who offered not just commentary or ideas, but also a total conception of the universe—a gospel. Others are Karl Marx, Thomas Huxley, George Bernard Shaw, and the philosophers Herbert Spencer and G.W.F. Hegel. Spencer, who introduced the phrase “survival of the fittest,” had great influence in 19th-century America, especially on business leaders, while Hegel exported to the United States a popular doctrine of inevitable progress; its adherents included John Roebling,

builder of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Victorians were particularly receptive to these encyclopedic figures because of their pervasive sense that history was somehow coming to a head. This impression was linked to the political ferments of Europe, the seemingly unstoppable advance of the British Empire, a wave of scientific discoveries and new technologies, and the American sense of predestined progress. It can be found in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, depicting the rise and fall of nations as a panorama of inevitabilities, and in the dramatic gravitas of Abraham Lincoln, whose brooding utterances captured the mood of a fatalistic unfolding of immense moral and historical forces. In this atmosphere it was only natural for there to be a demand for purveyors of comprehensive wisdom to come forward, each offering a key to unlock the zeitgeist.

The situation changed radically in the early 1900s. World War I destroyed the old sense of historical meaning. One of the last 19th-century-style synthesizers of all knowledge, Oswald Spengler, helped usher in the modern era with his book *The Decline of the West* (1918–1923), which proclaimed that

In contrast with the Victorian quest to unify knowledge, the 20th century brought fragmentation of knowledge. Instead of coalesc-

“We require from buildings, as from men, two kinds of goodness: first, the doing their practical duty well: then that they be graceful and pleasing in doing it; which last is itself another form of duty.”

John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 1880

ing into a single picture of the universe, intellectual disciplines began moving apart. Professional philosophy retreated from its pretensions to explain reality to the general public and evolved into a technical specialty for the clarification of meaning and meaninglessness. Old certainties of physics and mathematics gave way to paradoxes that baffled even scientists. Painting, sculpture, music—even literature in the hands of writers like James

This left a vacuum in the information marketplace. The continuing public need for integrated overviews of knowledge created a new industry of popularizers who made up for what they lacked in philosophical originality and sophistication with a willingness to survey large territories of learning understandably. This industry continues today, forming a direct line from H.G. Wells through Isaac Asimov to television personalities like Carl Sagan, Kenneth Clark, Jacob Bronowski, and Bill Moyers.

Architects were not immune to these historical currents. Adopting the fashionable language of specialized revolution, the manifestos of architectural movements in the first half of the 20th century display their authors' almost desperate anxiety to create for their discipline a specialized metaphysical space analogous to the high intellectual ground on which the elites of other disciplines had aloofly established themselves. Some examples from such manifestos:

▷ “Velocity of rigid matter, dematerialization of matter, organization of inorganic matter, all these produce the miracle of abstraction.”—Oskar Schlemmer, manifesto for the first Bauhaus exhibition, 1923.

▷ “Rarely, it seems to me, has the order of the world so unequivocally revealed itself; rarely has the Logos of existence opened wider than in this time of supposed chaos . . . from real presuppositions form art, from mass and light form intangible space.”—Erich Mendelsohn, 1923.

▷ “The three allotropic states of the primal shape, the sphere—its movement towards a goal in the cone and the path into the infinite in the astragal, approaching the resistance effects of the polyhedron in the polyvertex and the polygon.”—Hermann Finsterlin, 1924.

It is not hard to come up with page after page of this sort of thing in the architectural programs of the first half of the 20th century. A running theme is a compulsion to



The Oxford Museum of Natural History (above) was designed with Ruskin's collaboration as an experiment in modern Gothic architecture.

Sage Hall (above right) at Cornell University, is an example of the “faux-Gothic” adaptation of Ruskinian principles of architecture.



if people could be sure of anything, it was that civilization was doomed. But another development even more decisively created modernity: professional specialization. It is here that Ruskin fits into the picture.

Joyce—assumed strange new forms that seemed expressly designed to limit their accessibility to the uninitiated. Incomprehensibility to mass audiences seemed to define leading-edge intellectual work.



mimic the terminologies of physics and mathematics, often with great contortion of the original meanings of terms. Of course, one can distinguish between what architects write and what they do. But should present-day readers patronizingly set aside the writings of architects, treating them like the eccentric memos of a powerful man whose challenged literacy his associates have quietly agreed to ignore?

Against this background, Ruskin is important to today for three reasons. First, he did not try to invent a pseudoscientific jargon of the kind later embraced by many modernists. He believed in a multidisciplinary approach to urban policy, but passionately wanted the public of all social classes to join in formulating it in a common language. He would, for example, have been at home joining modern-day debates about new urbanism.

Second, Ruskin differed from his polymathic contemporaries in that although his philosophical interests cut across many disciplines whose interrelationships he sought to understand, he did not (as the critic Sir Herbert Read has pointed out) have an integrated philosophy, at least not in the monolithic sense prevalent in his lifetime. The overriding tendency of his mind appears to have been awe at the varied findings of both the arts and the sciences, and a perception that these somehow illuminate each other even if they do not form a neatly intelligible whole. This intuition is a strong feature of the postmodern sensibility.

Third, Ruskin is particularly pertinent today because of the centrality of the concept of nature in his work. Just as it was important to him to express architectural ideas in universally accessible prose, so he believed that the study of nature provided a conceptual vocabulary that linked architecture to questions of social responsibility and public interest, as well as to a world view in which scientists help people

less to oversimplify the universe than to appreciate its complexity, oddity, and wonder. If a lingua franca exists among intellectual disciplines, Ruskin believed, it is the language of landscape, the decoding of which can be usefully contributed to by visual artists, writers, public place makers, and scientists alike. Moreover, he did not see the human mind as separate from nature, but as part of it, with the ability and, indeed, the responsibility to enhance it with independent creations of skill and imagination.

These insights into the subtle relationship between the natural and built worlds connect well with Ruskin's desire to see the profession of architecture occupy a pivotal position in the intellectual life of society. They also resonate intriguingly with environmentalism and with the attempts of some contemporary figures—as different as green skyscraper designer Ken Yeang and architectural theorist Charles Jencks—to try to provide bold new maps of what architecture can hope to be in a postmodern society. Ruskin's work is overdue for a reassessment of its relevance to these ventures. He was a good man for the 19th century but may, in important ways, be an even better one for the 21st. **UL**

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