

Ruskin's Road: Architecture and the Object of Work

WILLIAM GALLOWAY

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

The current disagreements between practitioners of architecture and the universities evince increasingly divergent views over the priorities of architectural education. Professionals voice the position that recent graduates are not properly prepared to be productive in the working world. Even *reflective* practitioners in the 1990's express dismay regarding the amount of time wasted in schools of architecture in seemingly *useless* pursuits. Theoretical speculation as well as activities such as furniture making, ceramics, and screen printing bear no similarity to the kinds of endeavors in which one would be engaged in a professional architectural office. Teachers, concerned with educating the whole person, tend to ignore these concerns as narrow and overly pragmatic. Architecture faculty see critical educational value in activities not directly related to solving the problems of acquiring commissions, and designing, developing, and managing the construction of buildings. The rift between the profession and the schools seems to be widening and its resolution growing less likely. This conflict, however, has at its roots a more basic misunderstanding regarding the place of *work* in human life.

The decades prior to the turn of the last century were also a time of urgent questioning regarding proper human occupation. The "working class" had been transformed by the industrial revolution from the peasant farmer, "whose timetable was set for him by Nature, into a tender of machines that could go on turning in season and out of season."¹ The Victorian worker found himself compelled to struggle to prevent his new masters the machines from working him to death. Labor unions, organized advocates of the common worker, evolved and thrived during this era.

Art, on the other hand, belonged to an idle "leisure class" made up largely of dilettantes dabbling in painting or sculpture. But in the 1870's, young Victorian aristocrats, aspiring artists and poets, who went to University were confronted with the revolutionary teachings of John Ruskin. Ruskin was a prophet for a generation of English scholars including Arnold Toynbee, Oscar Wilde, and William Morris. Upon reading "On the Nature of the Gothic: and Herein of the True Functions of the Workman in Art," Morris became Ruskin's

champion to others in his Oxford set. Morris summarized the impact of Ruskin's writings: "In future days it will be considered as one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century. To some of us when we first read it... it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel."²

In this pivotal essay, Ruskin held that the work of the freemason in Gothic buildings, with all its imperfections, properly expressed the human condition:

*Go forth and gaze upon the old cathedral front, where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors: examine once more those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and rigid; but do not mock at them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children.*³

In contrast to the Gothic age, Ruskin characterized the plight of the industrial worker: "It is not that men are pained by the scorn of the upper classes, but they cannot endure their own; for they feel that the kind of labor to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes them feel less than men."⁴

Ruskin also expounded against the separation of design and production:

*The difference between the spirit of touch of the man who is inventing, and of the man who is obeying directions, is often all the difference between a great and a common work of art... We are always in these days endeavoring to separate the two; we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the worker ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working... The painter should grind his own colors; the architect work in the mason's yard with his men.*⁵

It was to overcome this dichotomy that Ruskin embarked on an experiment that would expose him to much ridicule from the Oxford community. In 1874, Ruskin proposed to a group of undergraduates that they construct a road through a bog at a village called Ferry Hinksey near Oxford. Ruskin was often at the site exhorting his "diggers" and sometimes joined the work himself, breaking stones with his gardener Downs, whom Ruskin dubbed "professor of digging." The road was passable enough, though Ruskin later stated publicly that it was perhaps the worst road in the three kingdoms. But, this often misunderstood project was not a failure nor was it as ridiculous as it has been considered by some historians. While the road was built to help the townspeople and to improve the visual quality of the countryside, this was not the primary object. Neither was Ruskin advocating a retreat from scholarship toward practical training. Ruskin's educational principles were clearly defined in his first Oxford lecture: "A youth is sent to the Universities, not to be apprenticed to a trade, nor even always to be advanced in a profession, but always to be... made a scholar."—For Ruskin the Hinksey project was meant as a demonstration to his students of the inseparability of design intention and execution. The implications of this radical thought precipitated the educational experiments of the next century and were fundamental in the establishment of the Bauhaus. Walter Gropius later credited Ruskin with making the necessary first steps in striving "to find a means of reuniting the world of art with the world of work."

Contemporary business practice, however, is far from Ruskin's ideal. The modern "workplace" is characterized by a management model in which the object of work is defined solely in terms of production. Properly managed work, according to Frederick Winslow Taylor, the founder of management science, is to "secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity of each employee... Maximum prosperity can exist only as the result of maximum productivity."⁸ This prosperity means not only monetary dividends — those are taken for granted — but also the development of each worker to a state of maximum efficiency (i.e. turning out his or her highest daily output.) Taylor states that these principles should be so self-evident that we "may think it almost childish to state them."

Scientific management can be reduced to two general principles: firstly, the *standardization of process*. Through scientific methods, a manager may find the "one best way" to do anything, eliminating outdated empirical rules-of-thumb. The process can be refined, perfected, and then applied relentlessly to production. Even the noble craft of the mason has not escaped scientific management. Taylor observed that there has been, "for centuries, no improvement in the bricklaying trade." So, his colleague Gilbreth studied all the motions of the laying of brick in order to find and eliminate all unnecessary movements from the process.

We have all been used to seeing bricklayers tap each brick after it is placed on its bed of mortar several times

with the end of the handle of the trowel so as to secure the right thickness for the joint. Mr. Gilbreth found that by tempering the mortar just right, the bricks could be readily bedded to the proper depth by a downward pressure of the hand with which they are laid. He insisted that his mortar mixers should give special attention to tempering the mortar, and so save the time consumed in tapping the brick.⁹

The productivity of the mason should increase correspondingly from 120 bricks/man/hr to 350 bricks/man/hr.

Taylor also recounts the story of a pig iron handler, Schmidt, who, properly induced (coerced) and managed, and for a wage increase from \$1.15/day to \$1.85/day, increased his productivity from loading a meager 12'12 tons of ingots per day:

Schmidt started to work, and all day long, and at regular intervals, was told by the man who stood over him with a watch, "Now pick up a pig and walk. Now sit down and rest. Now walk — now rest," etc. He worked when he was told to work, and rested when he was told to rest, and at half-past five in the afternoon had his 47 1/2 tons loaded on the car.¹⁰

The key to this prosperity is the direction of management, since for Taylor "the workman who is best suited actually to do the work is incapable (either through lack of education or through insufficient mental capacity) of understanding this science."

The second principle of scientific management is the division of labor, which not only splits the world of work into workers and managers, functionaries and officials, but also creates a myriad of specialists. For ball-bearing inspectors, Taylor's scrutiny produced a specialization of the workforce which precipitated an ironic fate. Taylor discovered that everyone has a "personal coefficient" measuring quick perception accompanied by quick, automatic, responsive action. This discovery unfortunately involved "laying off many of the most intelligent, hardest working, and most trustworthy employees because they did not possess the quality of quick perception followed by quick action."¹²

Ruskin predicted the damaging consequences of the division of labor:

It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: Divided into mere segments of men — broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail. Now it is a good and desirable thing, truly, to make many pins in a day; but if we could only see with what crystal sand their points were polished — sand of human soul... And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities... that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to

*strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages.*¹³

Nevertheless, since Taylor's ideas infiltrated the Harvard Business School, they have been the single most influential management strategy adopted by American business. We live in a Taylorized age.

But Taylor's concept of work is uncomfortably inappropriate when we use the word "work" as a noun (as in "a work of art.") In her study of the *vita activa* (The Human Condition), Hannah Arendt identifies this kind of activity, not as work, but as labor — "the labor of our bodies" as opposed to "the work of our hands." Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body — bound to the vital necessities produced and consumed in the life process. In summary, to labor is to be enslaved by necessity. If labor produces some product, it is incidental to the process and is consumed in short order. Labor, accompanied by consumption, leaves no enduring trace or durable artifact.¹⁴ Nowadays, almost all products, even those identified in calculations of the GNP as "durable" goods, have become consumables: clothing, chairs, refrigerators, automobiles, and houses are all commodities in the marketplace.

Labor is characterized by toil and trouble, pain and effort. The exaggerated value placed on difficult labor, simply because it is difficult, becomes evident in a particular trait of the laborer — that fixed, mask-like, expression of readiness to suffer indifferently. The laborer is epitomized by the mythical Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to spend eternity in an endless cycle, rolling a rock to a summit in Hades, only to watch the stone rush down toward the lower world from which he will have to push it up once again. Modern psychologists often refer to human endeavors which possess no apparent end or defined object as "Sisyphus tasks."

In contrast to labor, Hannah Arendt defines work as the activity of *homo faber*, man the maker, who fabricates all the things that constitute the human artifice. Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness or worldliness of human existence and provides an "artificial" world of things. The things produced are mostly objects for use, and, though these objects may eventually "wear out" and become "used up," this end is not their destiny, at least in the same way as destruction is the inherent end of all things for consumption. Their durability gives the things of the world their independence from their producers and users, their "objectivity" which makes them endure or (and this is the original meaning of the etymological root of the word "object") "stand against" time.¹⁵ The object or end of true work is not a commodity, but the work itself, the thing produced.

The American Shakers were known for the production of elegant objects and for their industriousness — for "putting their hands to work." In each of their 18 communities, they worked to convert thousands of acres of inhospitable wilderness into thriving, manicured settlements. The endurance of their objects and structures permeates the work and the worker: a primary element of the Shaker creed was to "do all

your work as if you had a thousand years to live and as if you would die tomorrow." In the 1980's and 90's, Shaker objects have been elevated to the level of art, transcending their categorization as objects of use. And when a Shaker chair is hung on a peg on the wall of a Shaker family dwelling house, it leaves behind its obligations as a sitting instrument, and becomes a thing to be appreciated in its own right. But, no matter whether they are removed to a museum, where they often appear somewhat uncomfortably, these things remain objects of craft and their purpose is, by nature, to be useful instruments. Despite its durability, for Hannah Arendt, a work cannot completely escape its quality of being "for the sake of" something else. On the other hand, art objects cannot lie completely in the world of work because instrumentality is not their essential foundation.¹⁶

The American painter Charles Sheeler was an avid admirer of the Shakers, and from his early life, the pure uncluttered contours of their buildings influenced his artistic ideas. He produced paintings which were pristine distillations of Shaker design. Sheeler is classified, along with Georgia O'Keeffe and Charles DeMuth, in a movement known as the precisionists, a group characterized more by a common state of mind than by a visual or technical similarity in their work. Sheeler practiced his craft diligently, and he was so obsessed with craftsmanship that he became the consummate anti-craftsman; his paintings have a flawless finish with virtually no evidence of brushstrokes, which were eliminated in favor of greater clarity of formal description. The strength of each of his paintings lies in the discipline through which a familiar object is revealed in its structure. The world of Sheeler's paintings is one "cleansed of accidentals."¹⁷ His work is characterized by a singular detachment — he remained outside the mundane subjects he painted — and by a disinterested attitude revealing psychological distance. This distant, yet not indifferent, contemplative aspect of Sheeler's paintings cannot be completely reconciled with working, since the worker must have, at every moment in the act of production, an interest in the work. Sheeler's disinterested attitude, however, reveals a state of mind quite distinct from that of the worker, suggesting that the object of a work of art may lie outside the world of work.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle states, "We work in order to have leisure" — the object of work is leisure. In an age of "total work" this statement may seem unusual and inverted, but a literal translation confirms and magnifies the surprising hierarchy: "We are unlesurely (*ascholia*) in order that we may have leisure (*schole*). "Schole is to halt or cease, to have quiet or peace, to deliberately abstain from the ordinary activities required by our daily wants, or to devote oneself entirely to something."¹⁸ The word *a-scholia* reveals that the Greeks possessed no proper word for work used in this context, and instead employed the negative term. There can be no doubt that Aristotle held a clear priority of leisure over work.

In a society of total labor, however, all serious activity is defined as work, and activities which are not necessary for the life of the individual or of society are subsumed under

playfulness. Even the “work” of the artist is dissolved into play — acts of making not associated with “making a living” become classified as hobbies.¹⁹ We often tend to think of leisure as rest or play for the sake of improving or restoring our capacity to work. But, Aristotle identifies this kind of recreation as quite distinct from leisure:

It is true that both occupation and leisure are necessary; but it is also true that leisure is higher than occupation, and is the end to which occupation is directed. We can hardly fill our leisure with play. To do so would be to make play the be-all and end-all of life. That is an impossibility. Play is a thing to be chiefly used in connexion with one side of life — the side of occupation. (A simple argument shows that this is the case. Occupation is the companion of work and exertion: the worker needs relaxation: play is intended to provide relaxation.) Leisure is a different matter: we think of it as having in itself intrinsic pleasure, intrinsic happiness, intrinsic felicity. Happiness of that order does not belong to those who are engaged in occupation: it belongs to those who have leisure. Those who are engaged in occupation are so engaged with a view to some end which they regard as still unattained. But felicity is a present end... It is clear, therefore, that there are some branches of learning and education which ought to be studied with a view to the proper use of leisure in the cultivation of the mind. It is clear, too, that these studies should be regarded as ends in themselves, while studies pursued with a view to an occupation should be regarded merely as means and matters of necessity.²⁰

What then is leisure? The term has suffered from a degradation in contemporary English usage. The Greek ideal of leisure (*scholē*) is not spare time or idle time off the job. Neither is it identical to play, as we have seen in the above passage, but lies beyond play. Leisure should also not be associated with laziness or sloth. In fact, in the middle ages, slothfulness (*acedia*, one of the seven cardinal sins) and restlessness — “leisurelessness,” the incapacity to have leisure — were closely connected. Sloth was held to be the source of restlessness and the ultimate cause of “work for work’s sake.” *Acedia* literally means that an individual chooses to forgo the rights that belong to his or her nature, or that one does not give the consent of the will to one’s own being. Rather than being associated with leisure, sloth is the inner prerequisite that renders leisure impossible.²¹

According to Sebastian de Grazia, leisure is defined as a “state of being in which activity is performed for its own sake or as its own end.”²² It is freedom from labor and from the distractions of necessity. It is in this sense of “free” for which the liberal arts were named. Aristotle says that the liberal arts are concerned exclusively with knowledge; those which are concerned with utilitarian ends and attained through activity are called servile. The distinction remains for us in the difference between education, which belongs to leisure —

scholē, is the root for the English word, school — and training, which belongs to the servile arts.

Leisure is often associated with the *vita contemplativa* — the contemplative life. Now to contemplate a thing is not the same as to observe it. To observe is to measure, count, weigh; it is a tense and directly interested activity. To contemplate, however, is to look in a disinterested way, to develop the capacity to find. For Heraclitus it was “listening to the essence of things.” It is a form of silence, a sense of wonder at the world.

This contemplative life or leisure is not unimportant for the “common good,” but cannot be counted useful in the utilitarian sense of a thing done “in order to” accomplish something else. Goethe, at the end of his life, said, “I have never bothered or asked in what way I was useful to society as a whole; I contented myself with expressing what I recognized as good and true. That has certainly been useful in a wide circle; but that was not the aim; it was the necessary result.”²³ As a contemplative activity, art cannot justify itself according to predetermined ends. In art there is always discovery and accompanying risk, uncertainty. But art must ultimately be revealed in an artifact, and therefore is bound to the world of work inherent in the *vita activa*. The artist — in whatever discipline: painting, sculpture, architecture, or road-digging — is perhaps unique among human beings in precisely this: that in art, as in no other human undertaking, one is immersed simultaneously in one’s work, in the *vita activa*, and in the world of the *vita contemplativa* or leisure.

Josef Pieper begins his essay, *Leisure: Basis of Culture*, with the question: Will we build our new house (that of the 21st century) on the Western tradition?²⁴ As one of the foundations of our culture is a proper relation between work and leisure, we cannot tolerate a situation in which work becomes the end of all activity. As with Ruskin’s generation, it is perhaps our greatest task, at the threshold of the next millennium, to reunite the worlds of work and art, and to protect art from being consumed by a world of total work.

One summer afternoon in Oxford — ‘that sweet city with her dreaming spires,’ lovely as Venice in its splendor, noble in its learning as Rome, down the High Street that winds from tower to tower, past silent cloister and stately gateway... well, we were coming down the street — a troop of young men, some of them like myself only nineteen, going to river or tennis-court or cricket-field — when Ruskin going up to lecture in cap and gown met us. He seemed troubled and prayed us go back with him to his lecture, which a few of us did, and there he spoke to us not on art this time but on life, saying that it seemed to him to be wrong that all the best physique and strength of the young men in England should be spent aimlessly on cricket-ground or river, without any result at all except that if one rowed well one got a pewter-pot, and if one made a good score, a cane-handled bat. He thought, he said, that we should be working at something that

would do good to other people, at something by which we might show that in all labour there was something noble. Well, we were a good deal moved, and said we would do anything he wished. So he went out round Oxford and found two villages, Upper and Lower Hinksey, and between them there lay a great swamp, so that the villagers could not pass from one to the other without many miles of a round. And when we came back in winter he asked us to help him make a road across this morass for these village people to use. So out we went, day after day, and learned how to lay levels and to break stones, and to wheel barrows along a plank — a very difficult thing to do. And Ruskin worked with us in the mist and rain and mud of an Oxford winter, and our friends and our enemies came out and mocked us from the bank. We did not mind it much then, and we did not mind it afterwards at all, but worked away for two months at our road. And what became of the road? Well, like a bad lecture it ended abruptly — in the middle of the swamp. Ruskin going away to Venice, when we came back for the next term there was no leader, and the 'diggers,' as they called us, fell asunder. And I felt that if there was enough spirit amongst the young men to go out to such work as roadmaking for the sake of a noble ideal of life, I could from them create an artistic movement that might change, as it has changed, the face of England. So I sought them out — leader they would call me — but there was no leader: we were all searchers only and we were bound to each other by noble friendship and noble art. There was none of us idle: poets most of us, so ambitious were we: painters some of us, or workers in metal or modellers, determined that we should try and create for ourselves beautiful work: for the handcraftsman beautiful work, for those who love us poems and pictures, for those who love us not epigrams and paradoxes and scorn.

Well, we have done something in England and we will

do something more. Now, I do not want you, believe me, to ask your brilliant young men, your beautiful young girls, to go out and make a road on a swamp for any village in America, but I think you might each of you have some art to practise.²⁵

NOTES

- ¹ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. IX.
- ² Fiona McCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1995) p. 69.
- ³ John Ruskin, "On the Nature of the Gothic," *The Stones of Venice*, vol. II, (Chicago, Belford, Clarke, and Co.) p. 163.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169-170.
- ⁶ E. T. Cook, *The Life of John Ruskin*, vol. 2 (New York, Haskell House, 1968) p.192.
- ⁷ Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1965) p. 62.
- ⁸ F. W. Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (New York, Harper, 1911) op. cit.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ¹³ Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. II, pp. 165-166.
- ¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958) Chap. III, op. cit.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chap. IV, op. cit.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-174.
- ¹⁷ Martin Friedman, *Charles Sheeler* (Watson-Guptil, 1975) p. 20.
- ¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Thinking* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) p. 93.
- ¹⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 127-128.
- ²⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VIII, Part A, Chapter III, sec. 3, trans. by Ernest Barker (Oxford Univ. Press, 1958) pp. 335-336.
- ²¹ Joseph Pieper, *Leisure: Basis of Culture* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1952) p. 48.
- ²² Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* (Garden City, NY, Anchor Books, 1962) p. 13.
- ²³ Goethe, as quoted in Pieper, p. 47.
- ²⁴ Pieper, p. 25.
- ²⁵ Oscar Wilde, "Art and the Handcraftsman," *The Essays of Oscar Wilde* (New York, Little and Ives, 1916) pp. 514-516.