

On the Border of the Beautiful

AMIR AMERI

University of Colorado

I.

At the outset of the "Pioneers of Modern Design,"¹ Nicholas Pevsner summed up "the basic doctrine of nineteenth-century architectural theory" in what is now a well-known quote from Ruskin's "Lectures on Architecture and Painting" (1854). "Ornamentation," Pevsner quoted Ruskin saying, "is the principal part of architecture." Ruskin's "surprising" proclamation on ornamentation has since assumed the burden of more responsibility and blame than any one sentence could readily assume. Emblematically, if not directly, it is held accountable for the state of architectural practice at the end of the last century from one end of the spectrum, to having "effectively repelled generations of readers from making a serious attempt to find out if there was any substance behind the bluster,"² on the other end of the spectrum.

What I wish to pursue through a close reading of Ruskin's discourse on ornamentation is that which is purported to be "silly," "preposterous," "nonsensical," "absurd," or generally "wrong" with this proclamation. Exactly what in this sentence propelled it to a position of such prominent infamy?

At face value, the problem with the sentence, "Ornamentation is the principal part of architecture," is a problem of place or placement. The purported nonsense in Ruskin's sentence is in its "surprising" equation of the peripheral with the central, the supplemental with the pivotal. Ruskin's sin was his attempt to incorporate into architecture what is by definition, as Alberti put it, "somewhat added or fastened on, rather than proper and innate."³

Although ornament is persistently defined as additional, extra, other, auxiliary, there is, it is important to note, no architectural element or group of elements that can be labeled an ornament, or for that matter not. Every architectural element could be an ornamental element depending on its place and the circumstances of its placement. This is because ornament is not so much an element, as it is a certain placement of any element with respect to another element - each of which appears as what it is in reference to the other. The measure of ornament is never itself. The ornamental is always measured against another body as an appendage and a subordinate element. Ornament does not have an identity or a place of its own, because it is fundamentally a creature of placement.

If the place of ornament has been of considerable concern, if we find virtually every major movement in architecture since the Renaissance define its unique identity by assuming a distinct posture on ornamentation - internal or external, principal or peripheral - this is in part because it is by defining and identifying the ornamental, by separating the additive from the essential that the principal and the peripheral are made to appear as such. To lose control of the ornamental is in a manner tantamount to losing sight of the essential. This is one reason why Ruskin's proclamation has appeared so problematic. At face value, it appears to confound two things whose identity depends on their distinction: the architecture and the ornamentation. Ornament cannot be principal, because ornament is judged against the principal.

There is yet another dimension to the problem. Ruskin's elevation of ornamentation to a principal part of architecture creates a crisis of identity for the latter. Architecture is,

according to a pervasive Western tradition, what transcends building. For instance, "when a thing responds to a need," Le Corbusier proclaimed, "it is not beautiful; Architecture has another meaning and other ends to pursue than showing construction and responding to needs."⁴ From Le Corbusier's text we may trace our steps through virtually every major, influential treatise on architecture back to Vitruvius' triad "commodity, Firmness, and Delight," or forward to Venturi and Scott Brown's reiteration of it, to find in each instance the same emphasis on the beautiful as the condition of the elevation of building to architecture. Without "delight," there is building, but not architecture. Architecture is synonymous with aesthetics and beauty.

Over time, the proposed ways and mean of rendering a building beautiful have been as diverse and varied as the cultural and paradigm shifts they reflect. Nevertheless, there is remarkable consensus, in principle, on what constitutes the beautiful. Alberti set the foundation when he proposed to follow "the opinion of Socrates" and define beauty to be that to which "nothing could be added, diminished or altered, but for the worse."⁵ The beautiful is, in principle, self-sufficient, and complete. It gathers itself all in one place. Its borderlines cannot be breached. It is neither missing a part to require addition, nor does it have anything extra to require subtraction. Attachment to or detachment from the beautiful is tantamount to its loss and destruction.

Alberti's definition of the beautiful has been principally and consistently upheld by the succeeding generation of architectural theoreticians. It is precisely in reference to this pervasive understanding of the beautiful that the question of ornamentation has assumed a critical dimension in theoretical discourse on architecture. It is also precisely in reference to this definition that Ruskin's equation of ornamentation to a principal part of architecture has been viewed as absurdly comic and/or sadly tragic.

Although Ruskin is purported to have lost sight of ornament's place in architecture, with dire consequences, the difference between him and his opponents have been greatly exaggerated. Ruskin and his opponents differ only over where to place ornament, and not

over the adamant need to place and control ornament. Ruskin's attempt to subsume ornament within architecture was in part a strategic move to exert greater control over ornament in hope of overcoming the inconsistencies and paradoxes in those aesthetic theories that choose the path of marginalization or exclusion of ornamentation.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the problems and paradoxes of ornamentation's marginalization and exclusion.⁶ Here, I wish to critically examine Ruskin's alternative path of inclusion and domestication of ornamentation. My intent is not to argue for or against ornament. I am not certain one is afforded this choice, even though one may readily and customarily exercise it. Rather, I am interested in the reasons for the preoccupation with ornamentation. The question for me is why ornament, which is not even a thing, but a role that can be assumed by virtually anything, has managed to stir so much passion and controversy in theoretical discourse on architecture. Why placing ornament, placing and positioning oneself with respect to it, has been of central concern within this discourse, so far sketched with broad strokes?

II.

The fact is, Ruskin boldly notes, by way of clarifying his position on ornamentation:

... that a noble building never has any extraneous or superfluous ornaments; that all its parts are necessary to its loveliness, and that no single atom of them could be removed without harm to its life, ... And I use the words ornament and beauty interchangeably, in order that architects may understand this: I assume that their building is to be a perfect creature capable of nothing less than it has, and needing nothing more.⁷

Ruskin keeps well within the bounds of tradition in assuming that architecture's objective is a *perfect* creature that requires nothing less than it has and is able to accept nothing more without loss, i.e., without ceasing to be autonomous and singular. However, refuting the traditional distinction between beauty and ornament as a misunderstanding of the limits of the architecture's terrain, i.e., of what falls inside

or outside it, Ruskin effectively re-positions or re-draws these limits to incorporate ornament as an interchangeable word for beauty. He re-proposes the distinction between things that fall inside or outside architecture as one appropriately made between two kinds of ornament: the "inner" or the "only true kind" that is conducive to beauty and the outward or untrue kind that is extraneous and dispensable. In other words, despite its internalization as another word for beauty, a certain *kind* of ornament remains extraneous. "It is of curtains, pictures, statues, or else things that may be taken away from the building and not hurt it," i.e., things that fall outside and are as such unrelated and unnecessary to architecture's "inner loveliness." Curtains, paintings, statues and other similar ornaments are not, however, as we shall see later, inherently extraneous. Within limits that are yet to be defined, placed or drawn, each could be an inner ornament and integral to the beauty of the building. To define these limits and clearly draw the line separating the inner from the outer, the inside from the outside of architecture - we need first and foremost "to determine a matter of very essential importance, namely, what *is* or is *not* ornament" which is also to ask and determine what is or is not beauty, and therefore what is or is not architecture.

Art, "generally, as such," Ruskin tells us, "with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing."⁸ Assuming a distinct hierarchy between "language" and "thought," i.e., between the "technical" or the "constructive" and the "reflective" or the "imaginative," in "all our speculations on art" - Ruskin goes on to set the ground rule - "language is thus to be distinguished, and held subordinate to, that which it conveys."⁹ This implies that in the "outset of all inquiry" into the subject of architecture, it is "very necessary" to "distinguish carefully between architecture and building."¹⁰ The name Architecture must be "confined" to that "art" which has "building" as "condition of its working" and as condition of elevation to *art* "impresses on its form certain characters venerable or beautiful, but otherwise unnecessary," i.e., "unnecessary" or "useless," "in the well understood and usual sense, as meaning, inapplicable to the service of the Body."¹¹ This unnecessary or useless

addition is the ornamentation without which there is no architecture.

Ruskin's distinction between architecture and building, adamant as it is, has many precedents. What is different here is the radical nature of the divide between architecture and building, and Ruskin's exclusive focus on those ideas or "characters venerable or beautiful, but otherwise unnecessary" that transform buildings into architecture. He divides these into two broad classes: the one "characterized by an exceeding preciousness and delicacy, to which we recur with a sense of affectionate admiration;" and the other "by a severe, and in many cases, mysterious, majesty, which we remember with an undiminished sense of awe, like that felt at the presence and operation of some great Spiritual Power."¹² The difference between these two impressions, Ruskin warns us:

... is not merely that which there is in nature between things beautiful and sublime. It is, also, the difference between what is derivative and original in man's work; for whatever is in architecture fair or beautiful is imitated from natural forms; and what is not so derived, but depends for its dignity upon arrangement and government received from human mind, becomes the expression of the power that mind, and receives a sublimity high in proportion to the power expressed. All buildings, therefore, shows man either as gathering or governing; and the secrets of his success are his knowing what to gather, and how to rule. These are the two great intellectual Lamps of Architecture; the one consisting in a just and humble veneration for the works of God upon the earth, and the other in an understanding of the dominion over those works which has been vested in man.¹³

The beautiful that is always gathered and imitated - we will return to the question of governance later - has to do with certain outward qualities, of certain *forms* and *colors*, i.e., ornaments, the simple contemplation of which gives us pleasure. The "feeling of mankind on this subject," by "the simple will of the Deity," is "universal and instinctive."¹⁴ Hence, Ruskin tells us that the "impressions of beauty" are "neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral."¹⁵ They are *moral* because, "these

common and general sources of pleasure are, I believe, a certain seal, or impress of divine work and character, upon whatever God has wrought in all the world."¹⁶ Therefore, "men," despising "all that is not of God, unless reminding it of God," are to attempt the "noble rendering of images of beauty, derived chiefly from the external appearance of organic nature" in all the visual arts, inclusive of architecture.¹⁷

Therefore, Ruskin goes on to conclude, "the proper material of ornament will be whatever God has created; and its proper treatment, that which seems in accordance with or symbolic of His laws."¹⁸ For instance, "all perfectly beautiful forms," i.e., all forms inwardly ornamental, Ruskin tells us, "must be composed of curves"¹⁹ because "every curve divides itself infinitely by its change of direction," displaying the "seal" or "impress" of that "divine character" or "attribute" it is ordained to bear: "infinity."²⁰ The ugly is, in turn, simply any form that does not bear the "seal, or impress of divine work and character."

Ruskin's fusion of aesthetics and theology is both overt and forceful. Ruskin Scholars broadly contribute this fusion to his deep-seated religious convictions.²¹ Ruskin is, of course, quite candid on the subject. However, it is important to note that the fusion of aesthetics and theology in architecture has a long history. It begins well before and continues well after Ruskin. Theoretical speculations of Pugin, Boullée, Laugier, Wotton, Palladio and Alberti from one end of the spectrum to Sullivan, Wright, and Le Corbusier on the other, are just a few examples. There must be, in other words, more to this story than the strong religious convictions of any one individual.

Theoretical and aesthetic speculations on architecture are, historically, if not per force, both prescriptive and proscriptive. They impose distinct boundaries. They seek to delimit the practice of architecture, in each instance, to the one mode or style particularly arranged to embody and promote the worldview of the culture articulating the theory through the author and/or the architect. This delimitation is accomplished, and perhaps it can only be accomplished, in the name of beauty and truth, rather than ulterior - cultural, social, or political -

motives. It is presented to be not arbitrarily, but following "immutable laws." The power of exclusion that is imperative to the delimitation of practice mandates this transformation of culture into nature and the variable into the invariable. In other words, universalizing the particular with recourse to theology and thereby disguising culture as nature is not a choice that can be readily avoided, given the intended purpose of the enterprise. For instance, what Ruskin propagates as an aesthetic architecture - Venetian or High Victorian Gothic - indubitably reflects the cultural and historic context within which it was formed. However, placing the weight of his authority to prescribe this and proscribe other modes of design on a divine ordinance has a strategic utility in excess of his particular religious convictions. He prescribes curvilinear forms not because they had, as they did, a particular meaning to a particular culture at a distinct point in time, but because they bear the seal, or impress of a divine character, truly, naturally, exclusively, and eternally.

The beautiful has no overt place in the vagaries of the cultural terrain for another important reason. In language, which Ruskin proposes art and architecture to be, there is no positive term, no original event and no autonomous element. Difference and deferral constitute the identity, or what is not absolutely different, the non-identity of every element. In language, nothing simply is what it is, immutable and present. A "perfect creature capable of nothing less than it has, and needing nothing more," i.e., a creature that is self-referential and autonomous has no place in language. This immutable creature may only emerge and find shelter on a theological terrain, i.e., the terrain of simple presences, clear origins, and explicit hierarchies. So long as one conceives and defines the objective of architecture as a perfect creature capable of nothing less than it has, and needing nothing more, one has little choice but resort to and place architecture within a theological frame. Placing and securing beauty's place within this frame is not, however, without considerable difficulties.

Keeping in mind that in architecture each ornament is "an expression of a beautiful thought," that is, the thoughts or divine attributes impressed and sealed on natural

forms of frequent occurrence, Ruskin asks us to:

... consider for an instant what would be the effect of continually repeating an expression of a beautiful thought to any other of the senses at times when the mind could not address that sense to the understanding of it. Suppose that in time of serious occupation, of stern business, a companion should repeat in our ears continually some favorite passage of poetry, over and over again all day long.²²

The effect "at the end of the day," Ruskin tells us, is that "the entire meaning of the passage would be dead to us" leaving behind only a *sickening* and *wearisome* form or rather "no form" because here form is to be disallowed the name without meaning or thought. Repetition incurs a loss. A loss not only of meaning, but also of form, and "it is the same with every other form of definite thought:"

Apply this to expressions of thought received by the eye. Remember that the eye is at your mercy more than the ear. "The eye it cannot choose but see" ... Now if you present lovely forms to it when it cannot call the mind to help it in its work, and among objects of vulgar use and unhappy position, you will neither please the eye nor elevate the vulgar object. But you will fill and weary the eye with the beautiful form, and you will infect that form itself with the vulgarity of the thing to which you have violently attached it. It will never be of much use to you any more; you have killed or defiled it; its freshness and purity are gone.²³

The place of ornament has thus everything to do with its life or worth conceived and defined as the presence of "meaning" or "definite thought" in form. Placed in the company of vulgar objects - conceived as a violent gesture - or in places of "active and occupied life," where no aid could be received from the mind, ornament loses its freshness, purity, "sharpness" and "clearness." It is infected, defiled, killed and destroyed forever.

Hence then a general law, of singular importance in the present day, a law of simple common sense, - not to decorate things belonging to purposes of active and occupied life. Wherever you can rest,

there decorate; where rest is forbidden, so is beauty.²⁴

The determination of what *is* or what is *not* the place of ornament follows, not accidentally, the application of one and the same test determining what is or is not *true* ornament: the presence vs. the absence of "meaning" or "definite thought." Where meaning can be perceived that *is* the place for ornament. Where ornament's meaning is killed or defiled that is *not*. Contrary to common practice, for instance, ornaments that "adorn temples and beautify kings' palaces" have no place on "a tradesman's sign nor shelf nor counter in all the streets of all our cities."²⁵ There - all socio-political implications and all socio-political lines and limits at stake withstanding - Ruskin tells us, "absolutely valueless - utterly without the power of giving pleasure, they only satiate the eye, and vulgarize their own forms."²⁶

Hence, that "general law" of "singular importance" that is to end vulgarity and violence, on the one hand, and the absolute loss of value and aesthetic pleasure, on the other. This is not only because, we should note, misplacement here constitutes a negation, but also because the misplaced cannot be contained within that place as a simple negation. True ornaments, misplaced, do not only satiate the eye, lose their meaning, purity, life and value, but in so doing they also, as a matter of "singular importance," vulgarize their own forms. Of the ornaments "violently attached," for instance to the signs, shelves or counters of tradesmen, Ruskin writes, "many of these are in themselves thoroughly good copies of fine things, which things themselves we shall never, in consequence, enjoy any more."²⁷

The consequence of misplacement is not a simple inability to read a "beautiful thought" at a given time or place. Rather, it is the impossibility of reading, if not always already, at least thereafter at any time or in any place. Once violently attached anywhere but its place, ornament can never be enjoyed any more or in any place. Misplaced, ornament is forever displaced - dispossessed of its meaning in every place. Placed outside its place, i.e., outside the limits protective, if not productive of its meaning, what ornament loses is not only its place inside but the very possibility of being placed inside (limits). This

passage is the passage of limits, leaving a violated, vulgarized, valueless form or "no form" inside and outside. It is a death or an absence that is not, can no longer be conceived, the opposite of life or presence still in place but the impossibility of both in every place.

What is the condition of this possibility or impossibility? How can the *good* copy destroy the original? How can a form whose power to please was said from the outset to be owing to the "written or sealed impression" it bears of divine attributes be denied that power inside or outside its place? In sum, why the very question of place?

To appear or be read as what it indeed is - a meaning-full or a formed form - ornament, Ruskin tells us, must be placed - retained - in its place. The condition of this possibility is the impossibility of the form ornament is desired to be - the written or sealed impression of a beautiful thought - in its place or any place. The meaning of ornament, i.e., its reading as form(ed), could only be said to depend on its place - formed in one, deformed in another - if this form did not precede its place or its reading in place as the form of a seal or an impress, if there was no *place* where ornament appeared formed or, for that matter, where it did not appear informed by its place or placement. The good copy, misplaced, could only deprive the original of its value if that value was not intrinsic but construed in place. That ornament must forgo the possibility of bearing the form of a seal in every place in order to appear or be read as the form of a seal in its place is precisely what the misplaced ornament points to. If Ruskin finds it impossible to enjoy ornament, once it is misplaced, any more or in any place, if he can no longer read it as the written or sealed impression of a beautiful thought in any place, that is precisely because the misplaced, the very possibility of misplacement, which is also the very possibility of placement - the possibility of dependence of meaning on place or placement - displaces the relationship between meaning and form, conceived and read as a seal or an impress, always already. Misplaced, ornament fractures its own seal, exposing a gap in its place between form and meaning, which Ruskin confessedly can never re-seal. It points to its reading, if not reading in general, as a matter of place or placement

and to the latter as a form, always already, of misplacement, if, of course, misplacement here is to imply a reading that is conditioned by its place or placement - a reading that marks a violence and vulgarity that must always have befallen placement already as the condition of possibility of reading form as (de)form(ed). So long as form could be misplaced, so long, that is, as the reading of form is dependent on its place, every place is the missing/missed place of the desired seal.

Therefore, where the misplaced or rather the possibility of (mis)placement leads Ruskin is, in a manner, his point of departure and what it leaves him is what he had to start with: a displaced form or a form with "no form." This is no *form* for which Ruskin has or could have an allotted place. This is no form which in order to be read, to give itself to a particular reading, be this as a true or a false form, a living or a dead form, a pure or a violated form, need not have been placed - as within a frame - and this is only in the absence of a place or any place for reading that does not always point to a placement already.

Therefore, to read the ornamental form as the written or sealed impression of a beautiful thought, which is a reading, we should note, already placed within a theological frame as the condition of its possibility, Ruskin must again place and then insist on the placement of the ornamental form in its place - the place of rest - for fear of the misplaced. This place, however, provides no relief. It provides neither simply a background nor a protective shield against which or within which the ornamental form can give its form to reading as the form of a seal, pure and simple. What this place provides, it denies in one and the same gesture. If it marks the place where ornament appears sealed, it also marks the place of its disappearance as sealed. It gives to the ornamental form what the form lacks without its protective limits and it gives precisely because the form lacks. It adds and fills only to expose a gap. It intervenes and does only to construe from outside the seal that is desired to have come from inside and the seal that then appears to have come from inside. As such, ornament in its place - the place of rest - has, in a manner, no place. It is neither in place nor out of place. It is neither protected nor exposed, but both in one and the same place. It is at once placed, misplaced, and displaced. Where then to

place ornament? Where indeed is ornament's place? Where is the place in the place of rest where the desired seal falls in place or, for that matter, out of place? Where to locate ornament its desired place indeterminable - here or there - in its place - the place of rest? The answer - the very possibility of providing an answer - as we may expect, requires still further placement and/or displacement. It requires further separation, distinction and opposition on two sides of a line called to place in what amounts to a perpetual placement in search of the ever missing/missed place. This time at the limits of the domain of architecture, on two sides of the line that was said to separate what falls inside architecture as "inner" and "true" ornamentation from what falls outside it as "outward" or "superfluous" decoration. Ruskin tells us:

If to produce a good or beautiful ornament, it were only necessary to produce a perfect piece of sculpture, and if a well cut group of flowers or animals were indeed an ornament wherever it might be placed, the work of architect would be comparatively easy. Sculpture and architecture would become separate arts; and the architect would order so many pieces of such subject and size as he needed, But this is not so. No perfect piece either of painting or sculpture is an architectural ornament at all, except in that vague sense in which any beautiful thing is said to ornament the place it is in. Thus we may say that pictures ornament a room; but we should not thank an architect who told us that his design, to be complete, required a Titian to be put in one corner of it, and a Velasquez in the other; and it is just as unreasonable to call perfect sculpture, niched in, or encrusted on a building, a portion of the ornament of that building, as it would be to hang pictures by the way of ornament on the outside of it.²⁸

No *beautiful thing*, therefore, is an ornament in anything but a vague sense, if in its place, the place of rest, it is *wherever* that it might be placed. A *good* or a *beautiful* ornament, which is, appears, and is read as such in its place, is one and only one that in the place of rest has or could be assigned a specific place. To this place, the place of ornament in its place, however, there is first a condition to

admission. No perfect ornament can be allowed in as an architectural ornament. Perfection places ornament outside the domain of architecture as decoration "outward" or "superfluous." As to what may allow ornament in, Ruskin tells us:

The especial condition of true ornament is, that it be beautiful in its place, and nowhere else, and that it aid the effect of every portion of the building over which it has influence; that it does not, by its richness, make other parts bald, or, by its delicacy, make other parts coarse. Every one of its qualities has reference to its place and use: *and it is fitted for its service by what would be faults and deficiencies if it had no especial duty.* Ornament, the servant, is often formal, where sculpture, the master, would have been free; the servant is often silent where the master would have been eloquent; ...²⁹

The place of ornament in its place, which is the only place where it might appear beautiful, is a place marked by deficiency and fault, and there the condition of ornament's admission is imperfection. The objective here, i.e., the very point of ornamentation or ornamental addition to architecture, is, we should recall, to create "a perfect creature capable of nothing less than it has, and needing nothing more." Where ornament that is inner and true fits in its place is at that borderline between the capacity for nothing less and the need for nothing more - the line bordering the perfect. Where ornament fits is where it adds to complete as a part to a self-enclosing, self-perfecting chain of imperfect parts. Admitting ornament on the condition of imperfection, Ruskin makes virtue of a vice. Whereas the perfect ornament is tied to no specific place, which is to say that it could always be misplaced and as such displaced, to the imperfect ornament every place is a missed place, unless it is in the only place from where it cannot be misplaced. This is the only place that excludes the possibility of misplacement in being the one and only place where the imperfect appears as a good or beautiful form or what amounts to same, where it does not appear as what it is outside that place - bad and ugly. This then is the place of ornament inner and true in its place. A "most difficult question," however, remains. Where to locate the parameters of this place

or rather within what parameters to place this place: the place of deficiency and fault fitted with imperfection in the place of rest? What to define as deficiency or fault and what to admit in as imperfection? Where to draw the line between the master and the servant, the perfect and the imperfect, the "inner" ornamentation and the "superfluous" decoration? The answer lies in "abstraction."

Architecture, Ruskin tells us, "delights in abstraction and fears to complete her forms."³⁰ These are the forms architecture borrows or imitates from natural forms of frequent occurrence. Architecture fears completion, however, not because completion or full realization of the imitated form is always "wrong" or that perfect sculpture may not "be made a part of severest architecture," but because "this perfection" is "dangerous."³¹

It is so in the highest degree; for the moment the architect allows himself to dwell on the imitated portions, there is a chance of his losing sight of the duty of ornament, of its business as a part of the composition, and sacrificing its points of shade and effect to the delight of delicate carving. And then he is lost. His architecture has become a mere framework for the setting of delicate sculpture, which had better be all taken down and put into cabinets.³²

The perfect form may step out of its place or appear to step into it as a work of art into a frame. This is the danger, in the highest degree. In the presence of the perfectly imitated form, one may readily lose sight of architecture as a work of art, and let it become a mere frame. It is against this danger that abstraction is meant to guard, for the sake of ornament's fit in its place, here, by definition, at the line separating architecture as a work of art from a mere frame.

The question is first to be clearly determined whether the architecture is a frame for the sculpture, or the sculpture an ornament of the architecture. If the latter, then the first office of that sculpture is not to represent the things it imitates, but to gather out of them those arrangement of form which shall be pleasing to the eye in their intended places. So soon as agreeable lines and

points of shade have been added to the mouldings which were meager, or to the lights which were unrelieved, the architectural work of the imitation is accomplished; and how far it shall be wrought towards completeness or not, will depend upon its place, and upon other various circumstances.³³

Before ornamentation or ornamental addition, there must be a clear determination of what architecture is or what it ought to be: a work of art or a mere frame, the master or the servant. This is a determination, we should note, which at once presupposes and seeks to maintain a clear distinction between the work of art and the mere frame, as the master to the servant.

Where are we to find or locate this distinction and there what are we to mark as the work of art and what to leave out as a mere frame? If anywhere, it is, as Ruskin points the way, to the place of ornament in its place that we must turn in search of an answer and there we must make the determination. The place we must turn to, however, could we have ever left it, is the place of danger, in the highest degree. It is a place that is neither clear nor distinct. It is a place where, before ornamentation or ornamental insertion, the work of art as the master and the mere frame as the servant are merged as one, which is also to say none. This is where what is neither a master nor a servant emerges as one or the other only after ornamentation, depending on the ornamentation. What we find in this place, if we can find our way in or around it, is neither the master nor the servant, but both and neither awaiting an imitated form which itself, by itself, is neither free nor enslaved. This is a dangerous indeterminate form that can free or enslave the building as a work of art or a mere frame. It is a dangerous form precisely because it is indeterminate, because it is not nor can it be readily reduced to one thing or another, a master or a servant, and as such placed and kept clearly in one place or the other, inside architecture as a work of art or outside architecture as a mere frame, without losing one or the other, which is to say, losing the distinction altogether. Also, this is a form whose indetermination - its ability to be the master *and* the servant and its inability to be, or be reduced to the one *or* the other - is the condition of the possibility of the work art and

the mere frame conceived, conceivable as an opposition only after ornamentation, and yet on whose determination and reduction to one thing or the other, the master or the servant, here or there, depends not only the clarity of the distinction between architecture as a work of art and the mere frame, but at that also a clear hold on the line separating the inside from the outside, and what is from what is not, architecture, beauty and perfection. In a manner, the authority of this entire discourse on architecture, on what is or is not, what falls within or outside architecture as a work of art depends on its authority over the imitated form, and its ability to reduce it to a servant inside or a master outside, clearly and simply. Hence:

Lose your authority over it, let it command you, or lead you, or dictate to you in any wise, and it is an offence, an encumbrance, and a dishonor. And it is always ready to do this; wild to get the bit in its teeth, and rush forth on its own device. Measure, therefore, your strength; and as long as there is no chance of mutiny, add soldier to soldier, battalion to battalion; but be assured that all are heartily in the cause, and that there is not one of whose position you are ignorant, or whose service you could spare.³⁴

Soldier to soldier and battalion to battalion we must add in the cause of architecture, beauty, and perfection, to make certain there is no chance of mutiny, i.e., no chance of the servant becoming the master and architecture a mere frame. We must be certain of our strength and control over the ornamental insertion not to let it lead us, inevitably, to that "dusky debatable land" which this dangerous form is always ready to lead us, and wild to command and take us. This is the place where the work of art and the mere frame become one and the same and "each and all vanish into gloom" for want of a clear line or limit.

How are we to exclude the chance of mutiny from within the parameters that define architecture as a work of art? How are we to guard against the ever-present possibility of losing authority, command or lead over the imitated form always ready to rush forth on its own devices from its place within architecture as a servant? This is the chance or danger of

mutiny that architecture always faces from within its parameters, to the authority and clarity of those parameters, and not from outside where the imitated form may be allowed the position of the master, as in a cabinet or a frame, so long as the work of art and the frame appear clearly distinct and easily detachable. The possibility of commanding and leading ornament to its place - the place of servitude - the possibility, that is, of reducing ornament to a servant within architecture, lies somewhere in between complete abstraction and full realization of the imitated form. However, neither the two extremes nor the various degrees of realization in between, in and by themselves, present or exclude the chance of mutiny. The line separating ornamentation "inner" and "true" from decoration "outward" and "superfluous," resides not in between complete abstraction and full realization but in between the presence and the absence of a clear expression of servitude or subordination of which a fully realized form is not capable, while anything less, depending "upon its place, and upon other various circumstances" is. The question, in other words, insofar as the line between what is and what is not architecture, between what falls inside it as ornament inner and true and what falls outside it as ornament outward and superfluous, is a question not of abstraction or full realization per say, but of the place and the circumstances within which the imitated form may express its subordination simply and clearly. A question of:

How far this subordination is in different situations to be expressed, or how far it may be surrendered, and ornament, the servant, be permitted to have independent will; and by what means the subordination is best to be expressed when it is required, ...³⁵

A question, Ruskin tells us, that is "by far the most difficult question I have ever tried to work out respecting any branch of art." This is a most difficult question, we should note, only in so long as the desired answer is a precise line, a distinct place and a clear expression of subordination from a form that does not easily submit itself to the determination of its being and place as what is or is not, inside or outside of architecture and this is in spite of Ruskin's best constructive efforts. What has been and remains clear to

Ruskin is that for buildings to become architecture, there is a need for ornamentation or ornamental addition of forms expressive of divine attributes impressed and sealed on natural forms of frequent occurrence, as such only in the place of rest, and there only in a specific place as a part in proportion to a perfect whole, and in that specific place only in a clearly subordinate position. The only thing that is not clear or is the most difficult question in this successive placement of limits within limits around the ornamental form is the ways and means of determining the place, the circumstances or the limits within which the ornamental form, which is synonymous with architecture, may be confined and controlled. These are the limits that may limit the movement of the ornamental form, giving it no chance or possibility of crossing beyond and as such to that dusky debatable land from which Ruskin has sought architecture refuge through ornamentation or ornamental addition for the clarity of distinction between architecture as a work of art and the mere frame. These are the limits of architecture itself. The limits indistinct before ornamentation and limits over which command and control remain most difficult questions after ornamentation.

Therefore, having made every effort to determine the place of ornament and the circumstances surrounding its addition to architecture, Ruskin finds himself in the end, as many of his predecessors did before him, at the border of architecture and there or rather somewhere in between the inside and the outside of the work of art, in between the work and the mere frame, confronted not with the clear line or limit which he, as his predecessors before, had assumed to find there, but instead with a most difficult question. The question, at the risk of repetition, of the place of ornament inside or outside the work of art pending the distinction and to that end the location of the missing borderline, the condition of the possibility of which is itself ornamentation. The question of the place of ornament found not on the sides, but at the border, as the border, irreducible there to a line, irremovable there to the sides, in a dusky debatable land from where ornament at once is the condition of the possibility of departure and the impossibility of exit.

There is in this predicament, however, a notable difference between Ruskin and his predecessors. Whereas the theoreticians of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment made every effort to place and keep ornament outside the place of beauty and perfection as a mere frame, only to find it intrude on the border from its assigned place out, Ruskin, having made every effort to find ornament a specific place inside the place of beauty and perfection in architecture, finds it very difficult to keep ornament from protruding on the border from its assigned place inside. In either case, however, we should note, the difficulty encountered in achieving the desired effect is not so much one inherent to ornamentation, conceived and placed differently in each instance, as it is a difficulty encountered in every search for a place with defined or definable limits within which beauty may appear as an autonomous, self-referential entity in need of neither addition nor subtraction. The difficulty, in other words, is not ornamentation, rather one named by ornamentation. The problem is the ever-elusive architecture itself. It is that "perfect creature capable of nothing less than it has, and needing nothing more" which only appears placed within successive frames, each of which is put in place to overcome the perpetual dependence of the beautiful on place and placement.

III.

In the preceding discussions, my intent has not been to point out inconsistencies or contradictions in Ruskin's aesthetic theory per se, much less attribute these to his deeply felt religious convictions. I do not see Ruskin as having somehow failed to effectively address and resolve the problem of ornamentation. I do not presume that a stouter critic may somehow overcome the obstacles he faced and succeed in curbing and placing ornament in its place. To the contrary, I have tried to point out how thorough and systematic Ruskin's argumentations are and why the problems he faces are endemic to the theoretical enterprise and not merely a reflection of personal failings or inconsistencies.

The difficulties Ruskin faces are endemic because, concerned as theoretical speculations on architecture are with the place and the placing of architecture's borderlines,

the borderlines themselves are presumed to precede speculation over their place. Ruskin's is a case in point. If architecture's borders were a given, however, speculation over their place would be at best redundant. Though architecture is presumed to precede theory, from a certain vantage point, there is no architecture before theoretical addition, supplementation, and/or ornamentation.

To design is to face multiple possibilities and no ground for the delimitation of formal options. The functions of an edifice suggest no one form and much less a direction. In deference to biological needs, function is nebulous and multi-directional. However, it assumes a trajectory and becomes highly prescriptive, when it is appropriated by culture and transformed into a ritual. Though by no means singular, a ritual is distinct and unidirectional. It has unique spatial requirements. It demands a specific setting. It is this and similar prescriptive cultural appropriations that make architecture possible.

The relationship between architecture and culture is neither passive nor neutral. Architecture, dependent as it is on cultural appropriation, transforms the body of beliefs, views, and ideas that shape it into a factual, lived experience of them. A culture's view of the world and its experience of the world are synthesized and turned into mirror images of each other through architecture and the rituals it shelters. Through architecture, metaphysics assumes the aura of physics and culture the guise of nature. There is, therefore, much at stake in appropriating, delimiting, and controlling architecture. Much is at stake, regarding a culture's power and authority, in fabricating a world that persuasively bears witness to assumptions about it.

The primary medium of cultural appropriation and delimitation of architecture is architectural theory in its various guises.³⁶ Focused as it is on the place and the placing of parameters around architecture, theory's power to delimit, much as it's authority to exclude is vested in aesthetics. In turn, the considerable power and authority of the beautiful, in whose name Western culture has variously shaped and controlled Western architecture for much of its history, is founded on a metaphysics that presumes the ideals that it sums up in a word

- full-presence, truth, authenticity, origin, autonomy, etc - as a given, a ground, a foundation, before their negation and complication in the figure of beauty's nemesis: the ugly. The persistently stated desire for beauty in architecture is a double take. It frames, shapes, and controls architecture and it uses architecture to effectively realize, evidence and validate the ideals subsumed under the name beauty.

The only, and at that the all-consuming problem is that the autonomy, singularity, and originality on which depends the power and the authority of the beautiful never appears un-appended, un-supplemented, unframed. The beautiful does not appear without ornamentation, i.e., without the introduction and construction of a borderline that separates and delimits the beautiful. This borderline is neither internal nor external to the body beautiful. It can neither be subsumed within it nor detached from it. It is also not a thing. The measure of the beautiful is the ornamental and *visa versa*. It is only by identifying the ornamental, by separating the additional from the essential that the principal and the peripheral are both made to appear as such. The border of the beautiful is never there. There is no ornament. There is only ornamentation perpetually construing the border of the beautiful.

What might accept "neither addition, nor subtraction without loss," must accept an addition that is neither internal nor external to it. This is the problem and the paradox of ornamentation that neither inclusion nor exclusion of the ornamental can overcome. This is, however, a problem and a paradox only insofar as one wishes to sustain the power and the authority to exclude and delimit in the name of the beautiful, i.e., the power and authority to control architecture. Hence, the preoccupation with the place and placing of ornamentation, with its marginalization or domestication, if only to sustain the pervasive and persuasive illusion of architecture as an autonomous aesthetic object, self-governing, self-regulating, and self-imposing.

Notes

- ¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* [1936] (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 19.
- ² John Unrau, *Looking At Architecture With Ruskin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 65.
- ³ Leone Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture* [c.1450], 1755 Leoni Edition, (New York: Transatlantic Arts Inc., 1966), p. 113. See also Leone Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor, trans. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 157.
- ⁴ Le Corbusier *Towards a New Architecture*, Frederick Etchells ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 102-103.
- ⁵ Leone Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, p.113.
- ⁶ See: two citations omitted for anonymity.
- ⁷ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol.1 (New York: J. Wiley, 1885), p. 400.
- ⁸ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol.1, (London: John Wiley & Son, 1855), p. 8.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* [1849] (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 15-16.
- ¹¹ Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, p. 399.
- ¹² Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, p. 70.
- ¹³ Ibid, pp. 70-71.
- ¹⁴ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol.1, p. 27.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 11.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 24.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 17.
- ¹⁸ Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, pp. 219-220.
- ¹⁹ Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, p. 104.
- ²⁰ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol.2, (London: John Wiley & Son, 1855), p. 45.
- ²¹ See Kristine Ottesen Garrigan, *Ruskin On Architecture: His Thought And Influence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), pp.137-210; Frederick Kirchoff, *John Ruskin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), pp. 41-60; George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 81-84, 135-37, 147-50, 162-63, 243-65; George P. Landow, *Ruskin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 10, 40, 48; Paul L. Sawyer, *Ruskin's Poetic Argument, The Design of the Major Works* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 84-85; John Unrau, *Looking At Architecture With Ruskin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 50; Gary Wihl, *Ruskin And The Rhetoric Of Infallibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 168-82. Also see Dinah Birch, *Ruskin's myths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Susan P. Casteras, *John Ruskin and the Victorian eye* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993); Sheila Emerson, *Ruskin: the genesis of invention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); C. Stephen Finley, *Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the art of the beholder* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Robert Hewison, *New approaches to Ruskin* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin : the argument of the eye* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).
- ²² Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, pp. 113-114.
- ²³ Ibid, p. 114.
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 115.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, p.236.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, p. 120.

³¹ Ibid, p. 130.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, p. 127.

³⁴ Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, p. 256-257.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 236-237.

³⁶ A building used as a model or precedent is as much a theoretical construct as any text labeled theoretical.