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On The Exorcise Of Theory

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Focusing on the influential 18th century text by Marc-Antoine Laugier - "Essay on Architecture" - what I trace in this essay is a certain affinity between ornamentation and theoretical writing on architecture. What I point out is that not only does theory play the same supplemental role with respect to its subject as ornamentation is said to play with respect to the aesthetic object, but also, the same paradoxes and inconsistencies that permeate the historic marginalization of ornamentation in architecture, permeate the self-marginalization of theoretical writing on architecture.

I.

At first glance, the place and role of theory in the field of architecture appears far from marginal. To theory, the field has historically delegated the crucial task of defining its parameters, setting forth a concise definition of its subject matter, and making a clear determination of what it is that the practitioners of the field must do. Re-assuming the burden of this responsibility at the outset of the Renaissance, Architectural theoreticians have since, in succession, made concerted efforts to isolate and mark, once and for all, the boundaries and the margins of the field and thereby separate its internal and inherent concerns from the marginal and the extraneous issues that are often said to encumber its progress. Considering the plurality of the attempts made as well as the considerable contextual differences between the various determinations, it is surprising that one finds a remarkable constancy in the extant definition of the parameters of the field through time.

We find a unique consensus among architectural theoreticians on the principles outlined by Vitruvius in the first century B.C., namely, that all buildings "must be built with due reference to durability, convenience, and beauty."¹ The consensus extends, in a peculiarly like-minded manner, to the greater importance of the third principle mandating all buildings to be beautiful. Of the three, beauty is consistently deemed the most important because it, in effect, is said to constitute the limits that separate the art of building - the proper subject of theoretical speculation - from mere building - considered a menial activity unworthy of theoretical pursuit. Alberti, for instance, emphasizing the fact that the principle of delight "is by much the most noble of all and very necessary besides," reasoned that "the having satisfied necessity is a very small matter, and the having provided for conveniency affords no manner of pleasure, where you are shocked by the deformity of the work."² Therefore, to prevent the shock of *deformity* - the shock that perpetually stands to reason the necessity of *beauty* in theoretical discourse on architecture - he concludes: "your whole care, diligence and expense, should all tend to this, that

whatever you build may be not only useful and convenient, but also ... delightful to the sight.”³ Le Corbusier was to express a similar sentiment nearly five hundred years and numerous reiterations later. “When a thing responds to a need,” he contended, “it is not beautiful; ... Architecture has another meaning and other ends to pursue than showing construction and responding to needs.”⁴ The “aim of architecture” as Le Corbusier put it, or rather the aim that is architecture insofar as this aim, this other ‘meaning’ or ‘end’ distinguishes architecture from mere building, is an absolute on whose definition there also appears to be a general consensus among the theoreticians of the field. This ‘end’ is, in the abstract, an unmitigated state of formal presence whose designate is an absence of need for addition or subtraction. John Ruskin summed up a unanimous sentiment among architectural theoreticians when he wrote “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.”⁵ The ‘end’ in every work of architecture, he concluded, is “a perfect creature capable of nothing less than it has, and needing nothing more.”⁶

The pursuit of this ‘end’ has historically determined not only the parameters of the field but also the parameters of architectural theory. Since the early Renaissance, the theoreticians of the field have devoted much time and effort to answering two questions: where to locate and how to procure the desired ‘end?’ The how, as we may well expect, has been a source of great dispute. On the other hand, the answer to where is, peculiarly enough, a virtual constant: the source of beauty is nature. In succession, the theoreticians of the field have turned to nature in search of an absolute whose mimesis is presumed to assure the fulfillment of their common aim. What these theoreticians propose to imitate, however, it is important to note, is not nature understood as a body of objects, but nature as “the greatest artist at all manner of composition.”⁷ This is the greatest artist whose work, nevertheless, is said to be regulated by a set of self-imposed rules and principles that collectively warrant the perfection of nature’s compositions. These are a set of constant, though secret laws that every theoretician in turn seeks to unravel and reveal.

It is perhaps needless to point out that the laws of nature have had nearly as varied an interpretation in this discourse as there have been theoreticians in the field. The ideal and the invariably natural composition to which nothing could be added or taken away without loss could not be any different, at times from one generation to the next. However, it is precisely these overwhelming differences in both the interpretation of the laws of nature and the way in which the ideal composition is circumscribed that make the constancy of the proposal to imitate nature ever more curious.

One implication of this constant proposal, the one that I wish to primarily focus on here, is that the ideal, the ‘aim,’ or the ‘end’ in the field is, by force of definition, always prefigured by nature. As innocuous a matter as this may seem, it has far reaching consequences for the perception of the role of theory. Since the subject of theoretical speculation - the absolute that constitutes and separates architecture from mere building - is presumed to always precede the discourse as a natural phenomenon, the task of theory,

as Laugier succinctly put it, is no more and no less than “to tear away the veil which covers it.”⁸ From Laugier’s torch to Ruskin’s lamps, light has been the prevalent metaphor for comprehending the task of writing on architecture. Theory is purported to do nothing other than to shed an insightful light on the eternal nature of a subject whose parameters each generation presumes hidden from the last due to blindness, ignorance, or sheer indolence.

Although the perception of theory as an act of *revelation* or *unmasking* of the concealed parameters of architecture may initially appear to give theory a central role in the field, in effect it marginalizes theory by reducing its role to a supplemental source of *light* shed from without on an otherwise autonomous subject. The prevalent perception of the relationship between architecture and theory is that of a sovereign subject, secure inside its inherent, natural parameters, to a subservient text that is said to contemplate, reveal, or unmask the subject from the outside.

The supplemental role theoretical discourse is said to play with respect to its subject is conspicuously similar to the role ornamentation is purported to play with respect to the aesthetic object. The relationship between these roles is what I wish to explore for the remainder of this work. I hope to demonstrate that it is not so much light as it is ornament and all the paradoxes and inconsistencies that permeate its historic marginalization in the field that best describe the task of architectural theory. What I also wish to point out is that it is through the marginalization and exclusion of ornamentation that theoretical discourse on architecture in effect denies its own role, or what amounts to same, safeguards the perception of its role as revelation and exposition.

II.

In the numerous attempts to edify or else unravel and reveal what can accept neither addition nor subtraction without loss, theoretical discourse on architecture characteristically encounters a dilemma in matters pertaining to ornamentation. From Alberti’s description of ornament as a ‘dress’ that covers the body beautiful,⁹ to Laugier’s description of it as all that “can be admitted or suppressed without changing the thing fundamentally,”¹⁰ to Ruskin’s definition of it as “things that may be taken away from the building, and not hurt it,”¹¹ to Robert Venturi’s view of architecture as a ‘Shed’ decorated with *explicit* ‘appliqué ornaments,’¹² ornamentation is purported never to be anything other than an external addition. In each instance, however, there is a tacit recognition of an aesthetic role for ornamentation. Hence the perplexing question that variously confronts the theoreticians of the field, namely, what to ascribe to and how to reconcile the aesthetic contribution of ornamentation, if the aim is to produce what can accept neither addition nor subtraction without loss?

To understand better the difficulty contingent upon the determination of the place and role of ornamentation - a determination that is inevitably linked to the determination of the parameters of the field and the task of theory - I propose to take a closer look at one

such attempt, namely, Marc-Antoine Laugier's discussion of beauty and ornamentation in "An Essay on Architecture."

III.

At the outset of his text, Laugier declares, as so many theoreticians before and after him, a certain deficiency in the field as justification for undertaking the task of writing. There is, Laugier contends, "no work as yet that firmly establishes the principles of architecture, explains its true spirit and proposes rules for guiding talent and defining taste."¹³ "Artists," including Vitruvius, have thus far avoided "the depth of theory," and followed "the road of practice" only to copy "the faults as scrupulously as the beauty" of "ancient buildings."¹⁴ "Lacking principles which would make them see the difference," Laugier contends, "they were bound to confound the two."¹⁵ This inordinate confounding, "so common although so pernicious and blind," has led architecture into a "chaotic state."¹⁶ "Everything now seems to threaten us with complete decadence."¹⁷ And this is all for want of theory.

In turn, to save architecture from "complete decadence" Laugier thrust himself into "the depth of theory," armed with the "torch of truth," with intent to "penetrate into the true mystery" of architecture.¹⁸ His aim, "in all modesty," is to "throw some ray of light" on the "fixed and unchangeable laws of architecture," and "to tear away the veil which covers" its "firm" and "clear principles."¹⁹ The motive is to give architects "infallible means to reach perfection" and "absolute beauty."²⁰ The latter are, per course, the 'definite objective' of architecture.

The crisis that calls for theory's intervention, it is important to note, is a crisis of sight. It is marked by an inability to see the difference between the 'good' and the 'bad,' which, Laugier believes, "produce two indelible qualities the essence of which neither length of time or prolonged habit can change or destroy."²¹ Given the nature of the crisis, in the mission to restore sight, Laugier's theory must play a double role. Although it is offered as a revelatory light, it also acts as a blunt instrument. It illuminates and it cuts. It reveals and it tears. If it brings order to a chaotic state, and leads from blindness to insight, it does by way of an incision that separates the beautiful from the faulty. It tears apart and reveals a *difference* between the good and the bad that is 'obscured' and indiscernible in the absence of theory. From the outset, this is to say, Laugier's rhetoric on the instrumentality of theory is caught between what he does and what he wishes to do: between incision and illumination, fabrication and revelation. We will return to this subject later.

On the road to beauty and perfection, where the 'depth of theory' leads Laugier is to the origin of architecture and the well known Rustic Hut. What emerges under the light of the "torch of truth" is a "rough sketch which nature offers us" and what "all the splendors of architecture ever conceived have been modeled on."²² It is by approaching "the simplicity of this first model," Laugier contends, "that fundamental mistakes are avoided

and true perfection is achieved.”²³ It is, in other words, with recourse to nature’s gift that Laugier, as so many theoreticians before and after him, redraws or else re-illuminates the ‘obscured’ parameters of the field, tearing away and separating what is essential from what is faulty or inconsequential. From now on, he contends:

it is easy to distinguish between the parts that are essential to the composition of an architectural Order and those which have been introduced by necessity or have been added by caprice. The parts that are essential are the cause of beauty, the parts introduced by necessity cause every license, the parts added by caprice cause every fault.²⁴

In an architectural Order, Laugier goes on to argue, “only the column, the entablature and the pediment may form an essential part of its composition.” “If each of these parts is suitably placed and suitably formed, nothing else need be added to make the work perfect.”²⁵ Furthermore, the column, the entablature, and the pediment should be “applied in such a way that they not only adorn but actually constitute the building. The existence of the building must depend so completely on the union of these parts that not a single one could be taken away without the whole building collapsing.”²⁶

Whereas the theoreticians of the Renaissance, within the bounds of their own particular world view, hoped to procure the ideal composition to which nothing could be added or taken away without the loss of perfection with recourse to numbers and proportions, Laugier hopes to accomplish the same in the Age of Reason with recourse to the logic of the essentials. Having, within the confines of *reason*, brought to light the perfect and the beautiful composition the “taste” for which, he tells us, is “natural to everybody,” and having in the process taken away from architecture “much that is superfluous” and stripped it “of a lot of trash of which its ornamentation commonly consists,” what remains is, Laugier informs us, to make use of art’s “recourses to embellish, smooth and polish” the “rough sketch that nature offers us,” without “touching the substance of the plan.”²⁷ The task of the architect is not complete, in other words, with the institution of the essentials. Once the essentials are in place, they must be embellished, smoothed, and polished. Having stripped architecture down to the bare essentials, the architect must redress it once again with a discriminating eye. This latter task falls under the heading: ornamentation or all that “one can make use of or cut out without the essence of the architectural Order being affected.”²⁸

Considering that “the parts that are essential are the cause of beauty,” and the parts that are not “cause every fault,” we may wonder what is or of what use is this embellishment or ornamentation that “can be admitted or suppressed without changing the thing fundamentally?” Why, in the first place, admit what is neither essential nor fundamental and can thus be and by its very *nature*, one suspects, should be set aside as all else non-fundamental or non-essential? Also, if admitted, where do ornaments fit? In or around the rough sketch that nature offers us?

The point and purpose of ornamentation, Laugier tells us, is to “embellish and vary everything.” Ornaments bring “variety” to architecture and it is this “pleasing variety”

that makes “the charm of decoration.”²⁹ As the agent of variation and contrast, ornaments are, in a manner, infinite. Each architectural element from a column to an entire building can assume an ornamental role in a wider context. This is insofar as the element in question is ornamented, that is, insofar as ornamentation has made it different from other similar elements, allowing it, in turn, to bring variety to its wider context.³⁰ Every architectural element can be ornamented and assume an ornamental role because ornamentation does not point so much to a body of forms as to a process of distinction and individualization of form. To ornament, is to differentiate and individualize.

Although ornaments are, in a manner, infinite, Laugier argues that there are in general and essentially two types of ornaments: the ‘true’ and the ‘false.’ True ornaments are those that appear additive and dispensable. A case in point is the Corinthian capital, the inventor of which, Laugier informs us, “has wisely made the curves very perceptible so that one cannot doubt that they are here as an ornament only.”³¹ Bad ornaments, on the other hand, are those surrounding whose presence as ‘an ornament only’ there can be an element of doubt. A case in point is the pilaster, that though superfluous, may appear otherwise, e.g., appear to bear load. Needless to say that it is only the ornaments that appear distinctly dispensable that are lawful.

Dispensable as ornaments are obliged to appear in an architecture that owes its perfection to the essentials, readily dispensable, it turns out, ornaments are not. “Whoever does not vary our pleasure,” Laugier contends, “will not succeed in pleasing us.”³² Since variation, the ‘love’ of which is an ‘inherent taste,’ is formed through decoration, it follows that whoever pleases us has already had recourse to ornamentation. The site of pleasure is an ornamented site. The cause of pleasure in an edifice is, however, Laugier insists, its beauty. The “cause of beauty” are the parts that are essential because to what is composed of the essentials, so it was argued, “nothing else need be added to make the work perfect.”³³ To please, however, the essentials must be ornamented, that is, they must be added to! To be pleasing, the essentials should require no addition!? We have, in other words, a paradox at hand, the history of which takes us back to the inception the essentials. In response to an objection raised by his critics, Laugier writes:

The only reason brought up against the proved relation between our buildings and the rustic hut is that we should be allowed to move a little away from this course and shapeless invention. We have, indeed, moved far away from it through the *grand gout* of the decoration which we have put in place of the careless faults of such crude composition, but the essential must remain - the rough sketch which nature offers us. Art must make use of its resources to embellish, smooth and polish the work without touching the substance of the plan.³⁴

There is a deficiency in origin. The embodiment of all that is ‘good’ and ‘perfect’ in architecture, the model of all “the splendors of architecture ever conceived,” is in need of addition. The “careless faults” of this “crude composition” need be eradicated “through the *grand gout* of the decoration” put in their place “to embellish, smooth and polish the work without touching the substance.”³⁵ Although, in place of its ‘careless faults’ nature’s ‘shapeless invention’ must admit an addition, what is admitted is not, it is important to

note, admitted in. The addition is never assimilated. It remains external to the “rough sketch which nature offers us.” In fact, it is admitted only on condition of appearing as a dispensable external addition: an ‘ornament only.’ Though ornament is added by default to take the place of a fault, the place it is given to take is not *in* the ‘rough sketch’ but *around* it. There, “without touching the substance,” not unlike a frame to an unframed sketch, it is given to embellish, smooth and polish the work, and in the process form an equation that is as paradoxical as it is unavoidable: imperfection + ornament = perfection + ornament.

The ‘essential,’ as Laugier insists, ‘must remain’ and remain ‘untouched.’ It must remain because it is only with recourse to it that Laugier distinguishes between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ in architecture. It must remain ‘untouched’ because to touch it, to add or subtract from it, is to remove its power of exclusion. To remain and retain its authority, the ‘essential’ must accept an addition by default. To remain ‘untouched,’ the needed addition must appear as ‘an ornament only.’ In other words, if the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ are to be told apart, the needed ornamental addition must be exorcised and chased beyond the boundaries of the ‘essential’ as an inessential and superfluous addition that can either be ‘admitted’ or ‘suppressed.’ Yet, where beyond the essentials should ornament be chased? This is to ask beyond which boundary that is not already the work of ornamentation or decoration? Where is the rim, the periphery, or boundary separating the beautiful from the ugly, the sufficient from the deficient, the perfect from the imperfect, before ornament is ‘added’ to embellish smooth and polish? The ramifications of this question are grave because the parameters at issue are the very parameters that separate architecture from mere building, the beautiful edifice from the deficient construct, and ultimately the theoretical text from the subject it is said to contemplate and reveal from a distance.

The ‘essential,’ Laugier insists, can do with or without the addition, for what is added is not added to the center. The ‘thing’ is, it is said, fundamentally unchanged by the addition, because what is missing is not missing from the center. What need be added, need only be added to smooth and polish the rim. The fault, in other words, lies on the border. What is missing is missing from the rim. Ornament, therefore, in consequence of the place it takes is of no consequence. It is only a marginal addition or an addition to the margins that could be dispensed with while retaining the center.

The inessential, however, is also essential, because the fault that calls for addition lies not on the border, but rather is the border. What is missing is the rim itself. There is, before ornamentation, only imperfection. The border beyond which the imperfect can be cast as the opposite of the perfect is nowhere to be identified before decoration is added to complete it. The condition of delimitation and of differentiation is ornamentation. The beauty of the ‘essential,’ by Laugier’s own account, can only please after decoration. Decorated, however, the perfect can no longer exact the authority needed to exclude the ‘bad’ as an imperfect other in need of addition. Ornamented, the perfect is already in the position of the imperfect, because if ornament adds it also subtracts. If it completes, it

also points to a deficiency in that to which it is added to complete. What Laugier gains by ornamentation, he has already lost to decoration.

To satisfy the 'inborn taste' for 'variety' Laugier must allow of ornamentation. To satisfy the "taste for true beauty" that is "natural to everybody," Laugier must separate and exclude the ornamental from the body beautiful of which ornament is neither a part nor apart from. The ornamental, however, can only be excluded as a 'superfluous' addition beyond the border of the beautiful. This essential border, however, Laugier told us at the outset of his text, is missing, or rather, as he put it, is hidden behind "the veil that covers it."³⁶ Therefore, to detach the ornamental from the 'essential,' Laugier must first *unveil*, *reveal*, or *disclose* the border of the beautiful. He must first bring order to a 'chaotic state,' where the 'indelible' difference between the 'good' and the 'bad' cannot be, or as he insists, can *no longer* be deciphered. To this end, Laugier adds what is 'lacking' in the state of chaos. He adds a theoretical text that purportedly by way of discovery and not invention, revelation and not construction "firmly establishes the principles of architecture, explains its true spirit and proposes rules for guiding talent and defining taste."³⁷ In other words, to reveal the border of the beautiful beyond which the ornamental can be cast as addition, Laugier must make yet another ornamental addition. He must add a revealing theoretical text that is already in the position of that which it exorcises as 'ornament only.' Added to take the place of what is 'lacking' in the subject and must be filled as the condition of delimitation and differentiation, the theoretical addition denies Laugier precisely what it provides him. The beautiful never appears in this text without an addition which is tantamount to not appearing at all - be the subtractive addition ornamental or theoretical. To prevent the theoretical text from becoming the very paradox it is meant to resolve, the theoretical text, in turn, must itself be exorcised as an 'ornament only' for the same reason that ornament must be exorcised from the body beautiful.

To satisfy the desire for perfection which is tantamount to having the privilege of exclusion and delimitation, for having the privilege of "guiding talent and defining taste,"³⁸ all the cultural and political consequences of the privilege withstanding, Laugier must, once again, place the needed textual addition outside the 'thing' it is added to by placing the 'thing' outside the theoretical text. Hence, Laugier tells us that if the theoretical text is added, it is added only to *unveil*. As addition, Laugier tells us, the text serves only to *reveal* what is present as such outside the theoretical text and independent of the textual revelation or 'ornamentation.' Theory serves only to *disclose* the true nature of architecture or a truly *natural architecture* enclosed as a self-sufficient presence "independent of mental habit and human prejudice"³⁹ outside the theoretical text within the boundaries of a self-referential, self-enclosing entity designated by the name *nature*. Theory is therefore an ornament only, added to unveil only. This frame of thought could not place theory, has not placed it otherwise. Nevertheless, what theory discloses, if it could be said to disclose anything, is only an endless frame-up. What theory reveals, if it could be said to *reveal* anything, is not a sovereign subject outside the theoretical text, but a delimitation of the subject within the text. The demarcation of borderlines in effect

frames and defines the subject after the fact, by supplying what is missing and missed in the subject from the outset, that is, a pre-determined, natural margin or borderline. This is the paradox in theoretical speculation on architecture. The insightful light that theory is said to shed over its subject is accompanied by a blinding shadow cast over its own operation. By assuming an ambivalent supplemental role *vis-a-vis* its subject, that is by reducing its own operation to an act of revelation, theory insures the truth value of what it purports to only be revealing. What theory promises at the outset, however, it denies in the end. The sovereign subject as such never appears before, or for that matter after, that external ornamental addition which is theory.

Endnotes

- 1 Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, Translated by Morris Hicky Morgan, New York, Dover Publications, 1960, Book I, Chapter III, p.17
- 2 Leone Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, 1755 Leoni Edition, Translated by James Leoni, New York, Transatlantic Arts Inc., 1966, Book VI, Chapter II, p.112
- 3 Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Book VI, Chapter II, p.113
The emphasis on beauty is peculiar to the Western architectural discourse as it is not found - not by the same definition, at any rate - in other discursive traditions. Two prominent examples are the Indian and the Chinese traditions. This is not to imply that there is no regulative process in these other examples, but that the criteria used for restricting and regulating architectural practice in these other examples differs markedly from those in the West.
- 4 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Translated by Frederick Etchells, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960, pp.102-103
- 5 John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 1, New York, Merrill and Baher, 1897, p.400
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Book IX, Chapter V, p. 195
- 8 Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, translated by Wolfgang and Annie Hermman, Los Angeles: Hennesey & Ingalls Inc., 1977, p.2
- 9 Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Book IX, Chapter VIII, p.203
- 10 Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, p.152
- 11 Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 1, p.400
- 12 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1972, p.114
- 13 Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, p.1
- 14 Ibid., p.2
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., p.107

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- 17 Ibid., p.9
 - 18 Ibid., p.2
 - 19 Ibid., p.3
 - 20 Ibid.
 - 21 Ibid., P.22
 - 22 Ibid., p.12
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Ibid.
 - 25 Ibid., p.13
 - 26 Ibid., p.152
 - 27 Ibid., p.14
 - 28 Ibid., p.152
 - 29 Ibid., p.131
 - 30 Ibid., p.53

Different ornaments, for instance, give us the different capitals. Each capital is an ornament to the column. The columns and entablatures give us the ‘pleasing variety’ of the five Orders by virtue of their distinct ‘ornamentation’ or ‘decoration.’ The Orders themselves which, of the main three, Laugier says: “simplicity is the share of the Doric, gentleness distinguishes the Ionic” and “noble grace belongs to the Corinthian” bring variation and contrast to the different parts of the building. The ornamented parts decorate the building; buildings decorates the street; streets decorate the town, and so on.

- 32 Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, p.129
- 33 Ibid., p.13
- 34 Ibid., pp.13-14
- 35 Ibid., p.14
- 36 Ibid., p.2
- 37 Ibid., p.1
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid., p.22

