

## **'They cannot choose but look': Ruskin and Emotional Architecture**

Katherine Wheeler

To honour John Ruskin's death in 1900, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) published an article by Robert Kerr (1823–1904) titled 'Ruskin and Emotional Architecture'. Kerr, a leading architecture professor as well as practitioner, credited Ruskin with creating an awareness of architecture's emotional intensity. Although not an architect and often at odds with the profession, Ruskin was, as Kerr points out, 'an emotional enjoyer of design achieved by others'.<sup>1</sup> This emotional enjoyment came primarily through viewing the architecture as the product of a man's own emotional input in his craft. This article explores how Ruskin's concept of emotion was central to his definition of architecture and how architects such as George Aitchison (1825–1910) not only acknowledged an emotional connection but strived for it.

Ruskin published two major works on architecture, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–52), both of which are laden with emotion. Even in one of his first publications, 'The Poetry of Architecture', serialized in 1837 in John Loudon's *Architectural Magazine*, Ruskin begins with the notion of 'the science of feeling', a connection between the visual and the mental experience of architecture: in other words, a building's emotional content.<sup>2</sup> He also lectured extensively on architecture, including, among others, the Edinburgh Lectures in 1853 and a lecture at the Architectural Association in 1857. Ruskin's views on architecture were complex, and he often contradicted himself over the course of his life, even condemning his early writings.<sup>3</sup> Architecture as an art was critical to Ruskin because it had the possibility of impacting all who came in contact with it over the course of many generations, long outliving those who built it. Ruskin advised architects and artisans to take

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Robert Kerr, 'Ruskin and Emotional Architecture', *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*, 10 March 1900, pp. 181–86 (p. 184).

<sup>2</sup> 'The Poetry of Architecture', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, 39 vols (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), 1: *Early Prose Writings* (1903), pp. 1–188 (p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> John Unrau, *Looking at Architecture with John Ruskin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 155.

care in the emotions that their work held because ‘all the world will hear you; they cannot choose but look’.<sup>4</sup>

The first part of this article provides a context for the concept of emotion in architecture with a review of the architectural profession in the nineteenth century, before turning to the writings on emotion by Ruskin and Aitchison. Ruskin’s writings were from outside the profession, and many of his ideas were discarded by architects as not suitable to the practice of architecture. But the writings of Aitchison, along with Kerr’s obituary, reveal that Ruskin’s words had made an impact, as emotion was considered central to the art of architecture.

### The architectural profession in nineteenth-century Britain

For architects, the nineteenth century was a period of dramatic and irrevocable change, and it is in this context that Ruskin’s writings must be seen. The architectural historian J. Mordaunt Crook describes this period as one which saw the ‘fragmentation’ of the architect into the surveyor, designer, builder, and engineer.<sup>5</sup> The architect then was faced with the problems of defining what he was responsible for in the building process and his status on the job site. Many architects sought a professional status equal to lawyers and doctors, which meant changes in the way they learned and practised. Pupillage, the apprenticeship to a master for seven years, was the primary means of education at the beginning of the century but was gradually replaced by new university degree programmes. Professional organizations such as RIBA, specialized publications such as the *Builder*, and membership examinations for RIBA (established in 1863) all became a means by which architects could ‘certify’ their knowledge and status.<sup>6</sup> There was no official means of certification other than the RIBA membership examination until Parliament passed the 1931 Registration Act.<sup>7</sup> The lack of certification of architects in the first half of the nineteenth century was problematic because it meant that anyone could call themselves an architect, and the profession became riddled with fraud and incompetence.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Influence of Imagination in Architecture’, from *The Two Paths*, in *Works of Ruskin*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, xvi: *A Joy Forever and The Two Paths* (1905), pp. 346–74 (p. 369).

<sup>5</sup> J. Mordaunt Crook, ‘The Pre-Victorian Architect: Professionalism and Patronage’, *Architectural History*, 12 (1969), 62–78 (p. 62).

<sup>6</sup> For analysis of the process of professionalism, see Barrington Kaye, *The Development of the Architectural Profession in Britain: A Sociological Study* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Crinson and Jules Lubbock, *Architecture — Art or Profession?: Three Hundred Years of Architectural Education in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 184. Parliament passed the Registration Act for architects in 1931, while the US had instituted professional architectural licensure c. 1897.

In 1849 the architect John Burley Waring (1823–1875) declared: ‘In no occupation are there more quacks than in architecture.’<sup>8</sup> The architect’s official status was also in confusion. Between 1851 and 1881 the architect’s class in the census reports shifted twice — from artist or builder in 1851, to artisan in 1861, to a fine artist within the professional class by 1881.<sup>9</sup> The issues raised by these shifts in the architect’s classification were at the heart of Ruskin’s concerns about the profession — that it had distanced itself from the actual crafting of a building.

Victorian architects also had to address the introduction of new materials such as iron, the mass production of familiar materials including bricks and glass that revolutionized how architecture was constructed, and new systems such as plumbing, gas, and eventually electricity. The rise of the general contractor and the process of bidding for jobs (known as tendering) changed the requirements of what architects had to produce in terms of drawings and specifications and led to the rise of a new class of draughtsmen.<sup>10</sup> The incorporation of new materials increased the prominence of the engineer, as architects tried to define themselves as artists in contrast to the more scientific engineer.<sup>11</sup> New construction of housing, schools, and commercial buildings struggled to meet growing demand and pressure from the growth in population, particularly in industrial cities.<sup>12</sup>

Add to this professional turmoil architects’ obsession with style, and it quickly becomes clear how difficult the practice of architecture was in nineteenth-century Britain. Ruskin’s writings, along with those of A. W. N. Pugin (1812–1852), promoted the Gothic as the preferred model for a contemporary architecture, which was a purposeful turning away from the classical style of architects such as Charles Barry, who designed the Reform Club (1837) on Pall Mall, London. The conflict came to a head in 1858 with the ‘Battle of the Styles’ when Parliament debated whether classical or Gothic would be better for the new Foreign Office building. Although the architect George Gilbert Scott (1811–1878) had been placed third in the competition with a Gothic Revival scheme, Lord Palmerston

<sup>8</sup> J. B. Waring, ‘The Diploma Question’, *Builder*, 24 November 1849, pp. 559–60 (p. 560).

<sup>9</sup> *The Census of Great Britain in 1851* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854), pp. 122, 125. See also Kaye, Population Tables II, I, pp. lxxxvii, 173.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent discussion of the changes on the building site during the nineteenth century, see Brian Hanson, *Architects and the ‘Building World’ from Chambers to Ruskin: Constructing Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); also, Sir John Summerson, *The Turn of the Century: Architecture in Britain around 1900*, W. A. Cargill Memorial Lectures in Fine Art, 5 (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Saint, *Architect and Engineer: A Study in Sibling Rivalry* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> C. G. Powell, *An Economic History of the British Building Industry 1815–1979* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 45–48.

(1784–1865; Prime Minister 1855–58, 1859–65) coerced him to make the design more ‘Italian’.<sup>13</sup> By the completion of G. E. Street’s Law Courts (1882), on the Strand, London, the Gothic Revival had already begun to wane.

Ruskin’s influence in these decades changed as architects drew different ideas from his writings. As the historian Michael Brooks points out in *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture*, in the 1850s and 1860s, when Ruskin’s works on architecture were first published, they became fodder for Gothic Revivalists interested in the historical architectural elements that he recommended for study.<sup>14</sup> With the waning of the Gothic Revival and the rise of the Renaissance revival and eclecticism, architects became more interested in Ruskin for his ideas concerning the craftsman and the incorporation of sculpture in architecture.<sup>15</sup> The focus on craft and the artistic freedom of the artisan were in part a rebellion against the impact of the Industrial Revolution on architecture, blossoming into the Arts and Crafts Movement and the formation of groups such as the Art Workers’ Guild in 1884. These groups saw the industrialization and mechanization of construction labour as a direct threat to architecture as an art, and they fought for the integration of the arts and crafts into architectural practice and education. The one constant, as Brooks notes, is the thread of emotional investment and reaction to architecture in Ruskin’s writings, which remained influential throughout the century (p. 334).

Scholarship on Ruskin’s ideas about architecture addresses several aspects of the relationship between emotion and architecture. Eve Blau’s *Ruskinian Gothic* looks closely at Ruskin’s involvement in the design of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.<sup>16</sup> An evocative mixture of craft and industry, the building’s ornament was carved by the O’Shea brothers and provided a contrast to the ferro-vitreous exhibition hall at its centre. The ornament was intended to reflect not only nature’s beauty and complexity but also the aesthetic freedom of the craftsman. The project was not an easy one with all the strong personalities involved, including Ruskin, and is still unfinished with blank bosses on the front facade where carving was not completed. In Blau’s study, emotion is discussed in the context of the often petty tensions between the main figures involved

<sup>13</sup> M. H. Port, *Imperial London: Civil Government Building in London 1850–1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 161–79, 198–210, 252–58; and Ian Toplis, *The Foreign Office: An Architectural History* (London: Mansell, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Michael W. Brooks, *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 325–26.

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the Renaissance revival in Great Britain, see Katherine Wheeler, *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Eve Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic: The Architecture of Deane and Woodward, 1845–1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

in the construction and fundraising process: Ruskin, Sir Henry Acland (1815–1900), the O’Shea brothers, and the architects.

In contrast, John Unrau analyses the keen observational skills evident in Ruskin’s drawings and descriptions of architecture (p. 19). The drawings and writings are the means by which Ruskin documents not only the specific ornament or detail but the mood or emotion that he receives from it. For Ruskin, it was the ornament, as opposed to the building’s overall structure or form that distinguished architecture from mere building. Ornament was the vehicle by which architecture conveyed emotion, hence his careful study of its use and design, as well as his concern regarding the labourer who created it.

For many Victorian architects, however, Ruskin’s ideas went against the prevailing trend of professionalism. Kerr, as a lifelong critic of Ruskin, consistently opposed, even mocked, Ruskin’s theories. After an 1865 lecture by Ruskin to the RIBA, Kerr noted that Ruskin’s ideas were impractical in the real world of architectural practice. He asserted that ‘he could not help thinking that if they were to set Mr. Ruskin up as an architect in an office in Whitehall, and give him plenty of work to do, he would change his opinion’.<sup>17</sup> In other words, poetry and theory were all well and good for a writer, but not for a busy architect who had projects on the boards.

Both Kerr and Ruskin were critics of the profession, albeit on different sides. Kerr promoted increased professionalism and was fundamental in the early movement towards formalized architectural education with his role in establishing the Architectural Association in 1847, for which he served as its first president.<sup>18</sup> Kerr was also a well-respected architect known for his country houses: in particular, Bearwood, an extraordinary house designed in 1864 for John Walter III, politician and proprietor of *The Times*. He propelled his knowledge of practice into publication with *The Gentleman’s House* (1864) and *The Consulting Architect: Practical Notes on Administrative Difficulties* (1886).<sup>19</sup>

Kerr was also a frequent contributor to the architectural press, including a series of short articles in the *Builder*, titled ‘Architecturus to His Son’ in which he simultaneously spoofs and critiques Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps*. Kerr redefines Ruskin’s lamps as Art, Delineation, Science, Building,

<sup>17</sup> ‘The Study of Architecture in Our Schools’, in *Works of Ruskin*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, XIX: *The Cestus of Aglaia and The Queen of the Air* (1905), pp. 19–40 (p. 39, n. 5).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kerr, *The Newleaf Discourses on the Fine Art Architecture: An Attempt to Talk Rationally on the Subject* (London: Weale, 1846). See also, John Summerson, *The Architectural Association, 1847–1947* (London: Architectural Association, 1947).

<sup>19</sup> Kent Bloomer, ‘Robert Kerr: Architect of Bearwood’, in *Architects’ People*, ed. by Russell Ellis and Dana Cuff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 130–45.

Learning, Teaching, and Making a Living.<sup>20</sup> Although Kerr's 'lamps' lit a path for architecture as a profession, he begins the series by reinforcing architecture's position as Art, stating straight off that 'the Architect is an artist'. Kerr's interpretation of an artistic architecture focuses on architecture's ability to create beauty, to which the 'science' of architecture — i.e. the structure, materials, systems, etc. — was 'the servant'. Science was the intellect that supported art, and art was the conveyor of emotion.

Kerr was not the only architect to disagree with Ruskin. Many disparaged Ruskin's anti-professional stance, his preference for the Gothic style, and his lack of enthusiasm for iron, the new material that forever changed architectural tectonic expression (Wheeler, pp. 25–30). There was, however, a curious silence from the professional side regarding his publications. An 1853 article in the *Builder* asked whether 'Mr Ruskin [is] to be allowed to fling his fire-brands, and hurl his venomous missiles [. . .] without opposition or contradiction?'.<sup>21</sup> A few architects did speak out, one going so far as to call him an enemy of the profession.<sup>22</sup> An architect writing under the pseudonym Zeta avows that *The Seven Lamps* was a 'decidedly silly' book, and that the ideas of 'Pope Ruskin', as he calls him, were 'ultra-revolutionary, and will put down almost all that is now in vogue', that is, professionalism and iron.<sup>23</sup> Architects' criticism of Ruskin typically did not, however, attack his idea of architecture as a vehicle for emotion.

Ruskin had his followers among architects, and John Pollard Seddon (1827–1906) defended Ruskin against Kerr's attacks in lectures and essays (Brooks, p. 229). Other architects assimilated different aspects of Ruskin's ideas, creating buildings that came to be called 'Ruskinian', which in turn had several different iterations. Brooks carefully outlines the various levels of these influences, showing how architects shaped Ruskin's ideas to fit the needs at hand (p. 179). Men such as Benjamin Woodward (1816–1861), G. E. Street (1824–1881), William Richard Lethaby (1857–1931), and John Dando Sedding (1838–1891), to name just a few, embraced different aspects of Ruskin's vision of what architecture should be and how it should be constructed. These architects were part of the profession while still at times fighting against increased professionalization.

<sup>20</sup> K., 'Architecturus to His Son', *Builder*, 8 November 1851, pp. 700–02. For the full sequence of Kerr's 'Lamps', see *Builder*, 22 November 1851, pp. 731–32; 6 December 1851, p. 764; 13 December 1851, pp. 780–81; 3 January 1852, pp. 3–4; 24 January 1852, pp. 50–52; and 6 March 1852, pp. 148–49. For comparison, Ruskin's lamps are: Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory, and Obedience.

<sup>21</sup> Z., 'Ruskin, the Reformer of Taste and Architecture', *Builder*, 13 August 1853, p. 518.

<sup>22</sup> An Architect, *Something on Ruskinism; with a 'Vestibule' in Rhyme* (London: Hastings, 1851), p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Zeta, 'The New Philosophy of Architecture', *Builder*, 17 May 1851, p. 312.

### Emotion in architecture

Emotion could be part of architecture at three different stages: in the design by the architect; in the production by craftsmen; and, finally, in its reception by the public. In Ruskin's writings for architects — *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and his 1857 lecture at the Architectural Association, in particular — he identifies both the design and the craft of architecture as the points where emotion can be instilled in the building. To experience architecture as a viewer was therefore to experience the range of emotions of all those involved in its production. What emotion was felt and transferred was also critical for Ruskin — was it honourable and suited to architecture's place in society? Or was it inappropriate and leading society astray?

The transference of emotion would not have been a foreign idea to Victorians, as a century before the Scottish philosopher and writer David Hume (1711–1776) proposed the connection of reason and feeling with the transference of emotion from one person to another.<sup>24</sup> Hume asserts that the 'passions', as he calls them, were 'contagious' and had an almost autonomous ability to move from person to person. At the same time, Edmund Burke (1730–1797) was exploring the ability of architecture to incite emotions associated with the sublime, creating a new aesthetic goal in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). In the late 1850s Alexander Bain developed some of these ideas in *The Emotions and the Will*.<sup>25</sup> A combination of these ideas may have led to the concept of the transference of emotion from person to object, and the subsequent retrieval of that emotion by a viewer at any later point in time.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ruskin asserted architecture's 'continual influence over the emotions of daily life'.<sup>27</sup> He believed that the buildings around him affected him as they projected emotions back out into the world for the public to receive. Architecture was rife with feelings and values that had been instilled during the process of construction. This embedding of emotions was what made architecture an art.<sup>28</sup> For Ruskin,

<sup>24</sup> Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). See also, Wayne Waxman, 'Hume, David (1711–1776)', in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Donald M. Borchert, 2nd edn, 10 vols (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), iv, 504.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 2nd edn (London: Longmans, Green, 1865), p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> There is currently a revival of interest in the effects of architecture on emotion, particularly in healthcare design. See, for example, Esther M. Sternberg, *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> *Works of Ruskin*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, viii: *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1903), p. 251.

<sup>28</sup> In her chapter on Ruskin and 'Photographic Emotion', Anne-Marie Millim notes that 'the truth of art could only be seized by the emotionally roused observer's

the problem lay in both the fixing of ‘affections’ to the wrong things or in not making the architecture vivid enough to communicate the affections to others.<sup>29</sup>

Ruskin understood architecture as an art, albeit a lesser art than painting and sculpture; and, as an art, emotion was central in both its creation and its reception. Each of Ruskin’s seven lamps held a quality that could either hinder or facilitate the architecture’s emotional impact. Sacrifice, for example, was ‘a devotional feeling’ that was ‘wholly wanting’ in contemporary architecture.<sup>30</sup> This deficiency was in part because true sacrifice required greater economic — as well as emotional — investment. In a period in which a building’s construction was now being awarded to the contractor with the lowest bid, Ruskin’s notion of sacrifice went against the professional grain. To practise architecture as Ruskin proposed meant that an architect must take fewer projects as he would be more involved in the work on-site. Ruskin felt the lack of sacrifice greatest in religious buildings, where shortcuts were taken and where parishioners spent money with greater freedom on their luxurious homes, creating happiness for one as opposed to happiness for all.

In the preface to the second edition of *The Seven Lamps* (1855), Ruskin added a brief commentary on what he had come to conclude were the four primary types of feeling associated with architecture: Sentimental Admiration, Proud Admiration, Workmanly Admiration, and Artistic Admiration (*Works*, VIII, 7–11). His descriptions lay the groundwork for the importance of painting and sculpture in architecture, as they are the elements of the building which stimulate emotion. Ruskin gives the example that Sentimental Admiration is the type of reaction brought about by experiencing a grand cathedral at night by torchlight when the whole of it could not be perceived at once, similar to Burke’s elements of the sublime. Most people, Ruskin thought, have the ability to experience Sentimental Admiration, but he does not consider this response to be of ‘the higher merits of architecture’, because Sentimental Admiration is a pure emotional reaction with little intellect involved. Proud Admiration is the feeling evoked when looking at a grand building with which the viewer has some affiliation, such as being its owner. Ruskin notes that these buildings are often symmetrical — i.e. classical — and are ‘invariably associated with vulgarity and narrowness of mind’ (VIII, 9). Architects should not strive for this emotional reaction, because its association with the wealthy

---

response’, which in turn ‘determined the cultural value’ of the object. See Anne-Marie Millim, *The Victorian Diary: Authorship and Emotional Labour* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 109.

<sup>29</sup> ‘The Stones of Venice, vol. III’, in *Works of Ruskin*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn IX: *The Stones of Venice, vol. III and Examples of the Architecture of Venice* (1904), pp. 1–307 (p. 68).

<sup>30</sup> *Works of Ruskin*, VIII, 30; Kerr, ‘Ruskin and Emotional Architecture’, p. 184.



makes it not admirable to the poor. Workmanly Admiration might be exhibited in the accomplishment of a mason's finely proportioned details and mouldings, which could be appreciated independently of the quality of the building overall. Good craftsmanship, Ruskin recognized, did not automatically equal a good building, even if it could elicit a positive emotional response.

Finally, Artistic Admiration is a reaction to the sculpture and 'colour' that adorn a building. It is this form of admiration for which architects should strive, even though it requires the realization that the building itself is 'subordinate to' the painting and sculpture. In other words, it was not the architect's work that created an appropriate emotional reaction, but the artist's. To admire was to connect the viewer to the craftsman or artist through the artwork, no matter how long ago the structure was built or the ornament carved. But 'the architect who was not a sculptor or painter, was nothing better than a framemaker on a large scale' (*Works*, VIII, 10). The architect must be an artist, otherwise he was merely making the frame which would hold the real art of the building, that part which roused an emotional response. Ruskin saw these four modes of admiration to be important enough to the reading of *The Seven Lamps* that he included them in the 1880 edition as an appendix titled 'The Four Modes of Admiration'.<sup>31</sup>

In his inspiring and sobering 1857 lecture to the Architectural Association, 'The Influence of the Imagination in Architecture', Ruskin outlines the duties of the architect and the limitations of architecture, including its emotional aspects. He rallied the audience of young men by proclaiming that a 'peculiar importance, and responsibility, are attached to your work, when you consider its permanence, and the multitudes to whom it is addressed' (*Works*, XVI, 368). To succeed, therefore, an architect needed three things: sympathy with his fellow men, imagination, and 'industry' (XVI, 346). Sympathy for Ruskin was the 'power of sharing in the feelings of living creatures' (XVI, 355). This emotional connection was not just to his fellow man, but to all living beings as part of nature.

The architectural example that Ruskin gives is that of Amiens Cathedral. Looking only at the cathedral's doorway, he asks the audience: 'Have you ever considered how much sympathy and how much humour, are developed in filling this single doorway[?]' (*Works*, XVI, 356). He notes that the architect must have closely observed human nature to depict the 'disputing monks', the 'puzzled aldermen', the 'melancholy recluse', and the 'triumphant prelate' (XVI, 357). Gothic architecture, he stresses, because

<sup>31</sup> Although Ruskin never directly connected the pathetic fallacy to architecture in the third volume of *Modern Painters*, it is possible that the concept was percolating in his mind when he wrote the preface on the Four Modes of Admiration for the second edition of *The Seven Lamps*. In both cases Ruskin's concern is with the connection between emotion's role in perception and the creation of art.

of its integration of sculpture as an inherent part of the design, should serve as an example for young architects on how they could incorporate art, and thereby emotion, in architecture.

The reception of architecture, as opposed to music, was larger in scope and took place over a longer period of time. Unlike music, which had the power to convey a full range of emotions, architecture is more limited in terms of this ability: sound can ‘express the depth of all affections’, but a ‘group of lines’, as he describes architecture, could not (*Works*, xvi, 350, 351). His criticism is focused on classical architecture, which is founded on a system of proportions based on the diameter of a column that prescribes the size and placement of almost every aspect of the overall form and the ornamental details of the building. As an assemblage of lines and proportion systems, classically inspired architecture was all intellect and no feeling and therefore could not reach the emotional depth of the other arts, such as music. Ruskin asked the audience of young men:

Do you not suppose the front of Whitehall, a singularly beautiful one, ever inspires the two Horse Guards, during the hour they sit opposite to it, with military ardour? Do you think that the lovers in our London walk down to the front of Whitehall for consolation when mistresses are unkind; or that any person wavering in duty, or feeble in faith, was ever confirmed in purpose or in creed by the pathetic appeal of those harmonious architraves? (xvi, 351)

But this stunted emotional condition was not inherent in all architecture, and was instead found only in that which relied on the use of proportion.

This attention to proportion as a defining principle of architecture made its practice more mathematical, scientific, and therefore intellectual, thus muting its ability to communicate feeling. Ruskin chided the young architecture students: by using proportions, ‘you will sink into a state in which you can neither show, *nor feel*, nor see anything, but that one is to two as three is to six’ (*Works*, xvi, 354, emphasis added). The rote practice of proportions could not imbue architecture with emotion, because it prevented the designer or craftsman from using his imagination, thus making him a ‘slave’ to the system of ‘vulgar fractions’. Classical architecture, according to Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*, was ‘utterly devoid of all life, virtue, honourableness, or power of doing good’ (xi, 227). To design architecture based on proportioning systems meant that the architect as a professional was of no use to society. Even though a building might provide shelter from weather, it could not heal, comfort, or inspire.

Proportion in architecture came into play in the relationship between the level of emotional engagement of the architect or craftsman and the emotional experience of the final design. Ruskin emphasized this connection to the young architects in his lecture at the Architectural

Association: ‘For, wholly in proportion to the intensity of feeling which you bring to the subject you have chosen, will be the depth and justice of our perception of its character’ (*Works*, xvi, 370). This intensity implied a *passionate*, wholly encompassing emotional approach to design. Just as for the famous happy carver in *The Seven Lamps*, the architect, too, must ‘see that your work is easily and happily done, else it will never make anyone else happy’ (xvi, 369). The emotion of the designer became integral to the object designed. Therefore, the architect must also beware of ‘small emotions’ such as jealousy, pride, and other anxieties that would limit his imagination and ultimately the design. This concept applied to all scales of the design, for ‘when the imagination and feelings are strongly excited, they will not only bear with strange things, but they will *look* into *minute* things with a delight quite unknown in hours of tranquility’ (xvi, 363–64, emphasis in original). The smallest details of architecture, in ornament or construction, were thus ennobled by the application of emotion.

Some architectural styles could elicit inappropriate emotional responses and, for Ruskin, Renaissance architecture provided an excellent example of what *not* to do. Concerned more with developing the intellect instead of the heart, Renaissance architecture expressed the period’s ‘coldness, perfectness of training, [. . .] [and] want of sympathy with the weakness of lower men’ (*Works*, xi, 74). The pride of knowledge embraced the classical learning and proportional systems necessary for the revival of classical architecture. In addition, the Renaissance heart grew towards a love of material things, luxury, and the sensuality of body, not towards God or nature or even ‘the weakness of lower men’. While the decline of Gothic and the rise of the Renaissance had begun with a focus on the intellect instead of holier ideals, the Renaissance’s real downfall for Ruskin was its expression of inappropriate emotions, or, as he noted in *The Stones of Venice*, ‘the ruin which was begun by scholarship, was completed by sensuality’ (xi, 131). Ruskin portrayed the Renaissance as a period of decadence, sensuousness, and luxury, and he used sexualized language in his descriptions of the period. Regarding fifteenth-century Italian architectural ornament, he wrote that ‘excitement and interest are sought for by means of violent and continual curvatures wholly unrestrained, and rolling hither and thither in confused wantonness’. These were clearly not emotions that he felt were appropriate to convey in public, civic, or religious buildings. Good architecture was ‘chaste’ and held a ‘restrained power’ (xi, 9, 6).

Ruskin maintained that emotion’s role in architecture was not simply for the pure experience of it, as the Aesthetic Movement would later hold, but as a catalyst for action. In this sense, the emotion instilled in the architecture was itself secondary to the action that it inspired. ‘It is not the church we want, but the sacrifice; not the emotion of admiration, but the act of adoration; not the gift, but the giving’ (*Works*, viii, 39–40).

For Ruskin, emotion was essential to architecture, but it was not an end in itself as its goal was to change men's hearts and then their actions with the goal of improving society.

Ultimately, for Ruskin, the emotion that he most wanted architecture to project was love (*Works*, xvi, 369). A young architect had to engage in three aspects of love: the first was a love of architecture itself. If the architect did not love his profession as an art and do everything in his power to practise it with integrity and emotion, then he was a 'drudge' or 'mechanic', but not an artist (xvi, 370). The second love required was that of the world around him, by which Ruskin meant nature as a work of God. Finally, the architect must love his fellow man, or, as Ruskin phrased it, 'the creatures to whom you minister, your fellow men' (xvi, 372). This theological phrasing emphasized the architect's responsibility and framed his building as the sermon, loaded with meaning, moralism, and emotion.

Ruskin saw the emotional potential inherent in architecture as a way to heal some of the problems of society. Unlike painting, sculpture, or music, architecture had the ability to reach the widest audience for the longest period of time. Therefore, its role in society was critical as a way to create change. But it was not the structural or technical aspects of the building that gave it an emotional value; rather, it was the art of architecture through its incorporation of sculpture and painting. Ruskin was trying to guide the profession and emphasize architecture's power to stimulate a sympathy for one's fellow man in a chaotic world.

### George Aitchison and emotional architecture

But did Ruskin's appeal for emotion in architecture reach the inner sanctum of the architectural profession? George Aitchison managed both to maintain a prominent role in the profession and to assimilate some of Ruskin's ideas, particularly Ruskin's stance on the importance of emotion in architecture. Aitchison's many lectures and writings serve as a touchstone for revealing the profession's attitude to the role of emotion as a generator for design and in its reception. The son of an architect, Aitchison junior studied at the Royal Academy and University College London before an extended tour of the architecture of Europe, after which he returned to London and eventually joined his father's partnership.<sup>32</sup> Aitchison was fully involved in the development of the profession, serving as the president of RIBA (1896–99), as well as professor of architecture at the Royal Academy. If Aitchison was, as J. Mordaunt Crook has claimed, the 'most Victorian architect', then his views might serve as a window into what many other

<sup>32</sup> J. Mordaunt Crook, 'George Aitchison (1825–1910)', *ODNB* <<http://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30356>>.

Victorian architects, who were not as outspoken or prolific, had on their minds in terms of emotion in architecture.<sup>33</sup>

While a direct connection cannot be drawn between Ruskin and Aitchison, there were many opportunities when they might have crossed paths or shared their views and Aitchison's later writings show an assimilation of the critic's ideas. Both men held a common friend in Frederic Leighton (1830–1896), for whom Aitchison designed both his house (1864–65) and the later addition of the stunning Arab Hall (1877–89), and whom Ruskin had met in 1855 and maintained contact with through sharing drawings and mutual visits. The two men would also have been in the same circle through their association with Sir William Emerson (1843–1924), who served as the RIBA secretary while Aitchison was president, and who was also affiliated with the Royal Architectural Museum, with which Ruskin was deeply involved.<sup>34</sup>

It is possible that in the years while Ruskin was writing his most seminal texts on architecture, Aitchison was focused on learning the practicalities of design and construction, as he was either still in school at the Royal Academy or travelling. Aitchison's early writings reveal an interest in topics such as iron and brickwork (Crook, *Architect's Secret*, pp. 200–02). When he began to teach architecture at the RA in 1881, however, Aitchison lectured and wrote more frequently and the topics became more theoretical. It is in these texts where Aitchison writes about emotion in architecture. Finally, according to Crook, both men also had a shared contempt for the Renaissance as the basis for a viable contemporary style, and they sought to understand and revive the 'mental attitude' of medieval architecture (*Architect's Secret*, pp. 24–25).

Aitchison's later writings reveal the connection between architecture and emotion within the practice and pedagogy of architecture several decades after Ruskin's primary writings on the topic. Aitchison understood emotion as an important factor in architecture, declaring in 1897 that 'architecture, properly so-called, does not exist without an ideal or emotional side'.<sup>35</sup> He believed that architecture had the ability to produce the 'higher' or 'lofty' emotions, those of adoration, solemnity, thankfulness, majesty, awe, dignity, and magnificence, as well as delight. These emotions when

<sup>33</sup> J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Architect's Secret: Victorian Cities and the Image of Gravity* (London: Murray, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the Royal Architectural Museum, including Ruskin's involvement, see Edward Bottoms, 'The Royal Architectural Museum in the Light of New Documentary Evidence', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 19 (2007), 115–39. Cook and Wedderburn note that Aitchison was one of the architects who signed the memorial to have Ruskin buried at Westminster Abbey. See *Works of Ruskin*, xxxv: *Praeterita and Dilecta* (1908), p. xlv, n. 2.

<sup>35</sup> George Aitchison, 'The Advancement of Architecture: With Some Remarks on the Study of Gothic', *Builder*, 13 February 1897, pp. 141–43 (p. 141).

projected from the architecture back out to the public inspired and gave pleasure to those who viewed the building. This involved a connection to the Divine, as it did for Ruskin. Aitchison wrote: 'If you [the architect] feel the divine power within you, that will enable you to delight millions yet unborn.'<sup>36</sup> Emotion was the connection to God that had been channelled through the architect to the public via the architecture throughout time.

An intellectual approach alone to architecture would not be enough to achieve this. Merely satisfying programmatic requirements did not make architecture. Aitchison states:

A good many [architects] thought that when every part of a building exactly answered its purpose, and when every redundance had been pared away, and each part took its shape according to the work it had to do, an architecture would arise of itself without further trouble, more wonderful, more perfect, and one that caused more exalted emotions than any that the world had seen; but it became apparent that this was a wrong hypothesis.<sup>37</sup>

Instead, he asked his audience how architecture might provoke the proper emotions suitable for each building, and what architects had to do to achieve this.<sup>38</sup>

Each building type — civic, religious, leisure, domestic — had its own 'proper' emotional ideal to communicate. These included adoration for temples, awe and apprehension for law courts, grace and delight for theatres, terror for prisons, and comfort for 'ordinary houses'.<sup>39</sup> Architects, therefore, had to have a broad understanding of how different buildings could convey different emotions. Both Aitchison and Ruskin understood that the lack of emotion was the 'major problem' of architecture in their respective periods, and Ruskin seems to have influenced Aitchison in both his notions of proper (and improper) emotions for architecture as well as architecture's ability to evoke an emotional reaction at all.

In standard Victorian fashion, Aitchison turned to the past to make his point. Roman baths 'could intoxicate the senses and enthral the mind, and the whole naturally became an architectural structure'. The earliest Roman baths were 'hardly *calculated* to raise an emotion' and were not, therefore, classed as architecture because they exerted no emotional pull

<sup>36</sup> George Aitchison, 'The Advancement of Architecture: With Some Remarks on the Study of Gothic', *Builder*, 6 February 1897, pp. 117–19 (p. 118).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> 'Advancement of Architecture', 13 February 1897, p. 142.

<sup>39</sup> 'Advancement of Architecture', 6 February 1897, p. 118.

on those who visited them.<sup>40</sup> The goal of architecture was to use the senses to create an emotional impact that overwhelmed the intellect.

Aitchison insisted that without recourse to emotion, architecture was dead and could not advance as a profession. To look back to historical models using only the intellect and not feeling was a mistake. This, Aitchison argued, was what many of the revivalists had forgotten in their studies of the past while focusing only on details and ornament. He claimed, ‘I am doing my best to dispel from the students’ minds the notion that the paraphrasing of dead styles is architecture, that it is more the means of learning how to express themselves architecturally.’ The study of past architecture was critical to develop true understanding of architecture’s emotional power. Aitchison noted:

The lessons of how these various emotions are to be raised must be learnt from those buildings of former times which show how cognate emotions were excited. [. . .] You must study how the poets have studied, and see how your predecessors learned to evoke the emotions that now delight you.<sup>41</sup>

While Aitchison does not quote Ruskin directly here, the similarity to his earlier writings and the parallel drawn to poets suggest the critic’s influence. Aitchison, however, is more direct, thinking like an architect in his use of precedent instead of a writer yearning for an earlier time’s style and simplicity.

Aitchison praised Greek architecture as well as Roman but reserved a special affection for the Gothic, which he felt held an incomparable emotional force. In line with Ruskin’s preference for Gothic architecture as a model for an appropriate emotional experience, Aitchison claimed that it ‘has been able to raise emotions of, perhaps, a loftier sort than those raised by other monuments’.<sup>42</sup> Despite the lack of bright sun and clear air that enhanced the Greek buildings’ aesthetic perfection, Gothic’s dark moodiness was powerful and the strong forms created deep emotional experiences. For Aitchison, the highest purpose of architecture was religious, and he pointed out how across time, architecture built for religious purposes conveyed similar emotions. Even when one religion took over the structure of another, the initial emotional engagement and effect was still evident.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> George Aitchison, ‘The Advancement of Architecture’, *Builder*, 27 August 1891, pp. 138–39 (p. 139), emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Advancement of Architecture’, 6 February 1897, p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>43</sup> George Aitchison, ‘What is Architecture? And How Can It Be Advanced?, Part II’, *Builder*, 4 February 1893, pp. 83–87 (p. 84).

The ability to inject emotion into architecture was not, however, something that could be taught, according to Aitchison. In an 1891 article in the *Builder*, Aitchison claimed that even if a young man studied all the materials and structural calculations, met the programmatic and functional requirements, and constructed the building properly, it was still possible for the building to fail in its mission to provoke feeling. For without the architect's artistic feeling, '[the] structure raises no emotions; it merely satisfies the intelligence that what was wanted has been done.'<sup>44</sup> Mere functional design could not convey emotion, which required drawing on the architect's own emotional reservoir. To develop this understanding took a lifetime of learning and of experiencing architecture in all its styles and manifestations, echoing Ruskin's belief in the importance of the constant observation of one's surroundings, nature, and humankind. The expression of emotion in architecture came from the architect's awareness of his own emotional responses, be they to buildings, nature, or people. Aitchison called on architects to become 'poets in structure', able to instil emotion as a poet does, using the tools of the architect instead of words.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, to create an architecture that was relevant for the present day was decidedly more difficult in the fast-paced world of the late nineteenth century than it had been in the past. Aitchison recognized that

ordinary emotions have become more complex, but this can hardly be the case with the grand ones, such as ecstasy, joy, heartrending grief, terror, and despair. [. . .] I think almost the emotions, being more complex than of yore, have become more difficult to portray.<sup>46</sup>

He knew that Victorian life was not likely to become less complicated, and he urged that simplicity did not mean the stripping of emotion from architecture. The difficulty — and the advantage — of architecture was that it was an 'obtrusive art', and unless you lived in the wilderness, you could not help but see it.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, unlike in painting and sculpture where people did not engage with a specific artwork every day, in architecture, emotion was essential because buildings had a more visible and more permanent presence. Architecture's long lifespan and its public face meant that the emotions it contained had to be carefully calibrated to be appropriate. Those who were satisfied to live without architecture — and, by connection, its emotional content — were, according to Aitchison, either savages (satisfied with living in a cave), or of the absolutely highest class, as

<sup>44</sup> 'Advancement of Architecture', 27 August 1891, p. 138.

<sup>45</sup> 'Advancement of Architecture', 6 February 1897, p. 118.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> George Aitchison, 'Utilitarian Ugliness in Towns', *Builder*, 15 December 1888, pp. 430–33 (p. 431).



they were only concerned with buildings that met their immediate needs, thus disregarding their ‘higher nature’.

The emotional pull of architecture was, Aitchison argued, in danger from the increasing processes of mechanization evident in the works of engineers and from the use of new materials such as iron, which resulted in the ‘utilitarian ugliness’ of many city buildings. By relying only on function, revivalism, and technology to drive architectural design, architecture had neglected its artistic side, that which could convey emotion in favour of ‘mere building or engineering’.<sup>48</sup> Thus architecture is left lifeless.

Henry Heathcote Statham, editor of the *Builder* from 1883 to 1908, also highlighted emotion’s importance in architecture by linking it to art in his 1886 editorial, ‘The Romance of Architecture’. Statham argued that when an architect did not have the opportunity to release his pent-up architectural feeling in built form, he often turned to art as an outlet, holding up the drawings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) and the paintings of John Martin (1789–1854) as examples. Statham placed these artworks within the realm of architecture, albeit not ‘practical architecture’, because they ‘were [ . . . ] the vehicle of impressions of power, vastness, and solemnity, conveyed with all the force and vividness of true genius’.<sup>49</sup> He noted that the works were intended to represent an ability to exploit architecture’s power and arouse emotion. To convey this aesthetic effect with its emotional impact required an artist’s skill; in these cases, in colour, chiaroscuro, and point of view, instead of in stone, iron, and glass. But built form could create the same impression by exciting the mind and the imagination of the observer.

Architecture was under enormous pressure to become more technical and less artistic with the advent of new materials such as iron. In 1891 a memorial addressed to the RIBA president titled ‘Architecture — A Profession or an Art?’ was published in *The Times* that revealed a division in the profession. The ensuing debate continued in the press over the following nine months, inspired a publication of the same title, and brought to the forefront the crucial question of whether the architect was an artist and, therefore, architecture a fine art. In the memorial, well-known architects and artists protested a Bill before Parliament to register architects through examination, because they felt that the art of architecture simply could not be tested:

We believe that, while it is possible to examine students in construction and matters of sanitation, their artistic qualifications, *which really make the architect*, cannot be brought to the test of examination, and that a diploma of architecture

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> ‘The Romance of Architecture’, *Builder*, 13 November 1886, pp. 687–89 (p. 688).

obtained by such means would be a fallacious distinction, equally useless as a guide to the public and misleading as an object for the efforts of the student.<sup>50</sup>

The seventy architects and artists who signed the 1891 memorial — including Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, Richard Norman Shaw, and William Lethaby — saw architecture as a fine art and a craft, not to be subject to testing and regulation. Knowledge of construction processes and materials might have been an easy way to protect the public physically, but it did not result in architecture, which was artistic and therefore communicated emotion. The testing of artistic competence challenged the notion of architecture as an art and could not result in an emotional architecture.

### Conclusion

An artistic definition of architecture was central to both Ruskin's and Aitchison's claims that architecture was an emotional, even passionate, art. If architecture was a science, either in terms of engineering or even in the use of classical proportions, then it was predominately intellectual and lacked emotion. But if architecture was an art, then it must have an emotional component, for the architect, the artisan, and the recipient of the design. For Ruskin, the emotional component of architecture was tantamount, as it had the power to simultaneously reflect the emotional states of the designer and craftsmen and create an emotional state in those who later viewed it. Emotion was the heart of architecture, and Ruskin feared its loss. In an 1865 lecture to the RIBA, 'The Study of Architecture in Our Schools', Ruskin noted that he 'was tired of knocking his head, thick as it might be, against a wall'.<sup>51</sup> He felt that no one in the profession had heard what he was really trying to say.

But Ruskin's appeals that emotion remain inherent in the art of architecture had not fallen on deaf ears. Aitchison and other architects, although consumed with their practices and the need to keep up with the changes in the profession, had heard him. Aitchison had shown the incorporation of emotion into architecture to be compatible with contemporary practice.

Kerr's tribute to Ruskin upon his death in 1900 was the ultimate acknowledgement from an old foe of the one aspect of architecture that seemed to stay above the fray of debate: that architecture was an art and that, as such, it was both imbued with and had the power to evoke emotion.

<sup>50</sup> 'Architecture — A Profession or an Art?', *The Times*, 3 March 1891, p. 9, emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> *Works of Ruskin*, XIX, 39–40, n. 5. While no roster of attendees remains, it would be surprising if Aitchison was not in attendance.

And Kerr's tribute was not unique. Statham's opening essay on Ruskin's death in the *Builder* acknowledged Ruskin's emotional appeal: 'But he has fired our hearts and feelings as no other writer except the great poets have done.'<sup>52</sup> Statham remarked on Ruskin's passion and his ability to make people care. Likewise, Ruskin's obituary in *The Times* emphasized 'the purity of his enthusiasm' and how 'he taught every outline in nature and art to be a universal framework for conceptions of the human brain and emotions of the human heart'.<sup>53</sup>

For Kerr, what remained after Ruskin's death was his 'Emotional Authority' and his insistence that architects invest their work with emotional meaning ('Ruskin and Emotional Architecture', p. 187). Not completely able to set aside their professional differences even in his tribute to the critic, Kerr gently chided Ruskin as sentimental for both his nostalgia for a simpler time and his desire for a more open conversation regarding architectural emotion. Kerr understood that while later architects might disagree with Ruskin's desire for a less professionally inclined architecture, they embraced Ruskin's emotional intensity. He also demonstrated that architects could find common ground in the issue of emotion in the otherwise contentious territory of Ruskin's architectural theories. Kerr wrote of Ruskin's writings: 'such is emotional criticism; and emotional effort is meant to follow, and has followed — Emotional Art — Emotional Architecture — not for the builder, but for the emotional admirer' ('Ruskin and Emotional Architecture', p. 186), which is ultimately everyone.

<sup>52</sup> 'Ruskin's Influence on Architecture', *Builder*, 27 January 1900, pp. 73–74 (p. 74).

<sup>53</sup> Leading article, *The Times*, 22 January 1900, p. 9. For an interesting analysis of obituaries in *The Times* during this period, including Ruskin's, see Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 92–94.