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PAUL GUYER, *A PHILOSOPHER LOOKS AT ARCHITECTURE*, CAMBRIDGE, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021.

Paul Guyer's new book *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture* is a refreshing philosophical exploration for both aesthetic theory and philosophy of architecture. The strength of this book draws on the fact that it does not come from someone who is primarily trained in architectural theory, nor architecture – though demonstrating extraordinary knowledge of it – but rather from someone who rightly declares himself as a historian of philosophy.¹ Paul Guyer is indubitably one of the greatest living interpreters of Kant's philosophy and history of aesthetics, the author of the three-volume book *A History of Modern Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014). However, he also authored three prior intriguing articles on architecture.² By intertwining the history of architectural theory with the history of aesthetics, starting from Vitruvius, through modern aesthetic theories, and all the way to contemporary architectural theories, Guyer succeeds in originally showing the interconnectedness of these disciplines in an innovative way, as well as their changes over time. At the same time, he shows that solid foundations of architecture – namely, their main principles – have stood the test of time and that we have every reason to believe they will remain the theoretical principles of architectural work.

¹ P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, p. 14.

² *Id.*, "Kant and the Philosophy of Architecture," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* LIX, 1, 2011, pp. 7–19; *id.*, "Monism and Pluralism: The History of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Architecture – Part 1," *Architecture Philosophy*, I, 1, 2014, pp. 25–42; *id.*, "Monism and Pluralism: The History of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Architecture – Part 2," *Architecture Philosophy*, I, 2, 2015, pp. 231–245; *id.*, "Formalism around 1800: A Grudging Concession to Aesthetic Sensibility," *Philosophy and Society*, XXX, 2, 2019, pp. 241–256.

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The book *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture* has been published in the recently established Cambridge University Press series “A Philosopher Looks at.” The aim of the series is to provide philosophers’ personal and philosophical exploration of a topic of general interest. The series is very important for the status of contemporary philosophy because it enables the intervention of philosophers in the significant domains of everyday life. Moreover, it provides a new opportunity to get acquainted with the accounts of some of the most prominent philosophers on pressing issues.

Although *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture* represents an overview of different historical architectural theories and philosophical views on architecture, it revolves around one main general thesis. The author aims to demonstrate that the basic principles of architecture proposed already by Vitruvius in the 1st century BCE – durability (*firmitas*), utility (*utilitas*) and beauty (*venustas*) – have not changed. However, he cautions against confusing philosophy of architecture with architectural theory and warns that this claim should be considered carefully. The author does not intend to suggest that the meaning of those particular principles has not changed over time; nor that technology through which we can realize durability has not advanced. Our understanding of durability is vastly different now than it was 2000 years ago. Further, the function of buildings, as well as our understanding of aesthetic appeal, have changed with transformations of our society and culture. Moreover, the interconnectedness of those principles (e.g., how much beauty depends on function) has been perceived differently in different epochs. These are all examples of issues related to architectural theory. Nevertheless, on a higher level, the very principles have remained the same and that is the level which the author as a philosopher of architecture wants to address. In other words, architectural theory provides explanations one level down: what the means to these ends are or what counts as a good construction/function/aesthetic appeal.

The book consists of five chapters preceded by an introduction. The first four chapters offer chronologically sorted explorations of various theories, while the fifth discusses the thesis that the Vitruvian triad will remain valid in the future despite new challenges. The first chapter, “Good Construction, Functionality, and Aesthetic Appeal” covers a long period of time from Vitruvius to the 18th century. It starts with the explanation of Vitruvius’ understanding of architecture. According to the author, the main framework of Vitruvius’ account involves the understanding architecture as a fundamental medium for the relation of

human beings to the rest of nature and to each other.³ Thus, the goal of architecture is to facilitate “human flourishing in its natural and social context.”⁴ However, this does not mean that Vitruvius argued for a naïve imitation of nature. It is rather a case that humans use available material to adapt natural environment by both imitation and invention. And not only are humans able to use natural elements in an innovative way, but they are also able to incorporate the innovation of others by observing each other. This process is what the author calls intelligent adaptation to nature.⁵ The introduction of Vitruvian principles, apparently those related to building materials, construction methods and building types, takes place against this background of human space in the world. Guyer chooses to rename those principles – durability, utility and beauty – as values of good construction, function and aesthetic appeal. This decision does not only seem to be correct, but it also exemplifies Guyer’s clear and engaging style that is accessible to readers coming from a wide range of backgrounds. The greatest part of the discussion is devoted to the aesthetic aspect of architecture, usually the most interesting topic for a philosopher. Guyer puts the accent on two important details of Vitruvius’ account. First, although most of Vitruvius’ analysis of beauty highlights formal, mathematical principles (proportion, arrangements, etc.), he also “emphasizes that what is crucial to beauty is how the parts of a building *appear* to human observers from normal vantage-points [...]”⁶ In other words, he appreciates the empirical/subjective aspects of beauty and its dependence on the observing subject – by custom and nature rather than mathematics. Secondly, Vitruvius further recognizes that *content* as well as form contribute to the aesthetic appeal. Here Guyer introduces the concept of *meaning*, related to that of content. The fact that buildings have meaning in various ways can be found already in Vitruvius’ work and it plays an important role in Guyer’s conception of the history of philosophy of architecture.

The second part of the first chapter focuses on two significant figures: Leon Batista Alberti, representing the Italian Renaissance, and Henry

³ P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ We can draw a comparison between this understanding and more contemporary theory of niche construction (a process by which an organism alters its own environment), see for example J. Odling-Smee, K. Laland, M. Feldman, *Niche Construction: Neglected Process in Evolution*, Princeton / Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003.

⁶ P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, p. 24.

Home, Lord Kames, a prominent figure in British aesthetics. The author also provides a brief overview of Palladio's work, which illustrates Alberti's approach, and an analysis of the architectural theories of Marc-Antoine Laugier. Both Alberti and Lord Kames generally follow Vitruvian principles, but with some important deflections. The most striking difference between Alberti and Vitruvius is that the former insists on objective, mathematical rules of beauty, putting aside the empirical issue of appearance to the observers and the impact on human emotions. In addition, as Guyer emphasizes, Alberti entirely disregards that buildings can have meaning. On the contrary, Lord Kames insists on how works of architecture actually appear to us in the case of utility as well as beauty and advocates for a more empirical approach to the aesthetic appeal.⁷ Laugier argued that beauty arises from good construction, thus implying that there cannot be any demands of beauty that are not also demands of utility. Despite the obvious differences between the three theoreticians regarding their conception of aesthetic appeal, the fact that beauty is considered a core value still stands. This is one of the examples of Guyer's main point: although there have been innumerable variations in the interpretations of the core principles, good construction, function and beauty have remained the core values of architecture.

The second chapter "The Meaning of Beauty" addresses the thesis that the idea of meaning has become central to the conception of the aesthetic appeal of architecture since the time of Kant. Guyer explores the work of four influential authors: Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, John Ruskin and Gottfried Semper. The chapter begins with a succinct yet eloquent introduction to Kant's aesthetics, followed by a comprehensive analysis of his views on architecture. Guyer puts emphasis on two important Kant's extensions of architectural aesthetic appeal. The first one is the involvement of freedom of the imagination in the analysis of beauty. The second one is that fine arts should express aesthetic ideas, which might be related to the symbolic representation of moral ideas or the representation of building types themselves, i.e., its purpose. Schopenhauer clearly fits in this chapter as another author who highlights the importance of meaning concerning the aesthetic appeal of architecture. He puts the accent on the representation of "platonic ideas." However, it is

⁷ *Ibid.*, 48. Guyer stresses the importance of emotional impact in several places. However, it is a bit strange that he never mentions the concept of affective atmospheres important for contemporary theorists as well as practitioners of architecture (see G. Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, Bloomsbury, London, 2017).

intriguing to note that he also abandons one of the Vitruvian principles, namely function. I will come back to it in the concluding part of this review. The chapter further contains an extensive discussion of Ruskin's seven principles (sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory and obedience). These passages perfectly demonstrate how multiple forms of meaning can comprise beauty in architecture. Additionally, Ruskin underlines the issue of truth and freedom, highlighting not only the freedom of the architect as well as the client, but also the freedom of workers. The chapter closes with a brief sketch of Semper's theoretical position.

The third chapter, "Multiplicity of Meaning in Twentieth-Century Theories" revolves around two central topics: language and phenomenology of architecture. In the first part, Guyer highlights communicative nature of architecture and connects it to the Vitruvian principles by discussing Raphael Moneo's critique of Eisenmann and the work of Susanne K. Langer. The author argues that we have to take into account not only syntax (form), but also the semantics/symbolism (meaning) and use (function) of architectural work. In the second part, Guyer focuses on the experience of architecture through the work of Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Roger Scruton and Steven Holl. In these passages, Guyer underlines how the concept of aesthetic appeal has been enriched to encompass not merely visual experience, but also the experience of how our life-space has been shaped by the architectural work.⁸ The works of Steven Holl, deeply influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, serve as an excellent example.

The fourth chapter focuses on three great architects: Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loss and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Guyer's main goal in this chapter is to establish a connection between freedom and truth in architecture, on the one side, and the Vitruvian triad:

[...] truth can enter into our conception of good construction, as in Ruskin, and into our conception of aesthetic appeal, beginning with

⁸ It has to be noted that Guyer only indirectly discusses the main figures of phenomenological approach who have influenced architectural theory, such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. However, it cannot be taken as a crucial objection, given that the author does not come from the phenomenological background. A critique of Guyer along those lines has been published by Bert Olivier (B. Olivier, "Review Essay: Paul Guyer's A Philosopher looks at Architecture," *Montreal Architectural Review*, VIII, 1, 2022, pp. 21–41.) – although I would not agree with his view that Guyer neglects to highlight ethical function of buildings. In my opinion, Guyer, at least implicitly, holds the Kantian background that ethics can and should be part of the meaning of architectural works.

Kant, freedom of the imagination can enter into our conception of aesthetic appeal, but also into the use of technology; freedom of use, particularly of the use of spaces by their inhabitants at any time and over time, can enter into our conception of functionality.⁹

The concluding chapter demonstrates socially responsible and engaged aspect of the book. It reiterates the main thesis of the book that the Vitruvian principles have remained core values of architecture throughout history. Moreover, Guyer suggests that we have every reason to believe that they will remain the main principles of architecture in the future:

[...] what counts as good construction, functionality, and aesthetic appeal will change, as it has changed in the past, with changing circumstances – economic, political, environmental, cultural, whatever – but these overarching values and goals of architecture will remain constant.¹⁰

Furthermore, Guyer stresses the importance of two challenges for architecture: climate change and social justice. With the full awareness that neither of these crises can be addressed by architecture alone, Guyer presses the import of these issues to remind that architect can also contribute to addressing them and that they also have responsibility to act in accordance with it.

One might object that the book does not contain much discussion about authors who oppose the Vitruvian principles. The only such author who is extensively discussed is the “eccentric [...] Schopenhauer.”¹¹ One paragraph refers to proponents of reductive functionalism – who claim that function could determine how a building should look. Guyer strongly opposes to this view, stating:

That is obviously false; the choice of a structural technology, such as the choice bolted or of welded steel members, the choice of energy-efficient gas. Even the choice to expose as much structure as possible for aesthetic impact, can hardly determine everything about how building looks – if the steel is not Corten steel and needs to be

⁹ P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, p. 128.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

coated, then what color should it be painted? If the glass needs to be tinted, what color?¹²

In addition, Guyer argues that Louis Sullivan, the author of the slogan “Form follows function,” never meant that function is a sufficient condition for the design of a successful building, but rather a necessary one.¹³ Although Hegel, who neglected values of good construction and functionality, is mentioned a few times in the book, there is no further discussion about his view. A curious reader might like to see more academic debate with those from the opposite camp, although it could disrupt the otherwise very compact and accessible structure of the book. However, it is worth mentioning that such academic critique can be partially found in Guyer’s earlier two-part text about pluralism and monism in architecture.

Paul Guyer’s book *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture* provides a comprehensive synthesis of architectural theory and history of aesthetics, aiming at the elucidation of the fundamental goals of the architecture, which he finds in the Vitruvian principles of durability, utility and beauty. Its engaging style makes it assessable and interesting literature for both experts and those who are not familiar with the topic, while the detailed exploration of various significant authors and topics, followed by an original thesis, marks it as an invaluable source for everyone dealing with the philosophy of architecture, architectural theory, as well as practicing of architecture. It is of particular significance today that Guyer uncovers responsibilities and challenges of the architecture concerning both its relation to nature (ecological issue) and society (the question of social justice). In this regard, the importance of this book lies also in the fact that it depicts architecture as an activity in social space and in relation humans have to nature, and for which we have to be responsible.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹³ *Ibid.*