

Recovering a Ruskinian Tactile Ethics of Architecture

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How to navigate and negotiate the built environment is not something that the population stops to contemplate as they go about their busy days. During our selected hours of business, daily journeys to and from work are taken without much thought on how much work, planning, and design was put into the architecture that surrounds our places of employment, our institutions of education, or our domestic spaces. At the same time, there is little reflection about just how much being able to move in any place relies on the use of many senses. As a sensory scholar focused on tactility and a passionate advocate for accessible educational and built environments, the senses of architecture is both theoretically important to my work and part of my pedagogical and ethical praxis and awareness. These are characteristics shared with John Ruskin, who saw awareness of positionality and accessible advocacy as important to an ethical way of life.

Ruskin is known in academic and cultural spheres as a critic, an artist, and a theorist. His interdisciplinary spirit and passion for social critique, educational initiatives, art, and architecture suggest that a polymathic approach to all of these topics can support reflection and change. An article from August 30, 2018 in *The Guardian* entitled “Ruskin the radical: why the Victorian thinker is back with a vengeance” emphasizes how we are at a prime point in our social discourse to start thinking about Ruskin more and referring to his work to help guide us out of difficult discussions about how urban spaces are developed and utilized. Ruskin has a lot to say about how we navigate our built environment, how we design our architecture, and what we should value as a society—we would do well, the article suggests, to listen more to Ruskin, and listen better.

I argue that there are three integral parts to a Ruskinian architectural understanding as seen in the totality of his writing on the art of building: craft, community, and ethics. Reading through Ruskin’s many texts leads to the conclusion that if, as a society, we can literally incorporate the praxis of craft, of community building, and of ethics into our daily lives we can then start to engage with the important concepts that guide urban building and development—like access, aesthetics, and intersubjective relations—major points of contention in relation to architectural development, especially over the past five years. These three facets of Ruskin’s thought on architecture should convince us that the time has come to recover Ruskin and that we need to recover him quickly if we are to have useable and feasible environments in which we can live and work.

Why recover? Because Ruskin and his reputation are always in need of some sort of recovering it seems. Ruskin is known to be a bit of a contrarian, as his thought evolves over his lifespan. However, this perpetually changing aspect is part of Ruskin’s deep commitment to finding the truth and the value in what is written and suggested—in true philosophical manner, it is important to test and retest one’s hypotheses as the socio-historical conditions change. Another important part of the recovery aspect with Ruskin is to move beyond the academic fascination with the visual as the main sensory valence when discussing Ruskin and get to where he really seems to be pointing to in his theoretical trajectory, which is touch. One of the

most famous quotations from Ruskin, in a time when Google hits are a marker of “fame,” is from *Modern Painters* which states, “hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see” (3.4, 16). This loaded quotation says a lot about the sensory aspect of Ruskin and his thought but it has become a substitute, along with “only see” and “people be good” as the main representation of Ruskin’s aesthetic and architectural position, which in some real ways is a shame. From a man who also said “fine art is that [in] which the hand, the head, and the heart of man go together” (*The Two Paths*), we do a disservice by only focusing on the visual instead of getting to the “origin story” of architecture with Ruskin, which is touch.

Why touch? Touch seems to be the integral link between both the material of architecture and the craft of architecture. Touch is a way to literally form a community of practice around architecture and it also has an intersubjective ethical level that requires greater exploration if we are to build spaces we want to be in and can readily use.

Touch and the Negotiation/Navigation of Place

Negotiation and navigation are very specific in relation to what touch does within a built environment. Negotiation is an agreement between the space you are in and yourself. Navigation, on the other hand, is the activity of ascertaining one’s position and more specifically one’s place which uses the senses and memory as opposed to an understanding of space which is a relative concept. Place is specific and particular, space is open and vast, and my argument is more interested in how to move through places, because that movement, the encounter, engagement, and sometimes refusal of liminality shares a similarity with an understanding of tactility as a sense or concept. Touch does not reside in a singular location—it is a shared experience; touch masquerades as having place, but with touch all you encounter is space. The pressure, the temperature, and as we will see even the pain of hapticity in tactile perception can allow for a more ethical means of negotiation and navigation. Touch allows us to explore an ethical understanding of place as well as the interpersonal dynamics of space. What is it to be in the same place as another and why is the understanding of place and dynamics of space important when we talk about architecture? Much of this of course is seen in Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore’s *Body, Memory, and Architecture* as well as in the totality of Juhani Pallasmaa’s work, but Ruskin talks about this way before them, in the 1850s through to the 1870s. A fascination with ethical and tactile negotiations of space is specifically seen in Ruskin’s *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866) but he also speaks to tactile elements of architecture and ornamentation before this.

In *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853) we find Ruskin’s argument about how Gothic architecture, with its intricate designs and very tactile elements, is preferred to the clean styles of the Renaissance which can be taken as a touchstone for what is happening now architecturally in places like Toronto. Aesthetically cold buildings and facadeism that is almost devoid of tactile elements is what appears more and more in urban centres in North America. The style can be likened to boxes and shipping containers embellished or covered with glass. The emotion in roughness and tactility that Ruskin searched for is difficult to find in architectures of the past decade. There is sadly little tactile sensation in the cold clean glass that falls from the sky in Toronto every time a rain or snow storm brings a wind.

The conditions of the building of buildings and structures, from an historical point of view, in terms of influence, and even in terms of emotional connection are all part of the tactile nature of architecture. The senses form an integral way to understand what surrounds us and, as Pallasmaa states, “all the senses, including vision, can be regarded as extension of the sense of touch” (42) and “[v]ision reveals what the touch already knows” (42). Yet one look at any North American urban skyline reveals the missing sharp edges and tactile sensations—texture, weight, and density are lost in cool glass reflections. Pallasmaa again mentions how “the tactile sense connects us with time and tradition” (56) and this is exactly what Ruskin was saying more than a hundred and fifty years ago.

Ruskin’s focus on tactility in relation to architecture is heavily tied to art and specifically to the concept of craft. Craft allows for the kinds of architectural spaces that are historically significant and this is the first pillar of Ruskinian architectural thought.

Craft

Ruskin is deeply interested and invested in craft. He reinforces the significance of how we build with our hands and that is carried forward to his thought about architecture. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) he gives an evocation of the importance of memory, tactility, and form:

Therefore, when we build, let us think that we build for ever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say as they look upon the labour and wrought substance of them “See this our fathers did for us” (8.233).

There is no building for the moment for Ruskin, only a building for all time. There is a deep tactile history, memory, and connection to the architecture—the hands that have touched, shaped and formed these buildings should rightfully be part of the memory of the structure. A similar ethos appears in Ruskin’s architectural drawings where he is trying to save for posterity spaces that should be remembered and he does so in a way that echoes his relationship to art and craft. Ruskin was truly someone who very much practiced what he preached and his drawings and sketches are representative of what he encountered architecturally and highlights the craftwork present, even if that craftwork is done by nature. As Stuart Brand suggests in *How Buildings Learn* (1994), “buildings have perfect memory of materiality” (2) and that memory is found in Ruskin’s architectural thought and architectural representations.

Ruskin’s Pictures and Drawings as Sight/Site of Tactility

Ruskin’s drawings and sketches present a high level of detail in terms of the buildings and ornamentations on the building. One of the best examples of this is *Study for Detail of the Market-Place, Abbeville*¹. The detail that the name of the piece suggests are objects such as baskets with vegetables and wagons in the foreground which serve as material cues of the market system being depicted. The store front names emphasize the selling of tobacco, spirits,

and other goods, and he also records a series of cafés to highlight the communal aspect of city/town life. The drawing gives a detailed “day in the life” alongside a precise study of the architectural ornamentation found on the roofs.

Ruskin’s study of geology in his early life gave him very strong insight into and scientific understanding of rock structures, and helps inform his art not only in depiction of nature and landscape but also in his depiction of stone-based architectural structures. This geological knowledge is seen in the precision present in *Venice, Byzantine Capitals, Concave Group*ⁱⁱ which is one of the plates in *The Stones of Venice*. The close attention to detail is one of the best examples of Ruskin’s appreciation and love for architecture from the craft, design, and implementation standpoint. His hand gives shape and form to the capital and simultaneously relates beauty, precise ornamentation aspects, and structure. In these studies of capitals Ruskin demonstrates illustrative mastery by putting to paper an understanding of art, architecture, and the geological composition of stone. He accurately details these capitals in order to study not only the development of architecture and style, the aesthetics of the capital, but also the ways of production from the point of view of craft. The work of the hands in the production of architecture is an important part of Ruskin’s critique and indeed, as Kate Flint suggests, “the physical imprint left by human labor was something that was deliberately recalled by those—like John Ruskin, [and] the Arts and Crafts movement—who repudiated the impersonality of mechanization and the suppression of individuality that mass manufacture brought with it” (26). Michael Lang also mentions this in his work on Ruskin where he emphasizes that “Ruskin venerated all handicrafts and felt that architecture, too, should be a product of the hand of the inspired individual workman” (Lang 39). Each building, then, becomes a historical record of the hands that built it—a representation of craft but also a quasi-permanent material artifact.

In *Merton College and Magpie Lane* (1838)ⁱⁱⁱ we again see an appreciation for detail, the use of accurate lines, especially in the ornamentation seen at the top of the spires. It is no coincidence that this is a drawing of a place of education, for through this drawing Ruskin was also attempting to educate and record. This piece has wonderful perspective and proportion. He adds details such as boxes under the windows on the left side of the piece. Yet the contrast of the two walking scholars in the bottom right hand corner of the piece with the shy mother and child on the bottom left demonstrates that even in a piece that is seemingly emphasizing architecture and a specific environment, Ruskin still manages to put class and social critique at the fore. Here we see a place of education that emphasizes that education is also spatial—it is a reminder that some have access to this space but not everyone does.

Finally, we move from an incomplete representation to an incomplete subject. This is Ruskin’s representation of the *Kenilworth Castle Ruins* (1847). This sepia and pen work is very representative of the topography in Ruskin’s art. Here we see the marriage of architecture and nature and what happens when nature is allowed to take over architecture. In *Seven Lamps*, Ruskin states that “an architect should live as little in cities as a painter. Send him to our hills, and let him study there what Nature understands by a buttress, and what by a dome” (8.136). The detail of form—both built form and natural form—is stunning and is representative of what happens when the architect (or in this case the architectural critic) gets out into the hills. The window is complete with mullion and quatrefoil ornamentation to show Ruskin’s knowledge of

architectural and natural form. He believes that “good craftsmanship and work of the fingers joined with good emotion and work of the heart” creates valuable art and architecture (16.385). What rests at the heart of the idea of craft is the tension between hand work and mechanization. This seems like a more recent understanding of craft, usually in relation to handicraft or something you find at your neighbourhood farmer’s market, but to Ruskin craft is much more than this. Craft plays an integral role beyond just everyday material objects that we would use in our homes, rather, craft becomes part of the buildings and structures we encounter every day. Ruskin says in *The Stones of Venice* “It would be well if all of us were good handicraftsmen in some kind and the dishonour of manual labour done away with altogether” (10.201). There is a type of ethos and value here in Ruskin’s words. He is suggesting and insisting that what we do with our hands should be how we build our communities.

Community

Community is the second pillar of Ruskin’s architectural thought. We have seen how craft is the first pillar and the concept of community comes from how Ruskin was very much socially committed to exploring how space and built environment necessarily includes or excludes. In 1871 Ruskin founded the Guild of St. George, a Guild that still exists to this this day. The Guild of St. George was a crafts guild. As a response to the disconnect Ruskin saw between society, art, and education Ruskin founded the Guild whose purpose and aim was to highlight and promote three main concepts: art education, craftwork, and the rural economy. As Mark Frost states, “fundamentally, the Guild was supposed to be about the enabling power of simple, productive work, and a means to solve social problems by unleashing creativity” (Frost 2). The Guild was Ruskin’s way of suggesting an alternative to industrial capitalism. It was his way of giving a practical space for people to build things and spaces that are of use and of value together. The value given to tactile interaction with materials and the importance of the feel of the finished product is highlighted along with the use. Ruskin wanted society to better understand how we can live together in spaces of value with an awareness of intersubjective and social dynamics within those spaces. The Guild sponsored, and still does, rural projects that incorporate craft and sustainable building models such as a studio building in Wyre Forest near Birmingham. The ethical dynamic also ties into community building and one of the earliest projects that Guild members were part of when he founded the Guild was the building and maintenance of roads in and around Sheffield. Beyond the practical community building space that incorporates craft, community, sustainability, and ethics in architectural design, Ruskin also has theoretical positions on community building and use of space in his work, and *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866) which he wrote a few years before he founded the Guild, is a good example of this theoretical and philosophical positioning of community.

What happens in *The Ethics of the Dust* can be seen very much as a discussion framed by a Merleau-Pontian conceptualization of touch. The reciprocation (or chiasmic) understanding of tactility blurs the active/passive boundaries of sensation and makes the ethics of each tactile interaction an important concept to address in relation to the negotiation of place. Because touch is reciprocal, we need to be aware that when one touches, one is also touched back; when you are walking and brush against someone they touch you just as much as you touch them and this theoretical concept was something of a fascination for Ruskin in the 1860s. As

Maurice Merleau-Ponty states in *The Visible and the Invisible*, between “my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things” (123). Touch is never one sided; and as Elizabeth Grosz states in *Volatile Bodies*, “[t]ouch may well prove to be the most difficult and complex of all the senses to analyze because it is composed of so many interacting dimensions of sensitivity, involving a number of different functions” (Grosz 98) such as the concepts mentioned above in relation to tactility pressure, temperature, and even pain.

Ruskin’s *The Ethics of the Dust* provides a complex example of how our lived environment is necessarily built on the arrangement of community and interpersonal (and oftentimes gendered) relationships. The text refers to ethical dilemmas and dynamics as well as ethics in terms of a general set of principles Ruskin feels are good rules of conduct for negotiations within society. In the text, he is seemingly asking, how do we start to build an ethical community? how do we ensure that each person has a place within that community? *The Ethics of the Dust* blurs genres by exploring the performance of architecture through tactility and he does this through reference to geology—more specifically crystalline structures as a touchstone for conceptualizing how to build. Through this play/philosophical treatise/series of lectures, Ruskin addresses how an understanding of tactility can intersect with our ability to create architectural limits that confine and exclude others either intentionally or unintentionally (both are bad in Ruskin’s opinion). *The Ethics of the Dust* is centred on a main character called The Old Lecturer, who throughout the text explains various concepts related to science and society to the other characters that are nicknamed “Little Housewives.” One of the concepts he explains is spatial negotiations and being within a community, and he achieves this is by getting the students to literally act out crystal formations by having each student pretend they are an atom and move as far away from each other as possible to recreate and perform a crystalline structure. He dictates things like the importance of “orderly rows” and responds to queries with comments like ““how do they know their places?’ you asked, or should have asked. Yes, and they have to do much more than know them: they have to find their way to them, and that quietly and at once, without running against each other” (222). Later on, he says “I can’t allow any running against each other. The atoms never do that, whatever human creatures do. You must all know your places, and find your way without jostling” (236). This text lends itself to a rich and layered gendered interpretation, specifically how the possibility of creating or building community or the act of being in community without actually “touching” is very gendered. Ruskin has already emphasized, as mentioned above, that buildings need tactile elements and that they need to be built using strong aesthetic craftsmanship by hand, but in order to negotiate, live, and thrive in those spaces all touching and tactile interaction (at least intersubjectively) must stop.

As Merleau-Ponty suggests, tactile experience adheres to the surface of the body (369) and Ruskin seemingly understood this and wanted to prevent a tactile memory. His avoidance strategy is to build in space between people and adopt or promote mathematically calculated spaces that circumvent proximity. Ruskin’s tactile ethics requires reflection, awareness, use and expansion of space as much as possible while maintaining the importance of knowing your materials and using your hands wisely and well to build. Merleau-Ponty’s work suggests that the task of architecture is to make visible how the world touches us (Pallasmaa 31). Ruskin

understood how the tactile connects us both through time and tradition, through our intersubjective relations. Our buildings build history and define our sense of community and this is the grounding for the ethical intersubjective relations within a built environment that Ruskin theorized and practiced in his work.

Ethics

Clearly ethics is an important concept for Ruskin and is the third and final pillar to his architectural thought. He wants to see ethics in craft and handwork; he wants to see ethics in community and the architecture that we use and share; he also wants to build social structures that allow for educational spaces. A bioethical framework developed by Maurice Hamington can help contextualize the performative of tactility, in order to better understand the tension between the need for tactility in the building of buildings and how that same tactility is best avoided in the interpersonal interactions within that building. Hamington's work reinforces how tactile or haptic understandings of space usually require habitual performance and outlines an ethics of care: an action needs to be repeated in order to be understood, and in this repetition habit is created. It is through ritual repetition that a particular touch can be categorized as caring and ethical as opposed to uncaring and unethical. Within this framework and reinforcement of repetition and habit it suggests that it is not one good touch that will create an architectural design that espouses care and access. At the same time this framework suggests that it is important to look at how a built environment can cause repetitive unethical encounters in terms of user design. Hamington states:

For the sake of my analysis, habits can be divided into three categories: acaring, noncaring, and caring. An acaring habit is a morally neutral pattern the body uses to navigate its environment [...] Noncaring habits are those that harm another embodied being; examples include spousal abuse, child molestations, and acting out road rage. Caring habits are those that exhibit a regard for the growth, flourishing, and well-being of another. (Hamington 57)

For someone like Ruskin, each member of society should be negotiating and navigating their built world with acaring habits, "morally neutral patterns," and the same principle holds for the architect. The architect needs to build while keeping the need for morally neutral patterns in mind. Architects must create spaces where acaring patterns become habitual and not spaces where noncaring habits are the norm, which is what we too often see in architecture and design today, at least in North America.

Conclusion

The urban space that we usually see throughout North America is a fractured space that lacks a commitment to craft. Buildings and built environments are constructed without a commitment to or understanding of community. In fact, some new builds are openly hostile to community by removing grass or putting up dividers or spikes so people cannot sit or congregate. Therefore, the folk who live in and around these spaces and try to use them live with an understanding that there is no ethics in building and none of these spaces are actually for us. Having all three of the Ruskinian pillars of architectural design—craft, community, and

ethics— allows for an historic grounding of sensory theory in our architectural practice, and creates an architecture for all time instead of an architecture of a moment. Our architecture should be building a commune(ity), a group of people with place held in common. As Pallasmaa states “architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world and the mediation takes place through the senses “(50). The haptic experience of the majority of North American urban architecture today demonstrates that we really have a way to go in order to recover the craft, community, and ethics in architecture. This year is the bicentenary of Ruskin’s birth, and it serves as a great opportunity to think about tactility and architecture in order to design and build places that would make Ruskin proud.

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ⁱ <http://ruskin.ashmolean.org/collection/8979/object/14315>

ⁱⁱ <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/venice-byzantine-capitals-concave-group/vwEO3dZ3n1jSdA>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/merton-college-and-magpie-lane/QgFg_mGhNNpOmA