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Abstract

If innovation is a term applied to an instrument that is set to perform a *work*, this short paper proposes to define a hypothetical work field and goal for architecture as a discipline.

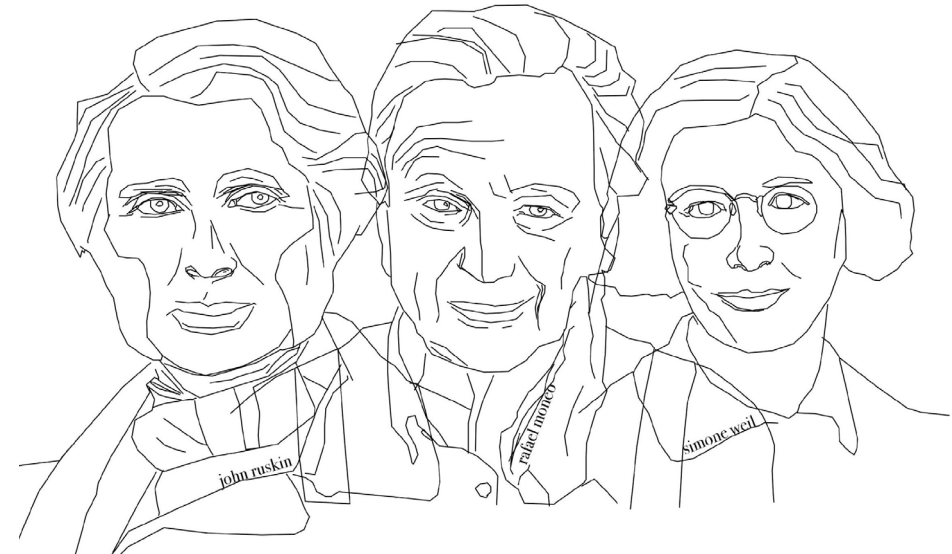
Writings of John Ruskin (1819-1900), theoretical scholar of the Victorian period, will here be used for their clear definition of architecture as a tool for an expressed purpose: the establishment of a better society and the formation of personal character through an act of education.

Once clarified the objective of the work to pursue, this paper presents the characteristics of *innovation* in architecture when utilised as a practical instrument, through the theoretical classifications of different scholars of the 20th Century.

JOHN RUSKIN, ARCHITECTURAL INNOVATION IN ANONYMITY

The creative process of a discipline

Matheus Cartocci



Img 1
Image elaboration by the author

ARCHITECTURE BECOMES TRULY INNOVATIVE,
NOT JUST IN STYLE, WHEN IT IS USED
AS A TOOL FOR A COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOUR

Innovation is associated to a certain idea of performativity and positive advancement, usually in the sphere of technologies and controlled actions. The scientific methodology is considered to be the most efficient method to study and foresee these actions.

Cambridge Dictionary defines innovation as *-the use of a new idea or method-*, (dictionary.cambridge.org) which implies a vague notion of instrumentality towards a determined goal and a specific usage.

When a third object is mechanical and capable of a specific work, it can be subjected to innovation and when the energy required to produce that given work diminishes, innovation is associated to *performance*.

Once a final objective is set, innovation is a *new way of doing*¹ an action in order to achieve the results. This paper identifies in John Ruskin's writings, a precise definition of the objective of any social being with transformative capacities: the betterment of the collective society through individual revision.

Moreover paraphrasing Ruskin, architecture is defined as a highly efficient tool for this type of work, *when applied in the direction* intended.

The Objective of an Action

In the XIX century Victorian London, during the highest peak of England's second industrial revolution, in an era of great scientific advancements and technological innovations, the scholar John Ruskin stands as one of the central figures of the century. His visions are different to the newly compartmentalised academic subjects. His intere-

sts begin with geology and grow through art and architecture, to finally land in economics and sociology.

In *The Stones of Venice*, with his most famous chapter *The Nature of Gothic* Ruskin tackles in 1851 the very idea of innovation related to the new conditions of labour in the industrialised Victorian London, and brings the focus not on the goods' production yet on its producers: "We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilised invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: -Divided into mere segments of men - broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little pieces of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail [...]"(Ruskin, 2009: 165). In 1866 John Ruskin publishes *The Crown of Wild Olive* where he groups a series of lectures delivered in 1864 and 1865. Among these, the author re-proposes with *Traffic* the lecture that took place in Bradford (England) in 1864.

In this paper he presents his views about Architecture and its role in society, after maturing his new beliefs on political economy and social innovation. When invited by the wealthy businessmen of the town of Bradford to suggest an architectural style for a local Exchange building that was to be built, Ruskin suggests rather to reconsider the initial reasons and questions that called for a new public construction. He affirms that a specific architectural style is of no meaning whatsoever if the community that builds it does not live in accordance: it would produce just a superficial image of a building

and not a true manifestation of a collective intentionality, and fade rather quickly in time. In this occasion, one of the most famous Victorian defenders of gothic architecture - Ruskin became well known for his thorough apology of venetian architecture (Ruskin, 2009) - affirms "the Gothic rose also to its loveliest, most fantastic, and finally, most foolish dreams; and in those dreams was lost." (Ruskin, 1997: 240) In the century of harsh dispute between gothic revival and neo-classicism, the author invites his audience to go beyond minor stylistic choices and actually focus on the social relevance of erecting a truly collective building. Ruskin advocates for a more equal and just society, where architecture is necessarily the tool to achieve this goal, since it is the final manifestation of all arts, and among all arts it is the only that can stand the pass of time, and memory (Ruskin, 2007: 211).

John Ruskin's work can be of great use for today's understanding of social and political justice not for his aphorisms and answers yet for the clarity of his questions: for his capacity of setting a communal target that can justify the expenses of a collective endeavour.

"But if you can fix some conception of a true human state of life to be striven for — life for all men as for yourselves — if you can determine some honest and simple order of existence; following those trodden ways of wisdom, which are pleasantness, and seeking her quiet and withdrawn paths, which are peace; — then, and so sanctifying wealth into 'commonwealth,' all your art, your literature, your daily labours, your domestic affection, and citizen's

duty, will join and increase into one magnificent harmony. You will know then how to build, well enough; you will build with stone well, but with flesh better; temples not made with hands, but riveted of hearts; and that kind of marble, crimson-veined, is indeed eternal." (Ruskin, 1997: 249).

The Instrumental Use of a Tool

In the second half of the nineteenth century John Ruskin advocated for a usage of designing and building that went beyond architectural styles and mere symbolic decorations.

One hundred years later several thinkers and practitioners, such as Rafael Moneo, address the instrumental use of typologies and models in architecture along with their efficiency in the contemporary practice. With his essay *On Typology* (Moneo, 1978) Moneo writes of architecture and its types related to the large span of time and history, for a better understanding of *innovation* in the practice. Some of the questions that implicitly seem to arise are: When does the discipline encounter a leap forward that is characteristic of an innovative change (Britannica Encyclopedia)? What are the conditions that need to occur in order to have a significant transformation in the linearity of history, in evolution? What are the instruments architects may use to foster this shift and is it possible to recognise it during the action?

In the paper Moneo suggests two very interesting characteristics that could reveal if a contribution by a single or collective are truly significant in its innovation: *generality* and *anonymity*. Two features that were very dear to

Ruskin's understanding of the original gothic architecture (Ruskin, 2009).

"By looking at architectural objects as groups, as types, susceptible to differentiation in their secondary aspects, the partial obsolescences appearing in them can be appraised, and consequently one can act to change them. The type can thus be thought of as the *frame within which change* operates, a necessary term to the continuing dialect required by history. From this point of view, the type, rather than being a "frozen mechanism" to produce architecture, becomes a way of denying the past, as well as a way of looking at the future.

In this continuous process of transformation, the architect can extrapolate from the type, changing its use; he can distort [...]; he can overlap [...]; The list of different mechanisms is extensive - it is a function of the inventiveness of architects.

The most intense moments in architectural development are those when a new type appears. One of the architect's greatest efforts, and thus the most deserving of admiration, is made when he gives up a known type and clearly sets out to formulate a new one. Often, external events - such as new techniques or changes in society - are responsible for impelling him toward this creation of a new type, in accordance with a dialectical relationship with history. But sometimes the invention of a new type is the result of an exceptional personality, capable of entering into architecture with its own voice.

When a new type emerges - when an architect is able to describe a new set

of formal relations which generates a new group of buildings or elements - then that architect's contribution has reached the level of generality and anonymity that characterises architecture as a discipline." (Moneo, 1978: 27-28).

This last sentence is particularly relevant since it associates to the discipline of architecture the universal characters of anonymity and generality and by writing this, the author seems to understand it differs from the arts and their history of personal achievements related to the artists; it rather comes closer to the sciences and their objectivity in method and goals.

This anonymity could also be intended as impersonality and detachment from the results of one's work: belonging no longer to a single's experience, yet to history's major time line. As Simone Weil writes so well in her *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, "What is sacred in science is the truth. What is sacred in art is the beauty. The truth and the beauty are impersonal. This is all too evident. If a boy makes a mistake in a mathematical addition, the mistake carries a trace of his person. If he proceeds in a perfectly correct manner, his person is absent from the entire operation. Perfection is impersonal. The person within us corresponds with the part of us that is error and sin. All the efforts of the mystics were always directed to remove any part of their soul that said "I". (Weil, 2012: 19)

Learning from John Ruskin, architecture becomes truly innovative, not just in style, when it is used as a tool for a collective endeavour that is larger than

any personal aspiration or temporary fashion. Innovation can be seen as a happening that occurs on a truly singular and subjective sphere, springing from the awareness of single people that take part in a larger collective, and only in a second moment arises to a state of anonymity and impersonality. As Siegfried Giedion has coined the term *anonymous history* in *Mechanization Takes Command* (Giedion, 1970:2,4), we could conclude: innovation in architecture can be considered as such when it is an anonymous addition to the line of historical events.

Notes

¹ "Innovation, the creation of a new way of doing something, whether the enterprise is concrete (e.g., the development of a new product) or abstract (e.g., the development of a new philosophy or theoretical approach to a problem)." britannica.com, accessed January 12th 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/innovation-creativity>.

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