

# BOOK REVIEW

THE AESTHETICS OF ARCHITECTURE.

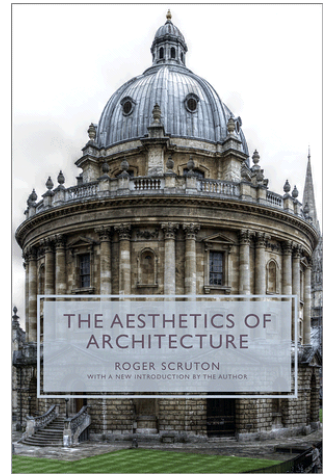
ROGER SCRUTON.

PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013 (1ST EDITION 1979).

REVIEWED BY HILDE HEYDEN

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Roger Scruton is a well-known and well-respected philosopher whose work has been extensively studied and commented upon, especially in the field of aesthetics [1]. In this field, Scruton's recently reissued book on architecture is generally appreciated. It is even considered a "classic in architectural philosophy" [2]. Scruton's standing within the field of architectural history and theory, on the other hand, is a point of contention. In this regard, the book is far less extensively studied and certainly not seen as indispensable. In the recent *Sage Handbook of Architectural Theory*, the sixty page section on "Aesthetics/Pleasure/Excess," for example, only mentions the book in passing, as an example of normative discourse "pitched against the theoretical developments published in progressive architectural journals" [3]. How does one attempt to explain this discrepancy? How is it that a book that clearly impresses many philosophers fails to register broadly in architectural culture? There is of course the possibility that aesthetics as a field matters to architects or artists only like 'ornithology to birds' [4]. It seems, however, that the reasons for the discrepancy are more complicated than that. Architectural culture supports, after all, a flourishing critical and theoretical discourse with a multitude of journals, books, and series all devoted to discussing the merits and values of particular trends, architects, works, and ideas. This discourse engages quite intensively with a host of philosophical references, and many prominent architects are actively involved



in the exchange. How is it then that the parameters of the discourse are so clearly different in philosophical aesthetics and in architectural theory? Would one not expect that these fields would be involved in an intensive transdisciplinary dialogue? Both try, after all, to make sense of what it is that drives architecture and what makes up its specific qualities. This review will try to delve into this problem after briefly discussing Scruton's position and summarizing the book's content and merits.

When *The Aesthetics of Architecture* was first published in 1979 the book was understood as part of a series of publications that all focused on questions regarding the meaning of architecture. Semiotics was, at that moment, a central concern in architectural culture, and many authors sought to develop an approach to architecture that could go beyond the functionalism and rationalism of the modern movement. Such publications provided the intellectual ground for what became known as postmodernism, and Scruton's book might be seen as part of that endeavor. Scruton, however, was different from the other authors in this field (such as Norberg-Schulz, Eco, Jencks, Bonta, and others) in that he considerably narrowed the type of architecture that he saw as 'right.' His book may be simplified as an argument in favor of some form of classicism in architecture, and there are thus only a few contemporary architects whom he would sympathize with. As such, his position is out of sync with the architectural culture of the last decades. Classical-minded architects and theorists, just like new urbanists and neo-historicists, belong to a subculture which sometimes manages to evoke popular appeal, but which has not penetrated the academic sphere or the higher echelons of the professional field.

The new introduction Scruton wrote for the 2013 edition confirms the impression of desynchronization with mainstream culture. Here the author is more outspoken in his criticism of modernism and in his alignment with particular architects and theorists than he was in the 1979 version of the book. He mentions such architectural figures as Christopher Alexander, Nikos Salingaros, and Leon Krier as people who share his convictions. These are authors who indeed do not figure among the most prominent individuals in current architectural culture. Alexander and Krier briefly occupied a position of influence in the 1980s and 1990s—the heydays of postmodernism—but their intellectual impact has largely withered away due to the renewed prominence of modernism and modernity, in all their complexities, as the main point of reference. Salingaros is a mathematician and younger collaborator of Alexander, who has written several works

on architecture and urbanism. He calls for a built environment catering to human emotions and providing agreeable and pleasant places to live, and thus fights ‘stararchitects’ as well as all forms of deconstructivism and poststructuralism. Again, Salingaros’s work seems to have some popular appeal, but it is not widely known or highly regarded within the architectural field as a whole, which rather engages with questions of technology, sustainability, infrastructure, urbanism, or justice [5]. Many architects are weary of easy argumentations like Salingaros’s because they understand how the call for ‘pleasant places’ can hide utter conservatism as well as resistance against any form of innovation.

Let us now turn to Scruton’s book itself and its arguments. The author helpfully provides a summary in the third part of the book, which rehearses its line of reasoning. I will draw upon that summary to give an overview of his argument. Scruton posits in the first chapter that architecture does not derive its nature from being a form of art but rather from an everyday occupation with getting things right—which is basically an aesthetic concern. He thus wishes to start from the aesthetics of everyday life as the basis for his discussions. In the next chapters, he deals with theories that, according to him, detach aesthetics from architecture or that erroneously perceive some concept as central or essential to architecture. He thus dismisses functionalism, rationalism, theories of space and proportion, as well as discourses based upon the art historical concepts of Riegl (*Kunstwollen*) and Wölflinn (*Zeitgeist*). All of these approaches are ‘vacuous’ because they all fail to adequately describe the experience of architecture. In order to give a positive account of the experience of architecture, Scruton reverts to the concept of imagination, which he deems absolutely crucial for his aesthetics. Moreover, he claims that it “is because the experience of architecture is imaginative that architecture can be judged right or wrong” [6]. For

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aesthetic judgment is based upon imagination, informed by perception, and modified by reasoned reflection. It aims at an ideal of objectivity and at a continuity with moral life—hence its normative quality.

With all this, the basis is put together for further dismissals of other competing discourses. Freudian and Marxist analyses are seen as largely irrelevant to the understanding of architecture because they either generalize beyond aesthetics or devote themselves to a falsification of architectural experience, thus missing the point. The efforts of semiotics to understand architecture as a language likewise turn out to be ‘vacuous’ because they lack a theoretical basis or a critical application. Concepts such as ‘representation’ or ‘expression’ are faulted for not adequately connecting aesthetic judgment with the practice of the builder. Finally, the concluding chapters argue the importance of detail and the role of style as an indispensable adjunct to architectural knowledge. They culminate in a defense of classicism, which is seen as the only approach to architecture that allows it to connect with a true understanding of the self and with objectivity.

This quick summary of course does not properly acknowledge the depth of the author’s knowledge or the fine-tuned details of his specific discussions. Scruton is well read in the history of architectural theory, and he is an expert in the tradition of aesthetic philosophy up to Kant and Hegel. He clearly makes an effort to familiarize himself with architectural discourses such as those of Giedion or Tafuri. Many of his architectural examples are also quite illuminative and help to clarify his arguments. These qualities, however, cannot detract from the book’s weak point: its set-up as a take-it-or-leave-it argument, almost like a mathematical proof that sets out to validate the correctness of a formula by deriving it from previously proven formulas or from axioms. If, as a reader, one disagrees with only one step in the reasoning, that is enough to render the whole argument—and especially its conclusions—unconvincing (or ‘vacuous,’ to use Scruton’s own term). This, of course, happened to this particular reader early on in the text. I disagreed with Scruton’s analysis of functionalism and the theories of space in chapters 2 and 3. Whereas I was still following him in chapter 1—agreeing with his approach to architecture as being based on utility, location, public character, and continuity with decorative arts, which he later sums up as ‘aesthetics of the everyday’—his analysis of functionalism struck the wrong chord. Scruton understands ‘theory’ as prescriptive: “architectural theory consists in the attempt to formulate the maxims, rules and precepts which govern, or ought to govern, the practice of the builder” [7]. That means that he is reading texts by architects as if

they are fully explanatory of the architecture they produce, which is rarely the case. If Hannes Meyer wrote manifests of functionalism—which he did—this does not in turn mean that all his design projects can be explained as if he just applied his own rules—he did not. It also means, however, that a mere philosophical disputation of the correctness of the theory is not enough to deny the buildings associated with it any aesthetical significance. It is not because modernist theory does not hold that modernist buildings therefore lack any value. This however seems to be an important subtext in Scruton’s book.

The author also takes issue with Giedion’s and Zevi’s theory of space, which considers space and spatial articulations as the essence of architecture. “Taken literally,” he states, “the theory that the experience of architecture is an experience of space is obviously indefensible” [8]. The reasons for this indefensibility however do not convince me. According to Scruton, as soon as one can point to an architectural feature that does not relate to space or spatial experience, the theory is invalidated. He thinks he found such features by referring to materials or by referring to the differences between carved and molded forms. However, for people thinking as architects (I count myself among them), both materials and carved versus molded forms are fine examples of how some details can articulate space in different ways, causing different experiences of space. Hence for me the theory of space continues to be a contender for adequately conceiving what the ‘essence’ of architecture might be. Because I thus repeatedly found unaddressed objections to parts of Scruton’s argument, the whole book seemed to become one large fallacy, constructed to prove the inescapability of what Scruton calls ‘classical vernacular’ as the only valid form of architecture. The more I read, the more the text came across as a potentially interesting but largely irrelevant elaboration of an argument, many

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parts of which I found too poorly developed to sustain scrutiny.

There are other small mistakes and larger misunderstandings in this book that might irritate people familiar with architectural culture. (They are competently summed up by Juan Pablo Bonta in his review from 1981 [9].) Rather than further repeating the flaws, however, I would like to point out two major issues that are responsible for the wide gap that separates Scruton from much contemporary reflection in architectural theory. The first has to do with the import of modernity, the second with his claim to objectivity.

From the turn of the twentieth century onwards, architects and architectural theorists have been talking about modernity. Around 1900, Berlage, Muthesius, Loos, Van de Velde, and many others agreed that industrialization and urbanization gave rise to societies with a wholly different way of life, which hence necessitated a wholly different kind of architecture. There was a widespread consensus that modernity implied a rupture with tradition, and that this discontinuity somehow had to be reflected in architecture. The intensity of the conviction provoked an aesthetics that no longer took classicism to be the ultimate point of reference. The new aesthetic sensibility has since been elaborated in many different ways—avant-garde, modernism, art deco, regionalism, critical regionalism, high tech, postmodernism, deconstructivism, neo-modernism, etc.—but across the board the idea that architecture needs to relate—somehow—to modernity has remained paramount. This means that ‘getting things right,’ as Scruton says, is only part of the equation for contemporary architects. Since dissonance, struggle, and contradictions are so much a part of that modern condition, a new aesthetic register seems to be more adequate, one that can show, in a right way, that things are not all right. Such an aesthetic register is more consistent with the philosophical musings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, or Gilles Deleuze—names indeed prominently present in contemporary architectural culture.

Secondly there is the issue of objectivity. Whereas I agree with Scruton that aesthetic judgment assumes in the act of judging a claim to universal validity, I would be much more reluctant than he is to translate the claim into something actually true and objective. As an architectural theorist who has taken to heart the criticisms of rational discourse coming from Marxism, feminism, and postcolonial theories, I have a hard time accepting Scruton’s writing as possibly universally valid. It rather strikes me as an excellent example of how an intellectual of a specific (hegemonic) class, gender, and culture produces a discourse

that serves the continuation of the dominance of that class, gender, and culture. I do not believe, in other words, that there really is a general consensus possible about how buildings would ‘feel right.’ I do not believe that the aesthetics of the everyday can be anything else than confusing, contradictory, and hybrid (which, by the way, I see more as an asset than as a problem).

All in all, I think Scruton’s *The Aesthetics of Architecture* narrows architecture to something which most of its practitioners today would not recognize as such—as if architecture essentially deals with only questions of style and detail, regardless of everything else. Most architects and theorists would agree that architecture necessarily engages with the real world—that it is crucial therefore to consider political and social issues (such as, Who is the client? Who is excluded? Who is included?), technological and material questions, ecological constraints, contextual considerations, and so on, as part and parcel of what architecture is all about. An aesthetic theory valid for today needs to adequately address these issues, not putting them aside as ‘marginal’ to the ‘essence’ of architecture. I am afraid that Scruton’s book does not live up to these expectations, not in 1979 and not now.

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#### ENDNOTES

[1] Andy Hamilton and Nick Zangwill (eds.), *Scruton’s Aesthetics* (New York: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[2] Rafael De Clercq, “Scruton on Rightness of Proportion in Architecture,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 4 (2009): 405.

[3] John Macarthur and Naomi Stead, “Introduction: Architecture and Aesthetics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, eds. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns, and Hilde Heynen (London: Sage, 2012), 126.

[4] Barnett Newman, “Untitled” (presentation, 4th Annual Woodstock Art Conference, Woodstock,

NY, August 22-23, 1952).

[5] *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory* doesn't even mention Salingeros.

[6] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 240.

[7] *Ibid.*, 3.

[8] *Ibid.*, 39.

[9] Juan Pablo Bonta, review of *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, by Roger Scruton, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39, no. 3 (1981): 328-330.