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John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture by Anuradha Chatterjee (review)

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John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture

Anuradha Chatterjee
Routledge, 2017

In her treatise championing aesthetic restraint in modern architecture, *The Decoration of Houses* (1896–1897), Edith Wharton laments the “unscientific methods” of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century decorators, decrying that “house-decoration has come to be regarded as a black art by those who have seen their rooms subjected to the manipulations of the modern upholsterer.” She goes further, writing that “Mr. Ruskin is entitled to the reverence and gratitude of all; but as a logical exponent of the causes and effects of the beauty he discovers, his authority is certainly open to question. For years he has spent the full force of his unmatched prose in denouncing the enormity of putting a door or a window in a certain place in order that it may correspond to another; nor has he scrupled to declare to the victims of this practice that it leads to abysses of moral as well as of artistic degradation.” As in all of her works, Wharton is critical of the values and *mores* of a culture that had championed the gothic revival and had embraced the theory and principles of John Ruskin, the pole star of the movement. Beginning with theorists of Wharton’s generation, the architectural principles of Ruskin, with their emphasis on the surface, the veil, the *fabric* of architecture, had become emblematic of the worst excesses of nineteenth-century historicizing aesthetics. Indeed, with the advent of the twentieth century, classical rationalism and — in the fullness of time — modernist restraint, would wholly supplant a Ruskinian *ethos* premised on the idea that architecture *is* surface, *is* fabric. By consequence, the theories and principles of Ruskin came to be wholly disregarded, reaching a nadir of critical attention and academic consideration by the middle of the last century. With the 1970s and 1980s, a Ruskinian renaissance began — one that has proliferated into a robust, inter- and cross-disciplinary appreciation of the ramifications of Ruskin’s thought, not just on architecture and painting but on fields as far-reaching as economics, gender, politics, labor, and beyond.

In this renaissance, analysis of many aspects of Ruskin’s thought have demonstrated the enduring relevance of the Victorian Sage — the work of Robert Hewison, Cynthia Gamble, Nicholas Shrimpton, Francis O’Gorman, Sharon Weltman, Alan Davis, John Unrau, and many others spring immediately to mind. In the context of the abundance of scholarly work advancing the relevance of Ruskin in modern discourse on

the theory and criticism of architecture, it is truly remarkable when a writer contributes a genuinely new perspective into Ruskin's relevance. This is precisely what Anuradha Chatterjee has accomplished in *John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture*, published by Routledge (2017). Chatterjee builds upon the current of contemporary Ruskinian scholarship, deriving original insights into Ruskin's pandisciplinary thought, enriching our understanding of the intersections of wall and veil, gender and body, and their formal parallels in architecture, along with theories about dress, adornment, and edifice as they come together in Ruskin's aesthetic "effects." Most compelling is the connection that Chatterjee draws between Ruskin's position on restoration and the aesthetic ramifications arising from the privileging of the "crutch" over the "lost limb" — to borrow Ruskin's terms. *John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture* is a masterful defense of the enduring value of Ruskin's theories in contemporary architectural discourse, elucidating the relationship between Ruskin's theories and dress, gender, science, and visual studies, one which testifies to the enduring relevance of Ruskinian thought in bracingly fresh and illuminating ways, effectively delineating Ruskin himself from the "black arts" of those who have superficially sought Ruskinian "effects."

Biography

T. B. Kennedy is an architectural historian, preservationist, and writer whose work centers on the intersections of philosophy, economics, criticism, and material culture as they relate to architecture and the fine arts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is a former Stones of Venice scholar at the Ruskin Library and Research Centre at Lancaster University, a former William Kinne Fellow, and the author of *Here the Great Flaw in the Man: A Prolegomena to Ruskin's Marginalia in Viollet-le-Duc's Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du Xle au XVIe siècle* for *Contemporary Historic Preservation*, winner of the 2018 Ali Jawad Malik History/Theory Honor Award.