INTRODUCTION

Whether or not we are experiencing, in the recent words of one academic, a "new centrality of architecture in cultural discourse",[1] it has become commonplace to regard architecture as one of the more important clues to understanding society. Opinion is divided on whether it moulds or merely reflects the world around it, but, whatever view we take, it seems we have become content – even after successive waves of structuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction – to read the social significance of our buildings mainly on the surface, where the *architecture* is. Whether a building aspires to order, as does Foster and Partners' Carré d'Art in Nîmes, with its echoes of the Roman forms of the nearby Maison Carrée, or to disorder, as does Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, with its erratic dance around an eighteenth-century villa, we accept that it is the job of the *architect* to translate social reality into built form. He or she is the only one who has the vision necessary to penetrate the complexities of modern society, and so give form to what would otherwise remain formless.[2] In accepting this we privilege the architect's contribution above those of other participants in the act of building.

Recent studies have begun to reveal the extent to which the architect was subject to prevailing "building culture" before the Renaissance, when there was an understanding that the entire act of building was somehow political. Evelyn Welch has shown how the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century building lodges of Milan acted as a political counterweight to the signorial supremacy of the Visconti and Sforza dukes.[3] At a crucial moment in the history of that city's Cathedral, geometricians – nascent architects, led by the Frenchman Jean Mignot – made a doomed attempt to ally themselves with ducal authority in order to overturn the power of the lodge.[4] In such an atmosphere it was unlikely that anyone looking for social significance in building would give precedence to architectural form over building process: form and process coexisted in a "balance of power" that would endure in a similar fashion for nearly five centuries.

Yet, only half a century after the confrontation in Milan, in the fourth of his *Ten Books on Architecture*, Leon Battista Alberti was explaining how the finished, formal attributes of building – those things with which the architect was particularly concerned – could express social meaning and hierarchy. Supporting

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his argument with various quotations from classical authors, he showed how the various types of buildings found together in the city illustrated "the Division of the People into Different Orders".[5] It was once assumed that Alberti's emphasis on form betrayed a lack of concern, on his part, with the processes by which buildings were made. In the 1970s Leopold D. Ettlinger called Alberti a "dilettanti", who "never pretended to any expertise on the practical side of architecture".[6] But, as Erwin Panofsky had made clear some years before that,[7] the Renaissance watershed did not divide theory from practice in such a straightforward way.

More recently, various authors have attempted to put Alberti back in the context of the building culture of his times and to challenge the extent to which he imagined he stood "above" building craft. Robert Tavernor, for example, has emphasised the extent to which the abstract certainties of Albertian theory were softened in practice.[8] According to Tavernor, Alberti's mercantile background made him fear the "corruption of intellectual ideas" when they were submitted to practice – as architectural ideas must be – but this prompted him not to build a wall between theory and practice but to look for ways of effectively retaining the old balance between the intellectual and the sensual, thought and action. The previous view of Alberti seems to have been based more on what he *said* – his ambitions – than on what he actually *did*, in response to the reality of the building world of his day. In his recent biography of the architect, Anthony Grafton has shown that, in practice, Alberti extended the late medieval method of anticipating, or settling, disagreements through "disputation",[9] a process which testified to the complementarity of intellectual and manual pursuits. Grafton's Alberti, in sharp contrast to Ettlinger's, "placed the abstract, classically grounded pursuits of the well-born and the sweaty, paint-smeared crafts of men who worked with their hands on the same level". He found the "rare and secret knowledge"[10] of craftsmen so valuable, in fact, that, within the "community of critics", he occasionally claimed to speak "as a craftsman" himself.[11]

Craft knowledge became increasingly valued as buildings grew larger. It offered a necessary corrective to a merely scholarly, abstract, approach to building. Everyone connected with building understood that "what worked structurally in a model could not necessarily be achieved when the proportions were magnified",[12] which suggested that geometry alone was not enough. It was Galileo's interest in the limits of abstract knowledge that prompted him to observe and question builders at the Venetian Arsenal, where he learnt that their practical experience led them to introduce modifications to the pure geometry of the large structures being erected there: for example, thickening the walls at various points, so as to make the structure sound as well as beautiful.[13] It was this same craftsman's sense of how geometry in the abstract ought to be corrected by sound building practice which had enabled Brunelleschi to perform the seemingly miraculous task of roofing over the crossing of Sta. Maria dei Fiori in Florence.[14]

So we have here an interesting situation, in which individual vision – coming unprecedentedly to the fore – was still obliged to sublimate itself within the collective effort of building. Alberti's ideal of authority in the building world may have been as uncomplicated as his view of how the city should be ordered – with "a single ruler and a single designer" choosing the site, laying out the plan of streets, and establishing different areas for different trades and classes of citizen[15] – but he knew the reality had to be different. Grafton surely misses the point when he concludes that "For all its collective character, Alberti's architecture reflected his own convictions".[16] In fact, Alberti knew full well that his personal convictions could only be carried through if they were submitted to collective debate, and one of his most valuable skills was to be able to balance the individual with the collective in this way.

The models of debate Alberti favoured looked forward to the learned society or professional institute rather than back to the craft guild. In short, he is revealing of the extent to which even so independently minded and ambitious an architect was constrained in practice by the prevailing building culture; and how the authority he wielded had to emerge from a reciprocity between mind and hand. To have sought to break this compact would have been more damaging to the architect at that time than to the builder, as the Frenchman Jean Mignot had discovered to his cost in Milan. Only in theory was the architect able to indulge in a sense of being "above" building. In their published statements, Renaissance architects seemed, on the whole, to agree with the classical view that finished architectural form reflected the underlying, Platonic, truth of the world better than the crafts of the *banausoi,* who the Ancients had deemed undeserving of a political life.[17] In theory, then, if not in practice, the contribution of the artisan to a work of architecture was rendered virtually invisible.

Architecture uniquely brings together the "Material" of building with the "Essential" vision of the architect, two terms mentioned together in an anonymous pamphlet of 1773 on "The Qualifications and Duties of an Architect".[18] The ambition of Renaissance architects was to delve deeper into the *essence* of building, without entirely overlooking the need to submit their ideals to the world of *material* contingency, ruled by building tradesmen of various kinds. The peculiar nature of architectural production thus reproduced the mutual but "asymmetrical"[19] dependence of high and low estates in society-at-large. It would be some time, however, before this unique characteristic of architecture could find expression in polite discussion of the art. In fact, it was only just becoming possible to do so when the anonymous essayist came to write, two centuries after Alberti, about "the Material and Essential parts of Building". This book will examine why this dual aspect of architecture became a matter of renewed concern at that time, and what effect this had on architectural debate in the century that followed.

As Terry Eagleton has noted, one must not be misled by the classicism of the arts of the eighteenth century into believing that each of its underlying assumptions can be traced back to Aristotle.[20] One reason the dual nature of architecture became discussable in the late eighteenth century in Britain was a series of profound political and economic developments which had only begun at the end of the previous century.[21] Building – already seen to be of social significance because of the sheer weight of resources it consumed and the permanence of its results – involved people from all levels of society for its realisation (Figure 1). A re-examination of the place of craft in building began to render the processes of building more *visible*; so the *politics* of the building world seemed again to offer insights into society every bit as useful as those offered by architectural *form*. A social message could be discerned not only in the superficial, formal characteristics of building, but also in the manner in which buildings were brought into being. At a time when the very nature of the newly emergent commercial society of Britain was coming under fierce scrutiny – particularly from those aspiring to lead it – and when new freedoms were being enjoyed in the wake of the political settlement of 1688, the processes which underpinned architectural form took on a new significance, and seemed to shadow larger forces at work in society. This is one factor which makes eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates about building fundamentally so different from those which had gone before, even if for stylistic inspiration practitioners still looked back to their Ancient or Renaissance counterparts, or – as was becoming more common – to the more mysterious Gothic.

After 1688, we begin to see observations about the nature of the building world which are no longer isolated, and pragmatic – as they had been for Alberti and his contemporaries – but made in the hope that they might provide useful insights into a suddenly more confusing, complex and dynamic world. Productive relationships in building, a microcosm of the social sphere, begin now to be seen as possible models for right government outside building. In this postsettlement Britain, Court and Church were losing significance. The nature of authority in "polite" society and the social legitimacy which gave it its force were much less clear-cut than hitherto and became increasingly a subject for debate.[22] And as the order established by traditional institutions was diminishing, a quest for order of a new and unfamiliar kind was initiated by the philosophy of John Locke, and the writings of his pupil, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury.

This desire for a new social order grew steadily greater as the eighteenth century unfolded, and as the forces of urbanism, commercialism, and foreign revolution added to the sense that old points of view were no longer relevant. Yet accounts of eighteenth-century architecture have tended to be preoccupied with static formal attributes at the expense of dynamic processes. This is true even of the revisionist
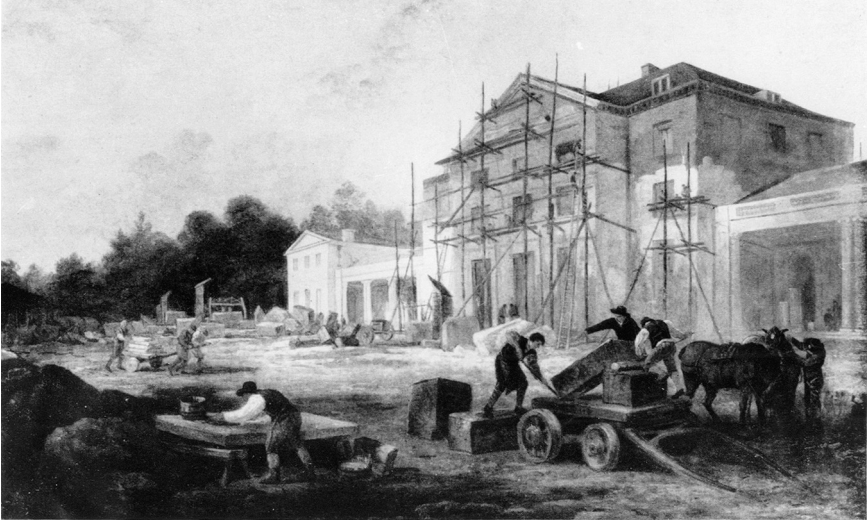
1 Henry Holland's rebuilding of Southill, Bedfordshire, 1797. Painting by George Garrard. (S. C. Whitbread, Southill Park.)

commentaries of Michel Foucault and those inspired by his method, such as the sociologist Richard Sennett. In his book, *Flesh and Stone*, for example, Sennett discusses the changing relationship between the actual bodies (of individuals and crowds) of those living in the city, and the master image of the "generic body" which the architect and planner seek to impose on them.[23] Missing from this account, though, is any acknowledgement of the body politic as it is represented in building culture, which in the act of embodying the architect's and planner's visions, does manage to impose something of itself on the city's stones. This means there may not be so wide a gulf between flesh and stone in the eighteenth century as we may be inclined to believe.[24] The late eighteenth century was a period, in architecture as in language, when apparently elevated classical forms began to be conceived as a field within which general ("top-down") and particular ("bottom-up") views of society might be reconciled. This, it might be argued, was one of the great achievements of James Gandon's brand of classicism, which came to the fore in late-eighteenth-century Ireland, in which divisions between high and low estates were even more visible than in the rest of Britain.[25] Accounts like Sennett's privilege the intellectual content of architecture – its "Essential" aspect – at the expense of its "Material" basis.

Some recent scholarship has begun to suggest a way forward beyond this. The late Chris Brooks's discussion of the Cambridge Camden Society, in which he invoked the French sociologist Pierre Boudieu, suggests one way in which the

power-politics of modern building can be linked to the larger power structures of the nation:

> The Camdenians trajectory in the field of power was replicated in the architectural field, where professionalism was still struggling to define its territory and deny it to the host of builder-architects, contractors and speculators . . . [26]

As Brooks seemed to appreciate, the building world – comprising architects and their representatives, contractors, and various degrees of operatives – constitutes a true *microcosm* of society, mingling together "high" and "low", "polite" and "vulgar". A fine building of any appreciable scale is a miracle of sorts, achieved through an often fragile cooperation between extremely vulgar and extremely elegant pursuits, undertaken jointly by different degrees of humanity: a cooperation which at all times – ours no less than that of 200 years ago – is deeply instructive for all those who wish to understand the society around them. It is one of the purposes of this book to correct the consistent omission from discussions of the social content of architecture of the vital contribution of what Howard Davis calls "The Culture of Building".[27]

This absence of studies of the social meaning of building process seems all the more remarkable because over the last two decades some extremely fruitful examinations have been undertaken into the political significance of the arts of poetry and painting, particularly landscape painting, against the changing background of the eighteenth century. All have been influenced to some extent by the pioneering work of John Barrell,[28] which began with the simple premise

> that polite discussions of art theory are grounded in a discourse of civic humanism, which conceives of a republic of fine arts and taste as a political republic, . . . [29]

This idea, which means that artistic strategies can be understood as covert political strategies, is still controversial, but it has steadily been gaining adherents among historians of art and literature.[30] Landscape painting, in Barrell's view, reflects the politics of its time. No general survey of the period can now be complete without some reference to the connections between landscape and social order. For example, in the new *Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, Tim Fulford describes Alexander Pope's ideal state as "a limited constitutional monarchy, in which great landowners governed the people whom they represented as carefully as they managed the land that entitled them to power".[31] He has called this one "of many efforts . . . to define the proper nature of moral and political authority for a nation whose physical and social organization was changing rapidly".[32] Yet another response to rapid social change was that a new kind of political animal began to emerge around the mid-eighteenth century: a reinvented type of "gentleman". Faced with the manifold changes in "physical and

social organization" taking place around him, this new type of gentleman was forced to question those attitudes previously granted legitimacy only by virtue of detachment and disinterestedness. It was simply not conceivable that this new, diverse, overlapping, and interdependent society which was coming into being should resolve itself into the kind of straightforward "prospect" by means of which sense had been made of earlier social structures. To understand such a society the gentleman had to "descend" from his previous high vantage point to pool his own, admittedly somewhat rarefied, labour (through intellectual sympathy at least) with the greater labour of society. The objective of this descent was to learn to understand this teeming society *from within*, rather than merely from above.

For Barrell, one of the most persuasive literary models for this new breed of gentleman was provided by the poet James Thomson [1700–48] in his figure of "The Knight of Arts and Industry", the hero of his last great poem, *The Castle of Indolence* [1748].[33] Born and educated in Scotland, Thomson had strong sympathy with the "commercial interest"[34] and recognised that Britain's provincial centres would overtake London to become the nation's powerhouse.[35] He came to prominence through the first of a hugely popular cycle of poems, *The Seasons* [1726–40], which, in its concentration on the details of the natural world, represented a striking new literary departure.[36] Fulford once again characteristically conflates landscape and politics, in describing how Thomson

> "observed" the English estates of his politician-patrons, viewing them as places in which God's designing order was reflected in landscape, and in the characters of those shaped by the landscape.[37]

Thomson's Knight of Arts and Industry was called upon to liberate a land fallen under the malign influence of the "wizard" Indolence, and, in so doing, to deploy an unusual range of intellectual and practical accomplishments. The land over which Indolence presided had seemingly turned its back on industry, its inhabitants mistrustful even of its customary sights and sounds:

> No Hammers thump; no
>   Horrid Blacksmith near,
> No noisy Tradesman your Sweet
>   Slumbers start.[38]

This stood in stark contrast to the breadth and openness of the Knight's own sympathies, instilled in him by an education which Thomson describes in some detail:

> Nor would he scorn to stoop from his pursuits
> Of heavy truth, and practice what she taught.

> Vain is the tree of knowledge without fruits!
> Sometimes in hand the spade or plough he caught,
> Forth calling all with which boon earth is fraught;
> Sometimes he plied the strong mechanic tool,
> Or reared the fabric from the finest draught;
> And oft he put himself to Neptune's school,
> Fighting with winds and waves on the vexed ocean pool.[39]

The Knight's ultimate triumph by the poem's end could have had only one meaning: that a set of outworn values – which had been acting to oppose the new world coming into being – was about to be eclipsed by others, which would better equip a man to "rule" within the new, more dynamic, society. Coming from a man who was affiliated with the "Patriot Opposition" gathered around Frederick, Prince of Wales, this can in part be interpreted as an assault on political corruption of the kind associated with the detested regime of Sir Robert Walpole (which came to an end in 1742).[40] The Knight's education embraced not only agriculture, labouring, and naval prowess, but also building – and it is at least implied by the poet that he was the author of the "draught", from which he subsequently erected the building "fabric". To overcome Indolence, intellectual accomplishment had to be leavened with practical engagement – in building as much as in other areas of life.

Thomson was not the only poet of his generation to explore this new theme. In the 1750s, after Thomson's death, the blank verse tale *The Fleece* appeared, written by his contemporary, James Dyer (1699–1757). The poem retails the journey taken by a woollen fleece as it is transformed from animal pelt to human clothing, and describes the variety of people, and diversity of skills, it meets with on its way. Dyer, according to Fulford, believed that "the processes of rural industry are heroic, because they are the source of national prosperity and imperial power".[41] This focus on *processes* of industry or society, lying beneath their outward characteristics, but crucial in giving shape to them, would help define a new philosophy, able to make sense of a world of increasing complexity. Some members of the artistic circle around the Prince of Wales – which, in addition to James Thomson, would later include the young architect William Chambers[42] – shared Dyer's interest in the connection between industrial processes and power. Both the poet and the architect were seeking to apply to their own arts new insights about social process, each seeking to become, in effect, his own Knight of Arts and Industry, by developing an artistic programme which was also distinctively political. Building may not have been regarded as "the source of national prosperity and imperial power" to the extent that "rural industry" was, but it was now coming to be seen as more than the mere expression of these things. "Architecture", Chambers would later claim, "smooths the way for commerce".[43]

More than this, though, as Chambers would also go on to show, it offered a model of productive leadership in the modern world.

Yet, despite the interest shown in recent years in the "political economy" of art, there have been two striking omissions in the resulting scholarship, which this book will attempt to redress. First, we find that the art of architecture – despite its being, in Ruskin's words, the "distinctively political art" – has been totally ignored. This may, ironically, be due less to an assumption that it had no relevance to the emerging social order than to a belief that the social dimension of architecture can be taken for granted more than that of painting or poetry. But, as I have attempted to show, where architecture has been examined for social content, attention has almost invariably been on its *formal* aspects, yet it is only when the practice of architecture is viewed within the context of building culture as a whole that the full wealth of political implications contained in it can be appreciated. The second omission is more difficult to explain. Though many writers on the social content of landscape painting have seen J. M. W. Turner as a crucial figure in adapting the art to the jarring confrontations symptomatic of a commercial age, Turner's most famous champion, John Ruskin, has barely featured in their discussions – this, despite the fact that one of the leading contributors to the field, Elizabeth Helsinger, is herself a Ruskin scholar.[44] I will later be arguing that Ruskin's greatly undervalued "Poetry of Architecture" essays represent an important link between the political dimension of painting, by now examined at length by Barrell and others, and that of building. But I will also argue that Ruskin's views were informed by nearly a century of attempts by architects themselves, and others concerned with building, to relate the politics of building to the politics of the world-at-large; attempts which, up to now, have gone unremarked.

In an attempt to recover an earlier tradition, of which Ruskin was something of a culmination, I have looked at a number of views about the place of the architect in the building world and tried to understand how these views evolved. Most recorded statements on the matter come, as one might expect, from aspiring leaders of building, but we do encounter the occasional voice from "below", which serves to put these more elevated opinions into perspective. Recovering this tradition provides new insight not only into the work of architects as diverse as Chambers, Soane, Barry, and Pugin but also into the contribution of Freemasonry and building magazines to the developing view of the politics of the art during the period 1750–1875. It was a period in which the architect was seeking legitimacy to impose authority upon the disparate set of skills which constituted the building world, which he relied upon to realise his dreams. It has been construed as the Age of Professionalisation, but studies have focused more on the hardware which accompanied architects' efforts, on the tools for securing and implementing an authority one must presume had already been conceded to them.

Our concern is with the "softer" questions, such as how the understanding came about which made the architect's authority over the building world possible in the first place. The classic studies of the rise of the architect often speak far more clearly about the preoccupations of their time of writing than those of the particular periods which they describe. Howard Colvin wrote what he called "a first attempt to trace the origins of the architectural profession in Britain" as early as 1954 to introduce the first edition of his great *Biographical Dictionary of English Architects.*[45] Before it there had been only the broad brush strokes, covering many ages and countries, laid down by Martin Briggs in *The Architect in History* (1927). Coming as it did shortly after a war in which "expert" opinion had seemingly been vindicated, and the practice of central planning established, the Whig tone of Colvin's account is hardly surprising. Divided into two sections, on Building Trades and the Architectural Profession, the ascent of the architect from one field into the other is depicted as linear and inexorable. *Official* support for the architect's status, such as that given by Lord Burlington at the Office of Works, is accorded great importance.

The next English accounts appeared in the wake of the Oxford Conference of 1958, which fully granted academic status to architectural training for the first time.[46] Writing a few years later, Frank Jenkins followed the pattern set by Martin Briggs, in providing a careful, and often stimulating, account, structured both chronologically and thematically. But, as the title of his book, *Architect and Patron*, suggests, a good deal of it concerned relations between the architect and those, often his social betters, who employed his services. He offered some penetrating asides on the building trades, but, as with Colvin, there seems from his account something ineluctable about the advance of the architect out of these trades, which is the case also with the hero of Barrington Kaye's 1960 account of professionalisation written from a sociological perspective. In all these accounts the corollary of the architect's rise is the craftsman's fall. Jenkins claimed, too eagerly, that "By the close of the eighteenth century the craftsman-architect had lost much of his importance and the following century was to see his virtual extinction"[47] – an assertion it would be difficult to prove even for London, never mind more outlying areas of the country – and he thought that "disastrous" experiments like Ruskin's at the Oxford Museum, represented only "perverse ripples on the main tide".[48] In a 1967 article, M. H. Port – who was (with J. M. Crook) later to edit the history of the Office of Works for the period we are considering – was even more explicit about the link between professionalisation and the retreat of the crafts:

> The development of the architectural profession, involving separation of design from execution, was a main factor in limiting the initiative and depressing the status of the craftsman.[49]