Assembled
John Ruskin’s Architectural Ideal

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Abstract
The paper presents John Ruskin’s theory of architecture as assemblage. It is now well known that Ruskin’s writings on medieval architecture focused almost exclusively on (surface) fragments, on quotations severed from their architectural contexts, and pasted and re-presented, as in the plates used to illustrate the Seven Lamps. This was one of the reasons Ruskin’s modernist critics refused to qualify his writings as sufficiently architectural, as they shifted focus from the wholeness and seamlessness of buildings. Instead, they were concerned with the surficial and the fragmentary. Ruskin’s ideal consisted in planar undisrupted walls, veneered surfaces, constructional polychromy, low relief and inlaid ornament, and layering of relief and polychromatic ornament, all variously sourced from Pisan Romanesque, the Gothic of Western Italy, and the Venetian Gothic among others. The architectural quotations were not merely copied and pasted: they were repositioned and repurposed, like the traceries from Gothic cathedrals that were used in the Ducal Palace. Interestingly, there was no particular formula by which the above stated ideality could be achieved: it was in a constant state of emergence. Characterized by historical impurity, stylistic discontinuity, formal fragmentation, and a singularity of expression, the ideal was capable of being reinvented, always. Besides the hybrid nature of the ideal, Ruskin writings appeared to bring focus to buildings as assembled, as three-dimensional assemblages. And, far from suggesting decay, and ruination, and ordinary picturesque interest, the watchful articulation of composition, assembly, and joinery in Ruskin’s drawings appeared to suggest emergence, and a coming to (life). Besides an obvious challenge to classical architecture, argues the paper, Ruskin’s writings articulate a response to the aesthetic and perceptual experiences of modernity.
Introduction
The paper brings focus to John Ruskin’s preoccupation with architectural surface, fragment, assembly, and the hybrid, and recasts this as a theoretical premise of architecture as assemblage. In the first section, the paper considers the manner in which Ruskin’s writings appear to quite consciously militate against wholeness and seamlessness of architecture, building instead on the surficial and the fragmentary. The second section deploys frameworks from within critical theories of modernity to consider the fragment as the ontology of modern aesthetics and experience. The third section returns to Ruskin’s texts, bringing forth the pervasiveness of the fragment (literary, physical, and visual) in his writings; the hybrid and assembled nature of his favourite buildings; and the emergent quality of his architectural ideals. While a number of scholars have positioned Ruskin as contributing to and being an influence on literary, artistic, and architectural modernism, there is no scholarship that examines the performative aspects of Ruskin’s theories that articulate a response to modernity. This paper provides a new reading of Ruskin, considering the agency of the fragment in articulating a theory marked by multiplicity and difference. It is also interesting to examine themes of modernity through Ruskin’s writings, specifically because they occupy the interstices of what is and is not the ‘business’ of architecture.

Between Surfaces and Fragments
Ruskin commentators took issue with the fact that his view of architecture was entirely surficial. Samuel Higgins, a nineteenth-century commentator on Ruskin, argued that “building in which construction is made subservient to, and whose chief glory is colour, whether obtained by painting the surface, or by incrustation with precious and coloured material, cannot be architecture at all, in the proper sense of the word”. Criticism of Ruskin’s surface attention was also augmented by observations that he did not seem capable of understanding structure, and by extension, architecture. In 1924, Charles H. Moore claimed that Ruskin’s “apprehensions were not grounded in a proper sense of structure and he had no practical acquaintance with the art of building”. He adds further that even though Ruskin “says a great deal about structure”, he does not fully grasp the “exigencies of the total structural system”. In fact, argues Moore, Ruskin “makes emphatic affirmations that involve important errors”. Paul Frankl echoed this view in 1960, as he argued that Ruskin did not really understand important advancements in architecture like the ribbed vaults, because he could not adequately visualize or understand three-dimensional interiors. More recently, Mark Swenarton has claimed: “When he used the term ‘architecture’ Ruskin almost always meant architectural sculpture or ornament; only rarely did Ruskin think in a more strictly architectural manner that is in terms of the disposition of masses and volumes”.

However, Ruskin’s focus on surface was not an outcome of his lack of training as an architect, and he did not just fall victim to a painterly view of architecture. Garrigan appears to make a case for Ruskin being consciously drawn to the “architectural surfaces”, and “medieval Italy”, even though he had studied Gothic cathedrals in France. He was drawn to those buildings that could be seen as “a series of planes. These planes may be undecorated, beautiful in themselves because of the lovely patterns inherent in their materials, especially the different kinds of marble”. Complementing this, John Unrau has shown that Ruskin was able to visualize and communicate cavernous interiorities. This can be seen in Ruskin’s drawing, Interior of San Frediano, Lucca (1845), and Loggia of the Ducal Palace, Venice (1849–50). Unrau also notes Ruskin’s interest in the vaulting in French medieval buildings and the passionate descriptions of cathedral interiors in The Bible of Amiens (1880–85). In previous publications, I too have made a case about Ruskin’s interest in surface being a conscious one.

I have argued that Ruskin’s attention to surface had textile orientations: architecture was analogous to dressed female bodies. In Seven Lamps, he differentiated architecture from building, arguing that architecture is the “art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man”, whereas building is “edifice designed with this masculine reference to utility”. The distinction between architecture as clothed and building as unclothed introduced considerations of gender, evoking the “image of male
and female bodies discernible in the *Kouros* and the *Kore*.  To this end, “architecture was a dressed version of the building”, where the “dressing consisted of ornamental features that were added to the basic structure ...in excess of use and function”.  Ruskin developed this analogy into a theory. His writings proposed a new architectural ideal, as consisting of planar walls, which depicted the tension one sees in stretched fabrics (Ducal Palace, Venice), and which were sometimes folded, like drapery, without losing their overall unity (San Pietro, Pistoia). The walls would be covered with a ‘veneer’ of ornament and/or polychromatic cladding that mirrored a textile orientation. If the inlaid ornament of the blind arcade in San Michele, Lucca looked like brocade, the pink and white marble cladding of the *piano nobile* of the Ducal Palace, Venice evoked images of a chequered weave. Compositively, the ornamental veneers demonstrated the qualities of “extension, non-elastic flexibility, unity, and comparative thinness”, which for Ruskin were properties of fabrics and drapery.  Ruskin’s writings presented St Mark’s basilica, Venice as clothed in a hybrid mix of dress, hide, and armour; Ducal Palace as wrapped in diaper patterned fabric and lace; and the Northern Gothic cathedrals as covered by interlaced networks of foliage.

Still, the issue was more than surface attention: it was the language of the fragment that Ruskin appeared to use, wittingly or unwittingly, but almost always consistently, as a perceptual and literary tool. Nineteenth-century architectural histories were characterised by empirical rigour entailing some level of taxonomic categorisation and completeness. In comparison, Ruskin writings were inconsistent. Some buildings were well documented (St. Mark’s) and illustrated and others not so. And, while he devoted a chapter to the Ducal Palace, he also deliberately avoided describing the Baroque structures altogether. Furthermore, the objects of Ruskin’s architectural history were not whole buildings but surface fragments. He hardly ever drew or discussed a building in its entirety. While *Seven Lamps* presented ornament, from various medieval buildings across Europe, as a collage of fragments, isolated from the larger context of the building, *Stones I and II* ‘zoomed in’ on certain details whilst also constructing taxonomies of architectural elements (capital, base, cornice, archivolt, arch, balcony, masonry, spandrel, and so on). It is not just that the focus is on fragments: Ruskin’s writing also charts a path that denies the reader textual continuity. This is echoed in Garrigan’s observation that much of the architecture discussed by Ruskin was not Gothic. She says: “Almost one-third of Volume II is devoted to the Byzantine and Romanesque structures ... Further, the central buildings of the study, St Mark’s and the Doge’s Palace, are only partially Gothic. St. Mark’s is discussed entirely in the Byzantine section, while part of Volume III treats the Ducal Palace’s additions, the remainder of that volume being wholly on Renaissance structures”. Ruskin’s language of fragments is that unity is either to be laboured for, or that it is a kind of unity that emerges as a tenuous whole, a hybrid, through the synthesis of fragments that are presented to the viewer.

Ruskin was not the first to chart this path: the fragment had infiltrated architectural thinking in the eighteenth-century. Barry Bergdoll and Werner Oechslin’s collection titled *Fragments: Architecture and the Unfinished: Essays Presented to Robin Middleton* is the authoritative volume that curates a range of perspectives around Middleton's 1999 essay, “Matter of Fragmentation”. Dalibor Vesley explains: “‘Fragment’ as we know it today, has its origin in the eighteenth century, when its situated, symbolic meaning was transformed into a problematic meaning of an independent, relatively autonomous entity”. Vesley explained that it was not until the eighteenth century that elements could be read as fragments, on their term (without a reference to the larger context), “combined at will”, and “able to generate their own context". The creative potential of the fragment is explored by Mary McLeod through Middleton’s essay, who reveals that there were “no ‘wholes’ in Soane’s architecture, nor even an underlying compositional strategy”. Soane not only assimilated fragments in his own architecture but he also created a new model of “ambiguous” and “shattered space”. McLeod argues that Soane’s “revolutionary” spatial models anticipated the “fragmentation and the ‘play of displacement’” in the work of Le Corbusier and Kahn. Neil Levine explores the “aesthetic of the unfinished” in the work of Le Corbusier and Kahn, and he argues that while Le Corbusier advocated the *béton brut* to suggest the raw, the undressed and the unfinished, Louis Kahn’s Yale University Art
Gallery articulated a response to this through its end wall, which is “not truly a façade but merely a kind of a sectional view of where the building stopped to make way for the street”.

**Ethics of the Fragment**

Fragment, which is a common modernist motif, demands a deeper reading against the registers of modernity. Marshall Berman’s *All that is Solid* (1983) recognizes the fragment, rather depressingly, as marking the loss of meaning and legibility of language, disunity of modern life, and the diminishing potency of all efforts modern. However, it is Linda Nochlin’s *Body in Pieces* that is instrumental in historicizing the fragment as the metaphor, and the ‘instrument’ of modernity. Nochlin argues that in eighteenth-century France, the fragment “for the Revolution and its artists, rather than symbolizing nostalgia for the past, enacts the deliberate destruction of that past, or at least, a pulverization of what were perceived to be its repressive traditions”. To this end, the figuration of dismembered bodies in art (Gericault) “functioned as revolutionary strategies”. Nochlin extends her analysis of the modern condition, from the “fragmented body” to the cropped representational plane and compositions (Manet and Degas), which served to portray the constructions of modern social life. Hilde Heynen’s *Architecture and Modernity* (1999) further considers the fragment, against the competing pastoral and counterpastoral perspectives on modernity, seeking a “theory of the ambivalence of modernity”. She argues that the views of architectural theorists (such as Eisenman and Cacciari) are disheartening because they only provide a “negative assessment of modernity”. Even though they recognize the “silence, empty signs, fragmentation and necessary incompleteness, dissonances and fragility”, they are unable to progress this towards “opportunities for progress and development”. They appear to be unable to connect “fragility and vulnerability with the utopian moment, with the promise of liberation and emancipation”.

Heynen offers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno’s critical theories, where the fragment is full of potential. For Benjamin, allegory (fragment) was the “authentic way of dealing with the world, because it is not based on a premise of unity but accepts the world as fragmented, as failed”. In fact, Benjamin saw fragment as having a “threatening quality” and “changed and intensified meaning”, suggesting constructive agency, as a “new-born object”. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* pursues the fragment as that part of the work of art that “opposes totality”. He contends that art that has attracted great attention has moved “beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary”, where the “unity of form” was supplanted by the conscious articulation of “[s]purious infinity, [and] the inability to close”, as principle and method. To assume that art is “whole and unfragmented”, is to set it up for failure, warns Adorno. Extending the discussion of fragments, Heynen points out that Adorno advances “dissonance” as the enduring logic in works of art, replacing harmony. This is because harmony, according to Adorno, is unachievable. He, therefore, offers dissonance as the “truth about harmony”. To this end, he argues, the essence of dissonance is harmony, just as the essence of “dynamic tensions” is “equilibrium”. This does not mean unity or harmony have no value, as without this dissonance would not even be graspable.

It is a different kind of unity that comes forth. Montage is seen as the organizing principle that pervades the work of the avant garde. Heynen explains, through the work of Peter Bürger, that this work is marked by “discrepancies and dissonances because it is constructed on the basis of a montage of fragments”, delineating a new kind of unity, distinct from what is recognized as “organic unity” in traditional aesthetics. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Bürger notes that traditional aesthetics depended on the “congruence between the meaning of the individual parts and the meaning of the whole”. However, in the work of the avant garde this was rejected, as the “parts ‘emancipate’ themselves from a superordinate whole; they are no longer its essential elements”. The work produces shock, due to the lack of meaning of its constituent elements. Meaning is replaced by the reading of the “principle of construction” of the work. Bürger returns to the idea of unity. He argues that even though “negation of synthesis becomes a structural principle” is a necessity, the work must articulate unity, which in this case is presented as a “contradiction within itself”.
Deleuze and Guttari’s assemblage is an alternative to the idea of montage. Graham Livesey explains that assemblage (agencement) indicates the “processes of arranging, organising, and fitting together”. It is the “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning.” Livesey terms the assemblage “innovative and productive”, as it is “destined to produce a new reality, by making numerous, often unexpected, connections”. Manuel De Landa explains that the “assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, ‘sympathy.’” But a “seamless whole” is never possible, “except as a synthesis of...parts”. However, synthesis does not obliterate difference. Jeffrey A. Bell focuses on the importance of “multiplicity” in Deleuze’s theory of the assemblage. He sees assemblage as “a dynamic assemblage, a multiplicity that is drawn into a plane of consistency that maintains itself without being reduced to either side of a dualistic relation”. Using Aldo Rossi’s Architecture of the City, Bell argues that city is seen as consisting of “a series of significant places—or loci—that together constitute an assemblage that is irreducible to the places themselves.” The key difference between assemblage and montage is that assemblage is a generative shifting organism that is productive of new realities, whereas montage is fully emerged, whose reality consists in the structure of contradiction. Ruskin’s writings appeared to deploy both modalities.

Assembling the Hybrid

The fragment occupies a central place in Ruskin’s architectural theory. Some of his most favourite buildings in the world (and Venice) were composed of historic and/or physical fragments. Indeed, in Ruskin’s own words, Venice represented the confluence of “the East and West”, and the meeting of the “energy of the one with the splendour of the other”. Deborah Howard explains that Ruskin was the “first to recognize, in an informed and articulate way, that Venetian medieval architecture was profoundly influenced by the Orient”. This was clearly seen in the Ducal Palace, which was the perfect architectural and racial hybrid. Ruskin revelled in the fact that the building “contains the three elements in exactly equal proportions—the Roman, Lombard, and Arab. It is the central building of the world”. In fact, he claimed, that it was “built successively in the three styles. There was a Byzantine Ducal Palace, a Gothic Ducal Palace, and a Renaissance Ducal Palace”, where the “second superseded the first totally: a few stones of it. ... But the third superseded the second in part only”. Specifically, the traceried balcony was from Gothic cathedrals, the planar wall from Italian Gothic buildings, and polychromy from Islamic sources. According to Mark Crinson, the “threefold parentage” and the “racial mixture or hybridity” was the best part about this building. Crinson explains further that Ruskin’s idea of purity was not about the singularity of source: it was in fact based on a “complex balance or consummation between various influences and various races”. Ruskin confirms this as he argues: “All European architecture, bad and good, old and new, is derived from Greece through Rome, and coloured and perfected from the East. The history of architecture is nothing but the tracing of the various modes and directions of this derivation”.

Ruskinian hybridity can be positioned somewhere between what Carol Meeks describes as “creative eclecticism”, wherein “the elements from the past are valued as the means for creating something original”, and the “residue of past forms” was discarded, to create “wholly new ones”, and what Cinzia Sicca delineates as the astylistic tendencies in the eighteenth-century works commissioned by Lord Burlington, which were defined as “‘wall architecture’ in the manner of classical Rome”, “meaningful in themselves”, and fashioned specifically for “reinterpreting antiquity for the moderns”. Ruskin avoided emphasis on specific combinations of architectural elements, like the cusped arch, the jagged parapet, and the slender shaft. Instead, he focused on qualities in buildings like the “Arab temper”, the “Gothic influence”, and the “Northern Energy”. Also, the architectural ideal existed in not one but across many buildings. Ruskin had hinted at this, as he argued that there is “very little architecture in the world which is, in the full sense of the words, good and noble. A few pieces of Italian Gothic and Romanesque, a few scattered fragments of Gothic cathedrals, and perhaps two or three of Greek temples, are all that we possess approaching to an ideal of perfection.” The stylistic particularities
were further undermined by Ruskin’s wall-based classificatory system for buildings, wherein the terms “Gothic” and “Renaissance” indicated attitudes to the architectural surface, not styles or periods. New architecture would be produced through the synthesis of qualities shared by Ruskin’s favorite buildings: planar undisrupted walls, veneered surfaces, constructional polychromy, low relief and inlaid ornament, and layering of relief and polychromatic ornament. Ruskinian hybridity was an emergent category, and essentially formless. The ideal was marked by historical impurity, stylistic discontinuity, formal fragmentation, and a singularity of expression, and capable of being endlessly reinvented.

The astylism of Ruskin’s ideal was reinforced by transhistoric architectural references. The illustrations in Seven Lamps, particularly the Pierced Ornaments from Lisieux, Bayeux, Verona, and Padua; and Ornaments from Rouen, St. Lô, and Venice; Traceries from Caen, Bayeux, Rouen, and Beauvais showed how Ruskin’s architectural imagination was a lateral cut through history, informed by visual practices sanctioned by the advent of photography. Karen Burns argues that the images in Ruskin’s publications in the “1840s increasingly emulated photographic effects”. They were developed in the “shadow of photography”, as they mimicked the “daguerreotype’s close viewpoint, detail, cropping, and skewed perspective”. I argue that these images were also aligned with photography’s affinity with reproducibility and recombination, and the nomadic and migratory status of the image. Critical theorists of photography have argued that photographs often exceed their contexts, and carry with them an agency well beyond what was intended of them. The photograph, a trace, an impression, which, once lifted (off the body of the building) was capable of being cut, copied, pasted, resized, assembled, and mixed onto a new pictorial surface. This is what is suggested in the above mentioned illustrations that are essentially montages. They progress readings across the fragments from various buildings, seeking continuity across the discontinuous. But above all, they diminish references to scale, style, and context.

The fragments are, however, never fully synthesized. A key element of Ruskin’s architectural ideal is the assemblage aesthetic. This is seen nowhere more clearly than in his drawing in the Teaching Collection at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. In the Study of the Second Pier from the Left on the Portico of the Duomo of San Martino, Lucca banded polychromy and braided colonnettes are shown to alternate. While the joints are visible, the disparate elements of the composition are also unified through layering and interlacing, giving the impression that one element is holding the other in place. The visual narrative of the interplay between the separate and the connected is also played out in Marbles at Verona: Base of a Pilaster on the Facade of Sant’ Anastasia. While the entire emphasis is on the coloured elements celebrating the joining of the various pieces of marble, the implicit emphasis is on the harmonious composition created by the pale and luminous colours of the marble. The Pilaster of Unfinished Façade of the Church of St. Anastasia, Verona is most remarkable for its emphasis on the joining and assembly of materials. Instead of signifying disassembly, decay and ruination associated with the picturesque, these drawings are about composition, assembly, and joinery. They suggest an emergent quality of the building, and a coming to life.

For Ruskin, it was not just buildings but also theories that were assemblages. His theory of buildings as dressed female figures was premised on references to clothing that were sometimes incapable of being reconciled: these included draperies; dresses; hide; armoured garments; brocade, printed, woven textiles; harlequin’s costume; and naturalistic coverings and mattings. They also included metaphors of draping, layering, stretching, cutting, gathering, binding, and stitching. While the Northern Gothic cathedrals were seen as a transitional form that hovered between the natural and the built, with their walls covered with interlaced naturalistic ornament representing a nascent form of adornment, St. Mark’s Palace was understood through concurrent metaphors of very different forms of covering (hide, chain mail, and dress). The Ducal Palace was a purer form of dressing, representing a more faithful interplay of a woven fabric and lace, represented by the unbroken polychromatic wall, with the perforated surface of the traceries and arcades stitched on to it. The
difficulty in managing theoretical clarity is exacerbated as one struggles to negotiate the two theories: architecture as dressed figure and architecture as assembled. This requires one to able to cut through the dualism, and speak simultaneously of clothing and assembling; seamless less and jointedness; continuity and discontinuity of materials; flatness and three-dimensionality; and softness and hardness of veneer, as if they were one and both. Ruskin’s writings weaken the assumption that theories are supposed to be neat and comprehensive.

Conclusion
In closing, the paper does not re-establish Ruskin as modern: this has already been done. However, it does offer a reading of Ruskin’s writings on architecture as a set of lenses through which modernity, as experience and aesthetics, may be appreciated. Ruskin’s writings can been seen as exploring responses to photographic optics; perceptual principles of montage; fragmentation of experience; and Deleuzian ethics of the assemblage. And while his writings navigate their way through a landscape of fragments, they sit uncomfortably and undecidedly between montage and assemblage. They may employ the visual and literary techniques of the montage, but they almost always maintain the organic vitality of the assemblage. Ruskin’s hybrid ideal is an emergent being: it barely coalesces. The incongruent elements that constitute the whole also remain whole in themselves. In exploring modernity through Ruskin, the paper goes to the heart of questions of multiplicity and difference. Through the premise of architecture as assembled, the paper advocates the power and potency of the fragment in structuring perception, and in providing new ways of generating architectural and spatial realities.
Endnotes

1 The term emergence derives from the practice and scholarship of digital design, which according to Antoine Picon is when form is seen as “something that happens as an occurrence or an event, rather than a static substance”. Helen Castle (and Picon) underscores the importance of transformative evolutionary process and natural systems, and that of “technique over the end product” to the definition of emergence. Antoine Picon, ‘Continuity, Complexity, and Emergence: What is the Real for Digital Designers,’ Perspecta, Vol. 42 (2010), 152; Helen Castle, ‘Emergence in Architecture,’ AA Files, No. 50 (2004), 50.

2 Cianci and Nicholls, Ruskin and Modernism. Here I am referring to Hilde Heynen’s discussion of the terms modernism and modernity. She argues: “The experience of modernity involves a rupture with tradition and has a profound impact on ways of life and daily habits. The effects of this rupture are manifold. They are reflected in modernism, the body of artistic and intellectual ideas and movements that deal with the process of modernization and with the experience of modernity”.

3 Samuel Higgins, ‘Classical Columnar Architecture and the Stones of Venice,’ The Builder 11, 3 and 10 (December 1853), 722–724, 743–44.

4 Charles H. Moore, ‘Ruskin as a Critic of Architecture,’ Architectural Record 56 (August 1924), 117.

5 Moore, ‘Ruskin as a Critic of Architecture.’


9 Garrigan, Ruskin on Architecture, 42.


13 Chatterjee, “John Ruskin and Female Body”, 141.

14 Chatterjee, “John Ruskin and Female Body”, 141.

15 Ruskin, Works 3, 151.

16 See publications by Chatterjee.

17 Garrigan, Ruskin on Architecture, 34.


23 See also William Tronzo, The Fragment: An Incomplete History (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2009).


26 Nochlin, The Body in Pieces, 8.


29 Heynen, Architecture and Modernity, 23.
QUOTATION: What does history have in store for architecture today?