

'To Make Wonders Plain'. The Ethics of Stock Orchard Street.

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Is Stock Orchard Street ethical architecture? Possibly. Its experiments in sustainability, its respect for its context, its protection of the dignity of its users all fit the ethical bill. Since the building was completed, Jeremy Till has written an abrasive attack on architectural ethics, taking architects to task for having muddled ethics with aesthetics. Ethics, he insists, is not to do with things, but with actions - 'a brick has no morals', as he puts it. The architect's ethical duty, he says, 'lies not in the refinement of the object as a static visual product, but as contributor to the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social relationships in the name of others'. An ethical stance, claims Till, citing Zygmunt Bauman, means 'to assume responsibility for the Other' (Till 2009: 173-8). Quite where this leaves Stock Orchard Street, not a public building, and with only a limited engagement to the Other, we will leave as an open question.

A different interpretation of what ethics means in architecture comes from the philosopher Karsten Harries,

who says that a work of architecture is ethical in so far as it provides an answer to what it means to be at home in the world (Harries 1997). While this is quite unlike Till's definition of architectural ethics, both Till and Harries see ethics as the business of setting up principles, against which we can then measure the results. The risk of this is that we end up arguing about the principles, rather than concentrating on the consequences. Another way to think about ethics in architecture would be to shift attention away from principles, and look instead at procedures and results.

This alternative interpretation of ethics is suggested by reading Sir Francis Bacon's *Essays*, or to give them their full title, *Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral* (Bacon 1985, 1985a). Bacon (1561-1626), best known as the founder of the inductive scientific method and father of the English seventeenth century scientific revolution, has been out of favour for the last half century or so on account of his alleged culpability, in the eyes of Adorno and others, for the rise of scientific materialism. But Bacon can surprise us - he was a more diverse thinker than the Frankfurt School gave him credit. Bacon wrote several versions of the *Essays* during his lifetime, augmenting and changing them. The final version appeared in 1625, the year before his death, and included fifty

eight essays on all sorts of moral subjects - Truth, Revenge, Envy, Love, Cunning, of Seeming Wise, Friendship, Ambition, Anger, and so on. Within the 1625 edition are two essays that do not obviously fit with the subjects of the others, one 'Of Building', and another 'Of Gardens', which together are unique in that they deal with material practices, rather than vices or virtues. These two essays are sandwiched between 'Of Deformity' and 'Of Negotiating'. To the best of my knowledge, Bacon's 'Of Building' was the first time that anyone had placed a discussion of architecture specifically within the context of morality and ethics, and this alone makes it worth a second look.

The essay 'Of Building' has been largely ignored by historians of architecture, nor have commentators upon Bacon's other essays shown much interest in it. It does not appear in either of two recent anthologies of architectural writings from the early modern period (Mallgrave 2006; van Eck and Anderson 2003). The German critic Hermann Muthesius, however, in his classic *The English House* of 1904 quoted the opening sentence of the essay, not just once, but twice - 'Houses are built to live in, and not to look on; therefore let use be preferred before uniformity, except where both may be had' (Muthesius 2007: v.2, ). Muthesius clearly regarded

Bacon as a spokesman for the properties that he saw and admired in late nineteenth century English domestic architecture, practicality and unostentatiousness. And on the very few other occasions that architectural writers have paid any attention to Bacon's essay, it has almost always been to claim Bacon as some kind of proto-functionalism. These references to 'Of Building' seem to me to miss the point of the essay, for they entirely ignore its context - and indeed most of its content.

It is not hard to see why Bacon's 'Of Building' has been overlooked. It is very short, and after a brief and largely derivative discussion about the siting of buildings, is mainly devoted to the description of an ideal country house, something like an Elizabethan prodigy house, a type that had already been superseded by the date when he was writing. In other words, on the face of it, Bacon's essay has nothing new to say about architecture. Compared to Sir Henry Wotton's *The Elements of Architecture*, which was published a year earlier, in 1624, it lacks originality, and contains no useful architectural prescriptions.

If 'Of Building' is a bit of a puzzle, so are Bacon's *Essays* as a whole. People have argued about their relationship to Bacon's other philosophical works. And

there has been uncertainty as to how to read the *Essays*. 'Of Building' is not alone in being a seemingly 'weak' essay, disjointed, lacking in coherence, and without a conclusion: compared to Bacon's other writings, sharp as anything, the *Essays* seem wanting in rigour and clarity. And curiously, the essays that he rewrote from the previous editions ('Of Building' was not one of these) became not more, but even less coherent in their rewriting, suggesting that this was precisely the effect that Bacon was after.

Bacon's disinclination to provide unambiguous advice on any of the ethical issues he wrote about appears to be connected to his generally low opinion of moral philosophy as a branch of philosophy. For Bacon, the purpose of learning was to study nature, and to gain knowledge; the tendency of moral philosophy had been, as he saw it, to divert men away from investigation, and into disputation. Philosophy had been, as Bacon put it, 'fruitful of controversies, but barren of works'. (Bacon 1858: IV, 14) Bacon's writing was intentionally fragmentary, for, as he saw it, his project would be hindered by presenting a body of work that appeared overly complete. Too systematic a philosophy would be a disincentive to the kind of investigation that Bacon advocated: it was not his purpose to replace one system

by another. Bacon's aim was to invite interrogation of all received knowledge - especially that coming from ancient philosophy - and to put in place an ongoing, and necessarily inconclusive investigation, whose destination was uncertain. For this reason he recommended an aphoristic way of writing, because, he explained, 'aphorisms, representing only portions and as it were fragments of knowledge, invite others to contribute and add something in their turn; whereas methodical delivery, carrying the show of a total, makes men careless, as if they were already at the end' (Bacon 1858: IV, 451). Bacon's way of writing about moral philosophy was wholly consistent with these general precepts; both in their style and in their contents, the *Essays* were not meant to endorse any particular rules for behaviour, but rather to raise questions about the value and status of ethics, and to create uncertainty rather than offer guidance as to how men should act.

Most readers of the *Essays* seem to have approached them expecting to discover clear advice on human behaviour, and finding this lacking, they have been at a loss to know what to say about them. An exception is the American literary critic, Stanley Fish, who in his book *Self-Consuming Artifacts* - by far the best and most inspired interpretation of the *Essays* - argues that the

*Essays* provided Bacon with a means of demonstrating, in the field of ethics, his general philosophical approach (Fish 1972: 78-155). According to Fish, the confusion induced by reading one of Bacon's essays is intentional, and is meant to force the reader to change their mind, often several times, during the course of a single essay. The subject of each of Bacon's essays is not its nominal topic - love, friendship, revenge - but rather what men think about these things, and how inconclusive and contradictory those thoughts have been. Each one replays Bacon's basic theme, the need 'to rid ourselves of excessive respect and admiration for things discovered already' (Bacon 2004: 11).

The pattern of many of the essays is to start with a statement that seems a generally accepted truth, but then to sow the seeds of doubt, by introducing other, contradictory, assertions, leaving the reader at the end entirely unsure what to think about the matter under discussion. Fish situates this formula within the context of Bacon's general approach to knowledge.

Bacon's main concern was with the inadequacy of the human mind, and he saw his task as to protect the mind against itself: his advice in the *Novum Organum* was 'let every student of nature take this as a rule - that whatever his mind seizes and dwells upon with peculiar satisfaction is

to be held in suspicion' (Bacon 1858: IV, 60). In particular, Bacon was concerned by the tendency of the human mind to move too quickly to general explanations: 'the mind longs spring up to positions of higher generality, that it may find rest there; and so after a little while wearies of experiment' (*ibid.*: 50). Bacon's aim was to prevent the mind from its tendency 'to jump and fly from particulars to remote axioms and of almost the highest generality' (*ibid.*: 97). Another counterproductive tendency identified by Bacon is for the mind to find order where there is none, 'to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds' (*ibid.*: 55). And in enquiry, the mind having once found a credible explanation, will tend to ignore contrary evidence:

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises; or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects; in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate (*ibid.*: 56).



If these were the ideas that guided Bacon's approach to all investigation, the *Essays* were, Fish argues, a demonstration of these principles in practice, within the realm of morality, notoriously prone to the kind of monstrously dogmatic judgements of which Bacon was most contemptuous. While pretending to be a good moralist, Bacon ends up destabilising thought. Where, then, does this leave the essay 'Of Building'?

In some respects, 'Of Building' follows the same formula as many of the other essays. It starts with a generalisation - in this case possibly taken from Wotton, who had similarly pleaded the primacy of use in determining the arrangement of the parts of a building. Bacon then goes on to a discussion of the siting of houses, a topic addressed by Vitruvius at the beginning of *De Architectura*, and, in tedious emulation of Vitruvius, by most subsequent Renaissance writers on architecture - including Wotton. But Bacon, rather than setting out yet again the criteria for choosing a site, shows that the received ideas of what makes an ideal site are irreconcilable, and that in practice no such site will ever be found. His conclusion is that if you want a perfect situation, you must have several houses. This is true to form for Bacon - the principles of the established authorities turn out, when examined closely,

to be nonsense. We are intended, I suspect, to take this little demonstration of the illogicality of the customary precepts for the siting of houses as a lesson in the worthlessness of all the other so-called principles of architecture laid down by the authorities. If we are to doubt what they say about sites, why take any more seriously the rest of what they have to say? Having disposed of all 'principles' of architecture, Bacon turns his attention to the ideal house. At first reading, this appears to be a straightforward description of a large Elizabethan country house, laid out around courtyards. (It has been suggested that the description resembled his own house at Gorhambury (Bacon 1985:276)). Bacon begins his description emphasising the importance of a division between the two sides of house, 'a side for the banquet ... and a side for the household; the one for feasts and triumphs, and the other for dwelling'. In other words, a distinction between the public side of the house, and the private, a division marked on the front of the house by a tower. But having emphasised the division of the house into two, Bacon proceeds to describe the parts behind the front, and in these, organised around a succession of courtyards, the distinction between the banquet and household sides dissolves, and the ranges around the several courtyards are not clearly dedicated to one or other of these two functions. The essentially bi-axial

division of the front is replaced by a distinction based upon depth, with less and less formality as one draws away further from the front. Finally, the description of the house ends, confusingly, with the entrance courts, through which you would have had to pass to reach the front of the house, with which the description began.

This scrambled account of the house may again be deliberate. Bacon had started the essay by railing against the poetic descriptions of houses: 'Leave the goodly fabrics of houses, for beauty only, to the enchanted palaces of the poets; who build them with small cost'. Bacon is suspicious of both literary descriptions, and of architectural magnificence, and seems to be at some pains not to allow his readers to be seduced by words. But there is also the fact that the mind has to be protected against its tendency to oversimplify things, to look for more order in the world than actually occurs. Contrary to the mind's (and the architect's) compulsive tendency to render the world into a satisfying neatness, Bacon seems determined to preserve something of the disorder and confusion with which we actually experience the world. The world is not as tidy as we like to think.

The presence of this essay amongst the other essays is still perplexing. Is 'Of Building' about building, or architecture, at all? There is always the possibility that Bacon, in common with other philosophers before and since, was using building as a metaphor for his own philosophical system. However, we should be cautious about this, for Bacon was in general resistant to metaphors, both on account of what he saw as their misuse by the scholastics, and their tendency to encourage the mind to fly to generalities, and more particularly because of his view that what he was proposing was not a 'system' such as could be represented in terms of an analogy. Bacon was much more concerned that whatever method should be capable of exposing its own errors - 'I ... make the things plain for all to see, so that my mistakes can be spotted and separated out before the body of science is further infected by them' (Bacon 2004: 21); any metaphor, but especially one of building, would tend to conceal the errors. In fact, Bacon did use metaphors to describe his procedure, but the metaphors he preferred were either of voyaging and navigation, or of gardening, all of which were more accommodating of temporality and movement, and also of accidents; architecture and building were far too static for Bacon's purposes. Nevertheless, Bacon was certainly aware of the potential of the architectural metaphor to describe his project -

according to his chaplain William Rawley, he complained that in his intellectual task he was condemned to be both architect and labourer. 'Having ... collected the materials for the building, and in his *Novum Organum* set down the instruments and directions for the work', no one had come forward to carry out the necessary experimental research; and, Rawley continued, 'I have heard his lordship speak complainingly, that his lordship (who thinketh that he deserved to be an architect in this building) should be forced to be a workman and a labourer, and to dig the clay and burn the brick' (Bacon 1857:II, 336). Even so, given his general avoidance of metaphors within his writing, it does not appear that Bacon intended the essay 'Of Building' to be an analogue of his philosophical method.

What then are we left with? Bacon's 'Of Building' seems to be more than just a jumble of derivative and out-of-date notions about architecture. Rather it is the first piece of *critical* architectural theory, the first time that anyone had turned architectural thought back on itself, made it question itself, and exposed its own shortcomings. Traditionally, it is the Frenchman Claude Perrault who has been credited with this achievement; but while Perrault, an inductive thinker after Bacon's model, was far better informed about architecture, and

gave a more developed analysis of the arbitrary nature of architectural beauty, it was Bacon who first saw that architecture was just as suspect as any other practice that based itself upon ancient authority. But more than just a critique of architectural knowledge, Bacon's essay is, it seems, an anticipation of a form of architectural criticism not otherwise encountered until the late twentieth century, an attempt through architecture's own precepts to draw attention to the way that architecture leads the human mind astray, causing it to believe that there is more order in the world than is actually the case. Bacon's comments on building correspond to his warnings against conventional philosophy, which seduced the mind by the elegance of its structures; too easily these gained the upper hand and ended up regulating thought.

But what does Bacon's essay tell us about the *ethics* of architecture? Taken together, *The Essays* indicate that ethics is not about applying principles - whose origins are always dubious; the general message of *The Essays* is that expediency is a better guide to action than principle - ends justify means. Bacon, himself a politician (he was James I's Attorney General and then Lord Chancellor), was a Machiavellian, believing in a rigorous separation between public and private or

personal morality: envy, vanity, revenge, ambition were all defensible qualities in public life, even if inappropriate in private life. When it comes to intellectual practice, what concerned Bacon were not principles, but the transparency of the procedure for arriving at the result. As he wrote in the essay 'Of Truth', it is not truth itself that matters so much as the enquiry after truth, 'the love-making or wooing of it', that is the 'sovereign good of human nature' (Bacon 1985a: 62). In the way we go about things, Bacon wanted to disinhibit us from all the usual nostrums and formulae about what constitutes the proper and the good.

If Stock Orchard Street is ethical it is not because it satisfies some previously declared principle of ethics, but because, like Bacon's essays, it forces us to ask what an ethics of architecture might be. Specifically, in its general shagginess, its hairiness, it is unusually transparent about its own design procedures. Another of Bacon's works, the *Sylva Sylvarum*, reveals Bacon's attempt to find a form to express the unresolved and the contradictory. The *Sylva Sylvarum* (which could be translated as 'The Forest of Materials', though it is known as 'The Natural History') belongs to a now forgotten genre, the *sylva*, which on the analogy of felled timber ready to be sawn and worked, contained raw

knowledge, awaiting refinement and processing (De Bruyn 2001). It was a genre that appealed to Bacon, and which he developed, because it allowed for an unelaborated, plain style that contrasted with the more usual rhetorically finished embellished literary forms, and it enabled him to avoid imposing a contrived order upon findings and observations that he had made. Things that he had noticed, but been unable to explain, should not be swept away out of sight, nor tidied up so as to seem that they had been resolved. Better to expose them, raw and unresolved though they were, in the hope that someone in the future might make sense of them. There is a lesson here for architects, and one that Stock Orchard Street takes advantage of. Rather than the usual compulsion to conceal the messy compromises, the fudged solutions inevitable to all works of architecture, at Stock Orchard Street at least some of these persist into the finished work. According to William Rawley, Bacon's ambition was 'to make wonders plain, and not plain things wonders' (Bacon 1857: II, 336): Stock Orchard Street is a *sylva*, whose ethics lie in its acknowledgement of at least some of the unresolved business of architecture. Like the best moral philosophy, it makes us question our assumptions about what is right, while leaving us still unsure, though wiser.



With thanks to Christine Stevenson for her suggestions.

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