

The deformation of the „ideal” architectural object as an aesthetic act: iterating on the picturesque aesthetics in architecture

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Abstract

This paper explores how the deformations of the „ideal” architectural objects as an aesthetic act and its reflection in contemporary architecture. As architecture is always seeking direct solutions, it often leads to a general or „ideal” object. But placed in a specific context, it experiences a series of adaptations, deforming its ideal state. Thus, the object enters a stage of „scholarly” play of volumes, obtaining variety, irregularity, and intricacy. This aesthetic act was explored as early as the 18th century, by the theory of the picturesque, through which the universal-objective judgment was questioned, emphasizing the object’s particularity. Containing the aesthetic act of deformation, the picturesque gives the framework for aesthetically accepting unforeseen incidents. Regarding the design process, it merges architectural rigor with the free spirit of spontaneity. In this sense, through the picturesque aesthetic, the act of deformity recurs in architectural works, by accepting and redeem the unforeseen of life.

Keywords: Architecture, Collaboration, Trust, Convergence, Aesthetics, Picturesque, Context, Landscape, Space

Introduction

As architecture is always seeking the most rational and direct solutions to the problems raised by society, it approaches in a rational-positivist manner, often resulting a sterile architectural object, that (strictly) cater to the wanted answers. Thus, its ludic character is reduced, contributing to the alienation of society from the architectural product that should, in its intended purpose, serve it in its best capability. But even as function and physical necessities are expressed through aesthetics and semiotics, the object *per se* does not belong to a certain space, nor a certain time, but to a perpetual *wherever* and *whenever*. In short, the architectural object exists in an untouchable, perfected state: the „ideal” architectural object. Placed in a specific context, the object undergoes a series of adaptations and deformations, following the particularities of the landscape or the way in which it responds to its needs. Thus adapted, the *general* object, produced from the ideal model, becomes *particular* and unique. It was this uniqueness the first advocates of the picturesque argued as an answer to the perceived tedium of classicism static state. As its reapers in various points of history, the picturesque marks the aesthetic argument an argument for a more joyfully and ludic architecture.

The proposed objective is to demonstrate and explore the aesthetic quality that the deformations can have over the „ideal” architectural object, with its reflections in architectural works.

The 18th to 19th century aesthetic observations provides the basis for the search and appreciation of *deformed beauty*, that echoes into contemporary architecture. A parallel regarding its trans-historical and trans-cultural value can be drawn, bringing the picturesque into the contemporary aesthetic discourse. As our contemporary aesthetic discourse reside heavily on „taste”, a fruitful discussion on aesthetic

standards should be engaged, especially with the widespread of participatory methods. Being at the crossroads of art history and theory, aesthetics, and philosophy, it addresses the "Convergence" theme by exploring means of building towards a richer interdisciplinary conceptual vocabulary, that revisits architecture and one of its aesthetics categories. Therefore, the article builds on the aesthetic case for the spontaneous intervention on and over the *ideal* object, an argument contained in the picturesque aesthetic, inviting to search for, and exercise, the *ludic* act in contemporary architectural works, that demonstrates its trans-cultural, or universal, value.

Literature Review

Selected literature follows the picturesque aesthetic, as it describes architectural models through which the case for deformation is to be drawn.

The latest study on the implications of picturesque aesthetics as argument for deformity highlighted the 18th century the historic discourse, namely its relationship with the sublime and its „negative” pleasure with which both philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant associate it. But it was Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829) who build a theory of „disgust”, defining the picturesque as *deformed beauty* (Macarthur, 2007, p.92), or rather a stage between the classical Beauty (*kālós*) and deformity: a first step towards an abstract aesthetic (Hussey, 2018, p. 17) that brought movement to the static object. The picturesque carried for Price and its contemporaries the concern regarding contextual integration of classical architecture into the British landscape. Price would go further and critique English Palladianism, as it rejected of the landscape and the accidental topography.

Already in 1728, Robert Castell (d.1728) left a curious suggestion regarding the blending-in process of architecture and garden design. Castell established three *stages* of development (or „perfection”) of the garden: in the first stage, the proposed objects position is established, followed by the second, when they are „symmetrically” ordered along abstract regulatory trajectories. In the third stage, these are *moved*, i.e. to imitate the natural, or rather the accidental aspects of nature (Mallgrave, 2006, p.240). As Castell pointed out, this last stage would require and prove much refinement on the part of the creator.

Once architectural theory embraced the picturesque aesthetic, the deformation of the ideal object could be seen occurring not only regarding the site, but also its own nature – function and structure. Therefore, ideal objects stood also in contradiction with the natural scope of architecture.

The idea of accepting irregularities as proof of a refined creative act would also be resumed by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852), regarding function (as utility) and skilfulness. When comparing a regular (or *classical*) solution with an irregular (or *picturesque*) one, Pugin considers that the architect would meticulously adhere to regularity and symmetry, whereas the latter would prove *masterful ingenuity* (Pugin, 1841, p.63).

John Ruskin (1819–1900) would also search for the picturesque case outside its visual characteristics, criticizing the viewer for its detachment from the subject and for the superficial admiration of dilapidated states. One definition was given in *The Stones of Venice*. Ruskin observed, in the Venetian Gothic, the architecture’s process of *becoming*: a constant change or the character of „changefulness”. By this principle, Ruskin assigned the picturesque a temporal dimension (Macarthur, 2007, p.15). For centuries, extra- or non-aesthetic

intentions of functional or structural rationale acted upon Venetian architecture. But the old masters of the Serenissima knew how to aesthetically absorb these unforeseen events or accidents, coming from the irregularities of the site or the requirements of the architectural program over time.

At the end of the 19th century, Camillo Sitte (1843-1903) would touch n the picturesque as he dived into Aristotelian understanding of the *polis*, namely, to combine regular and irregular systems (Sitte, 1992, p.135). In a passage about the town of Amalfi (Italy), Sitte highlighted the effect of surprise, through the mixing of spaces, resulting from the ambiguous public-private relationship and the distinct levels.

Methodology

This study uses textual analysis of the 18th to 19th century architectural writings, that reference architectural models as „picturesque”. Through those models, instances regarding the process of deformation and its appreciation in architecture can be outlined.

Firstly, what is the ideal object of architecture? At its origin, architecture contains the constructive archetype of the primitive hut, on which a proper aesthetic language and system developed. The aesthetic inheritance from classical antiquity reached its apogee through Palladianism, which represents the perfect(ed) image: an *un-*deformable and, therefore, closed, and final object. All the elements of Palladian architecture are in mutual relation (*concinitas*), and any changes would disturb its unity. But, like any complete object, it transcends the particularity of place or time, as Palladio "seems to have escaped the particularities suggested by the atmosphere of an age and the mystery of a place." (Cantacuzino, 2024, p.35). Therefore, the Palladian object contained its own internal rule, closed within its own system and from outside influences, becoming a universal, or

standard, model of what „high” architecture would mean: an „ideal” architectural object.

Having understood the ideal model, in form and system, the next step is to identify the causes of its deformation: it can follow the particularities of its physical context or *fitness* necessities. Adapted from the general and ideal model, the particular and deformed object, continue to adhere to subtle aesthetic qualities, contained through the characteristics of the picturesque.

Results

As the coryphaeus of the picturesque aesthetics, Price argued for the *visuality* of architecture, inspired by the painterly techniques and principles - to be *like a painting* - appealing to the role of the painter as connoisseur. The architect, as Price put forth, should be an architect-painter (*arhitectto-pitore*), who would not only have the mind of a painter, but also the hand, and familiar with the principles of landscape painting (Price, 1842, p.329). In this sense, deformation comes from following the principles of landscape painting and accepting the irregularity and variation of the landscape as scenery *in and towards* which the building is placed and opened; *ut pictura poesis* would now be extended for architecture also.

The aesthetic experience searched since the 18th century was found in the way landscape paintings rendered nature: through *rapid and nervous strokes of the brush* (Milani, 1996, 43), with their effects of chiaroscuro, irregularity and variety of their elements, which gave an overall dynamism to its compositional. Transferred to architecture, those effects were found in the medieval vernacular and Gothic architecture. When Pugin wrote about the „masterful ingenuity” (Pugin, 1841, p.62), he had the irregular Gothic - or „pointed” - architecture in mind, whose final image characterized as irregular and

intricate, as its construction spend over the course of many centuries and many more builder's hands. For Pugin, the Gothic contained the *beautified irregularities* of a *convenient plan* (i.e. the functional attribute), that raised so many *picturesque beauties*.

Similar, a Gothic structure, like the Venetian St. Mark's Basilica, embodied, for Ruskin, the sedimentation of this process of continuous *becoming*. It assimilates on its closed Greek-cross plan, successive additions that synthesis Western and Eastern influences. Italian aesthetician Diego Valeri evoked the image in which the basilica took shape, with its obvious aesthetic substratum: „at St. Mark's, a fantastic unity was taking place, so complex, through strange combinations and a harmony of contrasts, through the games and surprises of the most capricious asymmetry, elevated to the rank of system and functional law.” (Valeri, 1945, 32) From an aesthetic point of view, the description hints an intrinsic aesthetic intention, which denotes a sustained care: each new addition was a finished and closed system, which, added to the existing one, arrived at a *collage*-like image. Thus, it resulted an architectural object like those appreciated by the first theorists of the picturesque, which arranges in a new complex system – *through its strange combinations* – the aspects related to the architectural program and its adaptation to the site. The pictorial aspects (priorly sought in architecture) were not the intention of the picturesque anymore, but rather the process through which the purpose of architecture took shape.

In the same way, the architecture of Amalfi resulted from the external forces, both from the nature of the site, as from its own nature and historically succeeded cadastral decisions. The picturesque visual result lies in merging various ideal objects packed together. Weather monumental building – like the Dome of St. Andrew Apostle, or the *Chiostro del Paradiso* – or private houses, with a more frugal classical quotes, all have their own internal and closed order. Their joining

creates apparent points of conflict, where the ideal form of architecture seems to squeeze in, prioritizing the relationship with its surroundings (i.e. the natural topography or existing edifices), rather than erasing it: it deforms by blending into the natural, untamed topography.

As each ideal object succeeds with each other in time, the space between them becomes the place of compromise, acting like an architectural and urban *caesura*. Into it, the initial ideal objects deform their skin and partially their volume, retaining but their own structural rationale. Circling back to Pugin's and Ruskin's viewpoint, this *caesura*, between two regulatory systems, denotes a masterfully handed balanced space or elements disposition.

Discussion

It is no confidence that the settlements of the Sorrento Peninsula (or any other similar places) exercise a deep fascination upon us. As rational beings, human mind enjoy the sturdiness, fitness and clearness of architecture that conveys the quality of our edifices. But those three characteristics, that mirror the Vitruvian triad, tend towards monotonous architectural objects, that lack novelty and visual stimulation, contributing to an increasingly likewise monotonous built environment. Thus, the perfected „ideal” object, with its rational expression, lacks the attribute to excite the eye or the mind.

It is intriguing how, on the other hand, the mind tends to undervalue acts that distance themselves from the „ideal” model. Changes brought by new necessities, aesthetic tastes or fashions, as well as modifications imposed by structural reinforcement or adaptation to a specific site, leave their marks on the perfect(ed) object. Deformed, it loses the order that the *concinitas* of Vitruvian triad brought. Monotony has, indeed, disappeared, but also has order! In its

aftermath, a new conceptual framework is required, that could accept this decomposing process. This is where the picturesque entered.

An explicative instance would be the experiments that distance themselves from the direct solutions. Giancarlo de Carlo's projects, such as the Free University of Urbino, arrive at a picturesque image by deforming the ideal object after the topography. Although it consists of standard units, standing tangent to the site, with minimal deformation, they're playfully spread across the Cappuccini hill, forming an irregular and intricate general composition. This example appeals to the visual understanding of the picturesque: the painterly effect that the formal units have, by following the site's accidents. But picturesqueness doesn't necessarily need an accidental terrain. De Carlo's housing project in Mazzorbo, on a plain field near Burano, takes the functional approach towards the picturesque outcome: a fixed functional scheme is interplayed with specific volumetric elements, that gives it form.

A more illustrative case would be one of Leon Krier's famous sketches, through which he arrives at the same Aristotelian duality observed by Sitte in: bringing together the regular object, that deforms into the irregular, by into contact with each other. The negotiations between these two registers, lays in their zoning, where the isolated and formal monuments of the classical *Res-Publica* are mixed within the irregular and spontaneous streets, squares and edifices of the vernacular *Res-Economica*, resulting the *Civitas* in toto (Krier, 2009, p.286). This implies the interplay between two separate orders, in distinct levels of detailing, echoing Castell's stages: first, the general disposition of *landmarks*, and second the detailing of the *landmark* order. When a third level is added, namely *paths*, the landmarks of *Res-Publica* deform into a more suitable connection with its irregular surroundings. Therefore, it is the place of the *caesura* that acts also as the main spatial protagonist, as it links two or more of the closed „ideal” objects.

Conclusion

The lesson of the picturesque, regarding deformity, contains the search for a closer, deeper, way of relating to the built environment. As it retains the ludic act of adding on the formal, closed system, it also touches on the vernacular aspect of the participatory building process. The picturesque can embrace architecture in its visuality (*painterly effect*) or process of *becoming*. The fact that it repaired, even if hinted, throughout the 19th and 20th century, tells of a trans-cultural search of the human mind for something beyond the immediate problem-solving solution. Thus, its aesthetics could provide today's discourse, that emerges from post-modernism to meta-modernism, with an answer to the crisis of meaning in architecture. Aesthetic *pleasure*, as superficial as it could be regarded, is not something to be disregarded, as everyone has, inevitably, an opinion about their built environment. It is to keep and develop an aesthetic discourse that can contribute to architecture's role in trust-building. Learning it from history is a double-edged sword, as it is about what we retain from it, but, also, about a way to know ourselves:

„Everywhere we are looking for ourselves. Each age looks to the past for similarities that will exalt and justify its tastes and aspirations. Sometimes we also look for a chimerical image of times that promise to be happier. But dreaming of the past is a way of preparing for the future.” (Cantacuzino, 2024, 75)

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Deformarea obiectului arhitectural „ideal” ca act estetic: Iterarea esteticii pitorești în arhitectură

(rezumat)

Această lucrare explorează modul în care deformările obiectelor arhitecturale „ideale” reprezintă un act estetic și reflectarea acestuia în arhitectura contemporană. Întrucât arhitectura caută întotdeauna soluții directe, aceasta conduce adesea la un obiect general sau „ideal”. Însă, plasat într-un context specific, acesta suferă o serie de adaptări, deformându-și starea ideală. Astfel, obiectul intră într-o etapă de joc „erudit” al volumelor, obținând varietate, neregularitate și complexitate. Acest act estetic a fost explorat încă din secolul al XVIII-lea, prin teoria pitorescului, care a pus sub semnul întrebării judecata universal-obiectivă, accentuând particularitatea obiectului. Conținând actul estetic al deformării, pitorescul oferă un cadru pentru acceptarea estetică a incidentelor neprevăzute. În ceea ce privește procesul de design, acesta îmbină rigoarea arhitecturală cu spiritul liber al spontaneității. În acest sens, prin estetica pitorescului, actul deformării re apare în lucrările arhitecturale, acceptând și valorificând neprevăzutul vieții.