

What Is ‘Perpetual Change’? Concept or Protocol(s) of Change in John Ruskin as Substance of Architectural Writing

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Abstract As an architect and philosopher respectively, we have written a two-part text (architectural-philosophical) that would present the main outlines and figures of writing about architecture and architectural writing in John Ruskin. His endeavour to describe buildings and cities transformed into an imperative to find ‘the substance of the architectural’, simultaneously preserving the utmost significance of its ontological aspect, that is, change. We reconstruct Ruskin’s understanding of various protocols of ‘change’ in two different ways: first, within the general difficulty in the histories of Western culture and thought to determine ‘change’ (which is certainly not a Western invention), and where Ruskin’s contribution is crucial. Further, we understand Ruskin’s project as being in a state of tension between continuous amendment of his written description of buildings, while defending the paradoxical intransience of change that goes beyond the objects in which it is manifested. Ruskin’s method of endless correction and revision thus becomes an introduction to the preservation of the unadaptable and unchanging, and then also the beautiful.

Keywords Change. Beauty. New. Concept. Perpetual.

What comprises the basic elements of a possible prolegomena or introduction into the theory of change? Or conversely, what needs to be immediately rejected as unacceptable in the construction of a continuous concrete change or continuum of myriad changes? Change begins with a glut of activity, with swift and urgent exchange of various actions, with repetition and exchange of actions and agents, with their interchange and effacement. Such is the origin of change. The number of actions or amount of activity provides the introduction for any future construction of the concept of change. Aside from time (as it is a continuum), the exchange and quick transition of activities is an introduction into the connection between movement and change (in Aristotle, the words *metabolē* ‘change’ and *kinēsis* ‘movement’ stand in a complex symmetry or synonymy; Latin will take over these difficulties through *mutatio*, *alteratio*, etc.). Further, it leads to endless shades of change (not all cut of the same cloth: substantial, incidental,

relative, relational, proper, incomplete, accidental, etc.); it leads to the myth of invisibility of change, which is to say, negation and erasure of acts in the name of something as yet unachieved new or even (im)possible (the eternal *noch nicht*). We would like to assume and propose a few axioms of the ‘protocol of change’ or ‘acts or facts of changing’ that necessarily follow from the connection or from the ‘and’ (in architecture ‘and’ philosophy or architect ‘and’ philosopher):

- a. ‘change’ can be classified as an ‘architectural’ notion because it necessarily refers to movement, to “Spatial Relations: Place, Form, Size” (Buck 1988, 829-915);
- b. the architect and philosopher necessarily see not what is but what is yet to be or yet to be seen; at least three consequences follow: that what is real or actual is necessarily such as potential and in the process of becoming (as Hermann Lotze [1887, 106] writes, “change must find its way to the



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- inside of being"); what is actual is amended and corrected, erased and varied to better fit the concept that intervenes and produces the actual; the expression of the concept (a manifestation of the projective mind) is announced, noted, and visible;
- c. change is verifiable, it is necessarily present and objective, it can be thought and perceived – in opposition to Henri Bergson (1911) –; finally, architecture does not exist without the concept of change because change is perpetual modification of the objectification of the concept;
 - d. change is thus substantive and corresponds to the fourth designation in Aristotle concerning the "creation and destruction of substances" (Sorabji, Kretzmann 1976, 78); this means that form is compatible with the concept, and that true change is two-way: creative – when matter becomes statue, for example; or destructive – when matter is de-formed, losing its distinction from its surrounding, becoming a ruin;
 - e. 'change' can thus never be *une notion vide et abstraite*, nor ever be substituted with "transformation" or "a system of transformation" (as Michel Foucault seeks to make it [1972, 166-77]), which are no more than accidental alterations or simple shifts (*phora*), and not movement or change ("actuality of that which potentially is").

That this is change is clear from the following: when that which is buildable is in actuality, in the respect in which we call it such, it is being built, and this is the process of building; and similarly with learning and healing and rolling and jumping and maturing and growing old. (Arist., *Ph.* 201^a9)

John Ruskin was 20 in March 1839 when he published the poem *Canzonet*:

I

There's a change in the green of the leaf,
And a change in the strength of the tree;
There's a change in our gladness or grief, –
There may be a change upon thee.
But love – long bereft of thee,
Hath a shade left of thee;
Swift and pale hours may float
Past – but it changeth not.

II

As a thought in a consecrate book,
As a tint in the silence of air,

As the dream in the depths of the brook,
Thou art there.
When we two meet again,
Be it in joy or pain,
Which shall the fairest be, –
Thou – or thy memory? (1903b, 87)

This is supreme theatre from Ruskin, between change, changefulness, unchangeableness, while his writing has one single endeavour (its essential characteristic): to follow the rhythm of change and paradoxically underscore a vision of the unchangeable affirmed exclusively through perpetual change. Indeed, this is a paradox, but without paradox there can be no thinking or writing. How does Ruskin position himself towards everything in his presence that is changing? And how might we reconstruct his positioning, and perhaps further develop it? How can we utilize and extend Ruskin's engagement with 'change', entirely unique or at least quite rare in histories of Western thinking and writing?

Let us look at the places of thematization of change in Ruskin. We insist and prioritize various visions of change in Ruskin, and not the time when change occurs and dominates in his thinking. For example, nature: in *The Poetry of Architecture*, Ruskin describes a mountain as something that "appears to be beyond the influence of change" (1903a, 68), yet simultaneously, the mountain, or better still, a 'specific' mountain such as is Vesuvius, represents for him "perpetual change" (7 March 1841, on the way from Naples to Castellammare) (39). Ruskin uses this phrase, "perpetual change" until the end of his life (in 1839 he explains it as "eternal motion" and "infinite mystery" [208]); it is one of his great conceptual adventures. What does this mean? When attempting to formulate what is the opposite of change, Ruskin suggests change that takes place continuously, or change that recurs as perpetual change. That is to say, the opposite of that which changes is not that which never changes or is static, but rather, that which is faster than all movement and eternal in its change.

In his lecture, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, of 18 November 1853, we see that 'change' for Ruskin is conceptually entirely constructed and universal (this is ultimately the period when he publishes the last two volumes of *The Stones of Venice*). Specifically, Ruskin looks to 'change' as the basic global or geopolitical principle, the principle of motion of peoples in history.

For observe, the change of which I speak has nothing whatever to do with the Reformation, or with any of its effects. It is a far broader thing than the Reformation. It is a change which has

taken place, not only in reformed England, and reformed Scotland; but in unreformed France, in unreformed Italy, in unreformed Austria. I class honest Protestants and honest Roman Catholics for the present together, under the general term Christians: if you object to their being so classed together, I pray your pardon, but allow me to do so at present, for the sake of perspicuity, if for nothing else; and so classing them, I say that a change took place, about the time of Raphael, in the spirit of Roman Catholics and Protestants both; and that change consisted in the denial of their religious belief, at least in the external and trivial affairs of life, and often in far more serious things. (Ruskin 1904b, 139)

The universality of the concept of 'change' is then transposed into his writings on political economy:

In every nation, I believe that changes of government are the expression rather than the cause of changes in character. They are evidences, not the instruments, of its prosperity or distress. (Ruskin 1903e, 18)

Yet, more important for us, it also transposes into a concept as a phenomenon of the mind. For something to be a concept - we insist here that Ruskin, the conceptualist, produces concepts and describes and interprets the world conceptually - it must create reality: the concept must construct reality, and the writer must change reality, subject it to the will and force of their writerly vision. 'Change' as a concept has its double 'power': it has conceptual power to change reality or everything around it, and the power of naming or notion (content, meaning; the notion of 'change' describes that which the 'concept of change' does) which are in harmony with the action of the concept as such. In 1875, inspired by Alfred William Hunt, Ruskin describes what summer days are for him:

I am at some pause in expressing my pleasure in the realization of this beautiful scene, because I have personal interest in it, my own favourite summer walk being through this very field. As, however, I was far away at Assisi when the artist painted it, and had nothing whatever to do with either the choice or treatment of his subject, it is not indecorous for me to praise a work in which I am able so securely to attest a fidelity of portraiture, happily persisted in without losing the grace of imagination. It is the only picture of the year which I saw in the studio, and that by chance; for it is one of my fixed laws not to look at pictures before they take their fair trial in the Academy. But I ventured

to find fault with the sky. The sky was courteously changed to please me; but I am encroaching enough to want it changed more. - "Summer days are" *not* - "for me", unless the sky is blue in them, and especially unless it looks - what simple mortals too often make it in reality - a great way off. I want this sky to look bluer at the top, and farther away at the bottom. The brook on the right is one of the very few pieces of stream which, this year, have been studied for their beauty, not their rage. (1904e, 298)

Conversely, for a concept to be able to create reality, what is needed is love or desire ("desire of change", "love of change"). This is the novelty in the complicated histories of the concept, because Ruskin now presents a new, third protocol in the construction of the power of the concept to create reality or the world. What precedes even the concept as a spontaneous creative power (the concept moves of its own volition, that is, it is its own mover) is desire or love, or better, enthusiasm of one perceiving the world at once negating it.

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The condition or cause of an act that changes something, the 'act of change' is certainly a disorder in the 'changer', a disorder in their perception of reality (we are mostly thinking of architects and philosophers, who have this at all times, but children possess this, and all those who, so to speak, "know how to say no"). Still, it is not enough to simply say no, and childhood after all is brief. This is an ability to see the world not as it is, but as it ought to be, although it never will. How to see something not present, which ought to replace that which is? In this case too, consequences are varied, since the 'expression' itself is also important (the particular expression of what ought to be); further, how to design or project change (this is the place of birth of the 'projective mind'); further still, the 'projective mind' is always social: there can be no project if there are no others... There is no such thing as 'my project', and which does not imply others; and perhaps the most important consequence of this 'resistance' to reality would be that change is not some kind of fiction, but something visible, evident, real... Change is a new object, a new social fact (it has universal meaning; my desire for change is the desire of all), born of

the imperative (or transformation of the first-person singular, 'I want' into the imperative 'change').

We get a complete explanation of why for Ruskin change and variety (as absence of monotony) are well-nigh synonymous, and what is "love of change".

Hence, out of the necessity of Unity, arises that of Variety; a necessity often more vividly, though never so deeply felt, because lying at the surface of things, and assisted by an influential principle of our nature, the love of change, and by the power of contrast. [...] Of the Love of Change as a principle of human nature, and the pleasantness of variety resulting from it, something has already been said (Ch. IV. § 4); only as there I was opposing the idea that our being familiar with objects was the cause of our delight in them, so here I have to oppose the contrary position that their strangeness is the cause of it. And to do the same things often is pleasant... for what we are accustomed to is pleasant. And to change is pleasant, for change is according to nature. (Ruskin 1903c, 96, 97)

The concept of 'variety' is carefully chosen as complementary to the concept of 'change', in that it implies the existence of plurality as a basic characteristic of any change. It is the principle of dynamism and movement of everything in the plural. Change is always plural. Therefore, the concept 'interchange' that Ruskin thematizes in *The Elements of Drawing* is an excellent addition or bridge between 'change' and 'variety'. The chapter *The Law of Interchange* begins thus:

Closely connected with the law of contrast is a law which enforces the unity of opposite things, by giving to each a portion of the character of the other. (1904e, 196)

Change here is eternal motion and movement with something else, with the other. This is an entirely novel characterization of the protocol of 'change', entirely ontologically dependent on the other or on what it itself is not. Change implies not only the existence of variety or plural, but movement and dynamics of that which is opposite or in contrast, or else 'in front of'.

Still, why is 'change' an architectural concept and how does Ruskin stabilize it as the ultimate condition of what he calls "Living Architecture" (1903d, 204)? There is a double-step or a parallelism in execution of Ruskin's main book on architecture and *The Nature of Gothic* from *The Stones of Venice*. The two methodological strategies are a good explanation of the origin and justification

of Ruskin's introduction of the concept of 'change', and certainly the future of this concept, ever a new future. Let us, finally, list them:

1. Regardless of Ruskin's attempt to unify architecture (the gentleman) and the building (the operative), to buttress the existence of "mass society made up of morbid thinkers and miserable workers" (1904a, 201) or "uninventive architects and feelingless spectators" (1903d, 87), he nevertheless insists on invention, on the new, on "*perpetual novelty*" (1904a, 208; italics in original), which is undoubtedly an introduction into authorial architecture (and we are still waiting on an analysis of his famous line that "the best architecture to be the expression of the mind of manhood by the hands of childhood" [200]);
2. Regardless of a detailed deconstruction of change as such - Ruskin analyses on the example of music what is monotony and its significance, differentiating healthy and diseased love of change (such as when looking at a Turner canvas from 1817, he says, "It is, in fact, a work in the sickness of change; giving warning of revolution of style and feeling, without, as yet, any decisive possession of the new principles" [1904c, 124] - "the talent of the composer [or the architect we might add] is not in the monotony, but in the changes [...] an architecture which is altogether monotonous is a dark or dead architecture" [1904a, 35]).

The vital principle is not the love of *Knowledge*, but the love of *Change*. (210)

Change is the principal characteristic of novelty and invention (in the new, change is visible and objective, present to all), but at the same time, 'change' surpasses the finitude of anything new or any new object. This is certainly a paradox. Our assumption, which certainly surpasses the scope of this text, is likely complex in multiple ways: since concepts are always born and appear in places of paradoxes and various frictions between the multiplicity of concepts and their connections, the concept of 'change' ought to not only *impact* beauty (which is the title of paragraph 6, "Change, and its influence on beauty, of Modern Painters" (1903c, 97), but also *introduce* it and *imply* it. Is the idea of the beautiful or beauty as a concept constructed in the place of the new and simultaneous erasure of the same in what follows? Could the trace of that which is 'still not yet' constructed or the 'just erased' not be another great architectural discovery of John Ruskin, the first true philosopher of change?

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