Words Fail Me: architectural experience beyond language

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When we open up the pages of the books that once belonged to the English architect Inigo Jones (1573-1652), we are bombarded with words. Along each margin and across the plates themselves, and in the blank spaces of the page, are notes by Jones (fig. 1).
The densest annotations are in his copy of Andrea Palladio’s *I Quattro libri dell’architettura* (Venice, 1601) that he purchased not long after it was published and wrote in throughout his career. In fact, there are likely more words by Jones in his copy of Palladio than there are words by Palladio himself. Jones’s famous handwriting, cramped and adjusted to the narrowness of the margin, is the running commentary on these printed texts and images. These notes are the cinematic voice-over, forever wedded to the text in a permanent gloss and record of the book’s effect on its reader.

2 This essay will suggest that for Jones the books he read established an expectation of Renaissance architecture that was ultimately dislodged by the visual and emotional experience of seeing the buildings themselves. If Jones began his architectural career searching for the key to architectural classicism in the details and nuances of the orders, he ultimately experienced an aesthetic discernment that was both personal and professional.

3 The annotations by Jones are a remarkable historical survival and offer tremendous evidence of how this architect read and interpreted his books. The importance of these annotations spreads in many directions, and have endless importance for scholars of Jones and the English architecture of the early seventeenth century, but also for historians of the Renaissance and its fortuna for they give us hints as to how architecture and architectural books of the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were understood and interpreted. Marginal annotations by early modern readers help us to understand the reception of books and their contents. The search for notes and other evidence of use have fueled sub-fields of the humanities including history of the book and reception studies.

4 Jones’s annotations are the most extensive examples of notes by a working architect of the time, and have been recognized as important almost from the moment of his death. In his will, Jones took special care that the books would be kept together and held in trust by his assistant, John Webb. Later architects, authors and editors recognized the importance of the library as the link between English architecture and the classical tradition as it had developed in Northern Italy during the sixteenth century. When Giacomo Leoni intended to publish his English translation of Palladio in 1715, he advertised the venture with claims that he would include in the publication “several Notes and Observations made by Inigo Jones never printed before”. Under pressure to bring out his book quickly, Leoni did not receive permission to include Jones’s annotation in time for publication of his Palladio translation. He had hoped to ensure the success of his publishing venture by establishing the seventeenth century English link back to Palladio. Jones’s annotations were the physical traces of that architectural lineage.

5 The annotations survive from a turning point in the history of English architecture: the adoption of a more rigorous form of architectural classicism than had previously been used by English architects. The simultaneous shift in architectural style and the density of annotations in books on architectural classicism by the main practitioner of that style have an obvious causal connection. Jones read carefully, at times obsessively, about architectural classicism in order to understand its inner workings. He needed to understand classicism with enough fluency so that he could work within its limits, and then shape its language for his own use.
Architectural classicism demands an understanding of ancient architectural precedents and the corresponding classical culture. For architects in England, far from the actual objects of antiquity that information was available through books.

One of the most common ways that scholars have used Jones’s annotations has been to comb them for evidence of Jones’s typological and stylistic sources. Palladio’s treatise is the most copiously annotated of Jones’s books, offering the reader a range of building types to use as models. Books I and IV provide a vocabulary of the orders and ancient building types as justification for his particular formal choices. If Palladio was the main book on Jones’s desk, Jones read it alongside other architectural treatises including Serlio, his copy of Barbaro’s edition of Vitruvius, Vincenzo Scamozzi’s L’Idea dell’architettura universale, and Philibert de l’Orme.

Jones’s annotated treatises are only one type of documentary record that he left behind. The evidence that Jones offers us, from what survives, can be categorized into various types: his buildings, books, and drawings. Yet there is remarkably little overlap in content between these various types. Jones’s books are filled with words, not images. In fact, there are relatively few drawings in any of his books even when there is sufficient room to draw. Given that he brought the books with him to the continent, carrying his Palladio through France and into Italy in the years 1613-14 (and buying more along the way), it is surprising that there are not more drawings. The absence of drawings in his books may be because he also kept sketchbooks or commonplace books at the same time as he was writing in the margins of the printed books. Only one of these notebooks survive, the so-called Roman sketchbook, although we know others existed because Jones made reference to them in the margins. By using these books as a commonplace book, organizing his reading into categories, Jones digested the material in ways that made the book more personally useful. In his notebooks he brought together reading, direct observation of architecture and art, and his commentary on what he saw and read. The format of the notebooks with its blank pages with no predetermined agenda required Jones to bring materials from various sources.

Yet in his books, on the printed page, Jones’s principle form of response was textual. That is, Jones saw the product of reading and interpretation in the books to be writing, as if the printed books begat writing. Text into more text. This is particularly surprising when Jones is at great pains to explain, in words, what could be done so much more efficiently if he had decided to draw. When he writes about a particular use of an order that he studied and saw in one of Palladio’s buildings, he could have sketched that quickly – yet he describes it in words. The density of writing, trying to capture what was in the plates of Palladio in words, suggests almost a level of discomfort with the images, as if he did not trust or fully understand what they were showing.

The precedence that Jones gives to words also indicates that he approached the printed treatises of Alberti, Serlio and Palladio as grammars of a foreign language. He read the books (and especially the Palladio) in sequence: that is, the principles of the orders followed by their use in buildings followed by their antecedents in antiquity. Antiquity justified the grammar, the syntax, and even the idioms of classicism.

Jones is exactly the kind of reader that Palladio or Serlio had in mind; in fact, when Serlio explains why he chose to publish Book IV first – he said he thought it would be “more relevant and more important than the others for the understanding of the different styles of buildings and their ornaments”. But the orders in all their
complexity and refinement was also the aspect of contemporary architecture that certainly had the greatest interest to the widest range of readers. The detailed parsing of the images by Jones, comparing the solutions for the Corinthian order for example between Palladio, Serlio, Scamozzi, and Vitruvius (in the Daniele Barbaro edition) indicates the intensity with which Jones studied architecture as a textual critic.

Fig. 2. Inigo Jones, Elevation for a New Exchange


12 Jones’s fascination with continental architecture should not detract us from seeing that he approached treatises as a source of information of new designs. Classicism was exotic, and therefore novel, for an English reader. Craftsmen were always on the lookout for ornament that they could incorporate into their own work. Jones himself, in his early architectural designs, freely combined classical architectural elements from various sources (fig. 2). Treatises, like collections of drawings and sketchbooks, offered new ideas that were transferable into a variety of materials at differing scales. Jones’s first interest in the orders is typical of how an English craftsman might have approached the books of Serlio and Palladio. Yet is it this other side to his reading, his interest in the linguistic aspect of architecture that sets Jones apart from contemporary English readers.

13 Jones was not alone or innovative, of course, in thinking about architecture as a language. In this he is following his books that presented architecture in the guise of a complete system easily allied to grammatical systems. Sebastiano Serlio laid out the five orders in a systematic and visual fashion as a full visual language. He showed the orders together on one page so that the reader could make comparisons. Serlio says that he is imitating “the ancient writers of comedies, some of whom, when they were to perform a comedy, used to send out a messenger who, in a few words, told the spectators all that the comedy was about”.

Collections électroniques de l'INHA
By extracting the orders from the context of a complete building, or even ancient model, Serlio encourages the reader to interpret the orders within other contexts, including local traditions. In the first English architecture treatise, *The First and Chiefe Groundes of Architecture* (1563), John Shute presented the orders as different types of human figures. The Doric is described as equivalent to Hercules, a massive male body with all the characters of the ancient god. According to Henry Wotton, writing in *The Elements of Architecture* (1624), the Ionic order “doth represent a kinde of Feminine slendernessse, yet saith Vitruvius, not like a light Housewife, but in a decent dressing, hath much of the Matrone ...” (fig. 3). As a scheme of five elements, comparable yet different, the orders evoked other hierarchical systems already in place. In sixteenth and seventeenth century England, gradations of social class included distinctions of rank and birth, and easily transposed with a classical architectural system. Ben Jonson mocks this easy exchange between class and architectural classicism in his play *A Tale of a Tub* (1640):

I know his d'ameters, and circumference: 'A Knight is sixe diameters, and a Squire is iwe, and somewhat more: I know't by compasse, And Skale of man. I have upo' my rule here, The just perportions of a Knight, a Squire; With a tame Justice, or an Officer, rampant, Upo' the bench, from the high Constable Downe to the Head-borough, or Tithing-man; Or meanest Minister o' the peace, God save 'un.

(act. IV, scene 1)
In England classical columns had become by the sixteenth century a sign of educational reforms based on a humanistic arts curriculum. The use of a tower of the orders at the School's Quadrangle in Oxford is just one example of how classical architecture came to stand for classical learning (fig. 4). The literary aspect of architecture found an easy alliance in a climate that valued textual exegesis at the heart of religious reform and classical allusion as part of political policy.

The effect of the linguistic analogy, however, on architectural history (and on architecture itself) has been profound and perhaps unexpected. We privilege the history of classicism as a linguistic system most closely aligned with books. Yet one result of the alignment of architecture to language was that it created a hierarchy of status within the field of architecture itself, giving precedence to those aspects of building which could be aligned with an educational program of humanism. Those elements of architecture that did not have that linguistic basis - the work of craftsmen, the attention to materials, the labor of architecture itself - that is, all aspects connected with the vernacular architectural traditions, were now assigned to a secondary status.
It was a remarkable turn when Jones added to his self-education the experience of travel. The comments that he makes about the architecture that he has seen, and read about previously, adds information that the author does not include and could only be known by someone who had the almost unique opportunity to see the building. By recording these observations in the margins Jones is writing “more than is in Palladio”, as he notes in Book IV of his copy of *I Quattro libri*. The very presence of the notes confirms a special status on Jones as both an educated and an experienced architect who had the opportunity to travel. Anyone could read books but not everyone had seen the buildings. For Jones, travel was a transformation in his professional knowledge of architecture as well as a personal revelation about the intersections of the practice of architecture and the culture of continental humanism. The 1613-14 trip codified Jones’s desire to shape himself in the guise of Palladio and Scamozzi. Self-portraits from this period embed the image of Jones within the sculptural frame of classical sculpture and architecture (fig. 5).

Jones owned books and read them carefully before he traveled abroad. Books, however, showed buildings as two-dimensional objects, complete yet immaterial in terms of scale, size and materiality. In books, architecture could be studied at a distance, using a comparative method that was at the center of humanistic methods of study and scholarship. Laid out on the page, with measurements and scales provided, the careful reader could extract numerical relationships and linguistic rules from the images, and fill in information from the accompanying text. Yet there was no way to understand the tangible and sensual aspect of architecture. In this way, books shaped Jones’s preconceptions of modern and ancient buildings. Travel, however, upended any simple...
or fixed notion Jones might have had about how classical architecture worked. On the ground, buildings were never as they seemed in books.

**Fig. 6. Inigo Jones’s notes and corrections to the plan of the Palazzo Thiene, Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro libri dell’architettura* (Venice, 1601)**

Antiquities were not whole and complete as Palladio showed them. Nor were Palladio’s own buildings finished as he hoped they would be, and as he showed them in his treatise. For Jones, the inconsistency between book and building offered further evidence that the study of architecture required both hard work in his study, and attentive observation of the buildings in situ. For example, on the plan of the Palazzo Thiene in Book II of Palladio’s treatise, Jones drew dotted lines to indicate that less than half of the palace was finished, and made a note in the margin that “This foure Part is not begoon but the ould building stands”²⁰ (fig. 6). Neither the wood-cut illustrations, nor the brief textual description of the buildings included extensive information on construction techniques or materials²¹. “I obsearve”, he begins one note, “that the Stucco that c[o]vers the Collombs of bricke is w[i]th marmo pesto and that within the house are only of malta”²². That is, the outside stucco contained ground marble and the material used within was a less precious lime stucco. For an English architect used to different materials and building practices, the techniques used abroad were worthy of extensive comments. In his copy of Scamozzi, Jones later made extensive notes about the practice of covering brick with stucco in order to save expense²³.

What did it mean for Jones to see ancient and modern buildings first hand? The experience of architecture outside of England was not only the observation of buildings that looked different from what he knew in England, but also architecture which felt different. This point requires a bit of an explanation. Jones owned at least four books
before he traveled to France and Italy in the company of Thomas Howard, the Earl of Arundel: Giorgio Vasari’s Lives, Vitruvius [Daniele Barbaro edition], Sebastiano Serlio [Tutte l’architettura], and Palladio. Annotations in these four books can be dated to the years before he traveled – and almost exclusively, those annotations are about the orders and ornament: the differences between the orders, the use of the orders in various types of buildings, and the techniques for composing ornamental details.

In contrast, almost all of the annotations that he makes on site are about aspects of the buildings that could only be understood by someone who visited the buildings. The annotations are more personal, more specific to a particular time and place. From masons in Vicenza Jones learned that Palladio had carved one of the capitals of the Palazzo Thiene himself. There are notes that record conversations with architects or masons, famously his meeting with Vincenzo Scamozzi. Many of these notes are dated, adding to their specificity in time as well as in place.

The trip in 1613-14 marked a turning point in Jones’s career by transforming the ways in which he understood architecture as a physical object. No longer could he approach classical architecture as a discrete object at a distance, or as an abstract problem that could be solved solely through the manipulation of forms. This transformation stayed with Jones for the rest of his career as an architect. After his return from Italy, Jones continued to annotate his books and to read widely in the field of architecture, history, biography, philosophy and music theory. Yet, he never again wrote the same kind of annotations in his books as he had done before that formative trip. Almost without exception, he never again wrote the sort of linguistic analysis of architecture, the close study of the orders and architectural ornament that he had written before his 1613 trip. After this date he added notes that recalled the first hand experiences he had had when he was traveling. His ability to relive the experience of travel, to call it up again in his memory and then transfer those experiences into new architectural analyses and designs, indicates his belief in the importance and validity of his impressions of architecture.
For example, in a long series of annotations on the Temple of Peace in Rome (Basilica of Maxentius) in his copy of Palladio, Jones makes a note about the columns being taken down and one erected in front of Sta. Maria Maggiore. He notes that this happened while he was in Rome. Thus the note is a memory, a recollection of something that he had seen earlier\(^2\). He comes back to the annotations on this page as he is thinking about the relationship between the columns of a portico, and the interior space of a church, just as he was engaged in the design for a new west front for the church of St Paul’s in London\(^2\) (fig. 7). The other sort of annotation that Jones makes after he returns are historical, contextual comments about the buildings. These were often added with references to other texts, the histories of Herodotus, for example, or the geography of Strabo.

When Jones writes about ornament in his annotations made after 1613-14, he does so in order to understand ornament’s meaning, not just its grammar. He looks for ways to defend what he likes and what he doesn’t like (personal assessments, indeed) although based on broader principles. Most famously, in a long passage in one of his notebooks he condemns Michelangelo’s architecture as appropriate only for garden architecture or fireplaces, but not for solid, that is masculine, architecture:

> For as outwardly every wyse man carrieth a graviti in Publicke Places, whear ther is nothing els looked for, yet inwardly has his immaginancy set free, and sumtimes licentiously flying out, as nature hirself doeth often tymes stravagantly, to delight, amuse us sometimes moufe us to laughter, sumtimes to contemplation and horror, so in architecture ye outward ornaments oft to be sollid, proporsionabl according to the rules, masculine and unaffected\(^2\).
On the one hand in this passage we can connect Jones’s comments in with broader ideas about the changing definition of masculinity in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, a new sobriety in dress that could also be seen in architecture: the restrained exterior of classical architecture as the proper attire for public architecture. Public, in this case, includes both architecture of state as well as the public façade of the great urban house, the civic sign of its owner’s status and bearing. The distinction between the exterior and interior had been discussed by Alberti: “In a town house the internal parts, such as the drawing rooms and dining rooms, should be no less festive than those of a country one; but the external parts, such as the portico and vestibule, should not be so frivolous as to appear to have obscured some sense of dignity.” Yet Jones goes much further.

Fig. 8. Giulio Romano

Architecture, in his equation, is a catalyst to experience, a provoqueur of emotion. Like nature, buildings are capable of cajoling us into various emotional states. That is why ornament, solid and proportional, is necessary and significant because it affects us, it moves us emotionally and we are bound to respond. Jones had recorded just this affect in the work of Giulio Romano at the Palazzo Te, where he noted that Giulio’s use of the Tuscan rustic order (in all of its variations and inventiveness) had the effect of moving the visitor, as Jones himself must have been moved when he too visited the building in 1614 (fig. 8).

Jones resolved for himself that classicism was just an armature, a skeleton on which the real work of Renaissance architecture is done: the creation of an architecture which is emotionally engaged with the past and actively engaged in current social and historical dynamics. The language of Renaissance architecture, the use of the orders in all their variety, allowed buildings to do their real and important work: to emotionally move the
viewer. Jones knew this from first hand experience. Books offered analytical information about the language of classicism that could be studied at a distance. Yet the experience of the physical presence of ancient buildings, half-buried and awe inspiring in size and complexity, brought classical architecture to life for Jones. His emotional experience of antiquity was fully articulated and shared by his patron on this 1613-1614 trip, Thomas Howard, the Earl of Arundel. Arundel, a passionate collector of antiquities and patron of humanist scholars, offered Jones a model of emotional engagement and rigorous study.

Ultimately what Jones figured out is that the legacy of the Renaissance is not architectural classicism as some sort of detached architectural language but as a rhetoric of emotion. In both his copy of Alberti and Barbaro’s edition of Vitruvius, Jones praised the connection of the architect to the orator, as one whose job it is to move the audience. Jones’s extensive work for the court masques, designing stage sets and costumes, sharpened his understanding of all the ways that the visual arts could be used to affect the mind and body.

To see Renaissance architecture through Inigo Jones’s eyes then is to construct a natural history of architectural emotion, a great taxonomy of spatial experiences, defined by architectural forms. What would be in this history of powerful emotional architecture? The work of Giulio Romano, to be sure, and Michelangelo. The theatre designs of Serlio, the great Roman antiquities (especially those in France), and the villas of Palladio. Sixteenth century architecture almost exclusively would be part of this, with fewer areas of interest in the Quattrocento. Brunelleschi and even Alberti’s own architecture (though not his writings) made less of an impression on Jones than did the bolder, more highly charged work of sixteenth century artists.

Fig. 9. Wenceslaus Hollar, Banqueting House and the Holbein Gate, Whitehall, drawing

Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.

Jones’s Renaissance was personal, emotional, selective and based on his own experience. Books may have formed the foundation, but his buildings rose out of what all his senses had to tell him. As Gordon Higgott has shown, Jones carefully adjusted his architecture based on visual corrections, altering the proportions of the orders in the Banqueting House, for example, to account for the height of the stories (fig. 9). More broadly, however, Jones understood that much of the impact of his architecture would derive from its interaction with the urban context and existing buildings nearby. The
Banqueting House, for example, with its regular grid like façade, and carefully controlled use of the orders, was startling in contrast to the irregular, brick construction of the rest of Whitehall Palace. The classicism of the Banqueting House had the impact it did because of the disjunction, the contrast between the new and the old, and the disruption of English architectural expectations.

This visual anachronism was not an unfortunate side effect of adopting a new style in the midst of a city with older architecture. Classicism for Jones was a powerful mode of building precisely because it did clash with what was already there. It made a greater impact by being different and standing out from earlier building. As the court architect, creating a visual and public image of the court, the contrast between the old and new may have served to highlight the recent succession of monarchs from the Tudor Elizabeth after her death in 1602 to the house of Stuart with King James I from Scotland. A new king, and especially one from Scotland, needed to differentiate his rule from existing traditions. That political imperative could be achieved, as Jones showed, through the evocative use of architectural styles to achieve a desired aesthetic effect. Classicism in and of itself promoted the Stuart agenda through its references to ancient political rule and culture. But equally important was the disjunction between old and new, Tudor and Stuart, which made the savvy visitor aware that the architecture commissioned by the new monarch was not simply a continuation of what had come before, but the mark of a new era.

The afterlife of Renaissance architecture, and Renaissance architectural theory, was more than a vocabulary of ornament or a justification through a scholarly attention to the remains of antiquity. Jones offers an example of an astute observer of the architectural condition, coming at the visual and literary debates about buildings as they were taking place in Italian and French culture, as an outsider. In the course of his architectural career he moved rapidly through several phases of work, yet always working out of the English traditions in which he was operating. Continental architecture only had meaning for Jones and his patrons because it could be translated into local idioms. The most powerful lesson Jones offers, however, was his evolution into an understanding of Renaissance architecture as a catalyst for emotional experience, a way to affect the viewer (and architect) through the manipulation of forms.

NOTES


21. It is likely that Palladio did not include this information because he assumed that local architects and builders would adapt his designs based on local materials and building techniques.
32. The literature on modern and contemporary architecture has been much more attentive to the emotional affect of architecture. See Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space. Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2000.
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