

This Will Kill That

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The title for this essay, *This Will Kill That*, finds its origins in Victor Hugo's classic novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The oft-quoted chapter from this exquisite tome inspired us with its catalytic nature, pregnant with a foreboding malice that suggests an ambiguous slaughter about to ensue. Our choice of this phrase is not simply for its morose overtones, but also for the remarkable chapter to which it applies, in which Hugo deliberates over the death of architecture by the printed word. This duality seems too ripe for us to consciously neglect and thus we employ the brilliance of Hugo in the fullest sense, borrowing both the enticement of his title and the structure through which he illuminates this remarkable history. Thus we arrive at our point of departure, a synchronous moment to explore and challenge the myths and margins of human knowledge, or more directly the edifice through which that knowledge is revealed. Before we begin, however, we feel it necessary to clarify our position as faculty and scholars of design first and foremost, and more precisely architecture in its fullest sense. As such, we must confess that Mario Salvadori's identification of our discipline as knowing nothing about everything is both precise and potent.¹ We claim only cursory knowledge of the humanities proper and as such hope that our attempt to find critical purchase within the broad and rich fields that the humanities define are not misconstrued as a brazen attempt to run roughshod over the years of scholarship that this fertile field of inquiry has provided. Instead we hope to offer a glimpse, a mere fragment of an unfolding vision of human knowledge that has reacquainted itself with the literacy of our eyes, and as such has encouraged a return to the seductive ideas of image. To be sure, the ongoing shifts toward an image culture are undeniable and unwavering, but to simply attack this issue as a devaluing process strikes too shallow a blow, and one born more of a misaligned nostalgia than of criticality. Instead we propose to start as Hugo does, with him in fact as our muse, as we seek to quiet our intellectual wanderlust through the expression of human thought.

***Architecture is the Great Book of Humanity*²**

Perhaps it is ironic to start with this notion of architecture as a book, given that so much of our academic labors are driven by a desire for buildings, not writing. Nor do we mistake this irony for the opportunity to pose what is a foundational but remarkably simple question about the beginning of architecture proper. Academically speaking, we affirm to our students the multiplicity of inspirations for their projects, which so often seem to find their origins outside of the ideas of building. Perhaps this anecdote seems of little consequence to the task at hand, this curious notion of a ground from which to start the act of making architecture, but this ground conceals a more critical question about architecture itself – did architecture not begin as a constructed endeavor? While there are certainly numerous arguments for the expansion of architecture beyond the physical boundaries of construction, it is first and foremost an act of building, the constructing of a sequence of elements and voids, of enchanted spatial encounters that reveal both the sensual and cerebral aspects of human existence. The act of building, whether physically realized or constrained to the fictions of the page, offers a narrative of sorts, an unpacking of ideas to which our words are woefully inadequate. We are all familiar with these

ideas, and while we may be restating of the obvious, it would be too quick to simply take these things for granted – the overlooked histories of constructed thought before there were words. We, however, are neither scribes nor poets, and would be amiss to displace our own descriptions of the history of architecture when Hugo's provide such insight. So let us first borrow Hugo's brilliance.

*“So, during the world's first six thousand years, from the first immemorial pagoda of Hindustan to the Cathedral of Cologne, architecture has been the great writing of the human species. And so true is this that not only every religious symbol but every human thought has its page in the immense book and its monument.”*³

Hugo reminds us of what we already know, what we have known all along, that architecture in its most ancient and monumental state was *“the great writing of the human species.”* Lest we forget this notion as a whimsical apparition, we need simply to look to ancient Egypt, with the imprints of its numerous deities and political diatribes, or the encrusted remnants of ancient Rome, with the tales of battlefield triumphs. In these ancient times Architecture was fixed to the earth and as such immortal. The elites of the time, the pharaohs and priests, Caesar and his senate, wished for their stories and doctrines to be perpetuated, and what better medium to preserve it than through the permanency of stone. Architecture existed in the service of the gods first. The architectural vessels offered to them a home, a temple, where in the privileged literates could worship, and to which the stones could become words, sentences, pages in the accumulating cultural scripture. Hugo again provides us ample evidence:

*“So the word was enclosed in the building, but its image showed through its envelope, as the human form is visible through the wrapper of a mummy.”*⁴

Hugo's assertion, even visible in this displaced fragment, resonates with a clue to our meander, a cairn by which we can start to find our way. What Hugo introduces is the variance of image and edifice, and though we will not now obsess over this point as there is still much ground to cover, we should deposit this idea into our rucksack as it will inevitably serve us well later in the journey.

Genius Scattered Among the Masses⁵

We are quite accustomed to the idea of reading buildings, consumed with a plethora of essays and postulations about the language of architecture. But what is this language, and for whom is it written? Does it not speak to the masses of humanity, demonstrated in both the thing itself and the physical toils of its making – a tautological testament of human ingenuity and determination? The answer from our vantage point seems obvious... *“Yes, of course!”* we shout, but perhaps we are merely seeing what we want to see, superimposing our wanton desire to find an egalitarian residue in our ancestral casts. Architecture was, and some argue still is, a product of the elite, done for the privileged classes, the so-called “the lapdogs of the rich.” This rather debased comment is of course recent in context, but architecture's emergence as the most public of arts didn't appear

until the Gothic period, and it is here that another of Hugo's pages turn to reveal a new found expression in architecture...that of the masses.

*"Then, anyone born a poet became an architect. Genius scattered among the masses, pressed down in all parts by feudalism as under the testudo of bronze shields, finding no release but through the architectural side, escaped through it, and Iliads took the form of cathedrals. All the other arts obeyed and submitted under the discipline of architecture. The builder, the poet, the master, uniting in his person sculpture that chiseled the facades, painting that illuminated the windows, music that rang the bells and breathed in the organs."*⁶

No longer is Architecture constrained to the elite classes. People, citizens and nobles alike were now folded into the architectural literati, each capable of tracing the sublime ciphers of psalm and scripture, enraptured by the soaring stone vessels, thrown skyward to the heavens, beseeched to humility before the altar and word of God. Buildings were fundamentally the fullest edifice of human thought, impregnated with the whispered stories of our ancestors to assure that they will never dissipate with the winds of time, and this was done through the fullest culmination of what we now know as the arts.

Architecture was the mother of the arts. Hugo reminds us of this, even though this notion may cause an insipid indigestion to our non-architectural colleagues burdened with weak intellectual constitutions. In Hugo's history, the voice of Architecture was indisputable, though it fell not into the audible realms of consciousness, but to the eyes, for vision at this time was to serve as the rhapsodist, unfolding of the sonnets of human thought to the masses. Music, art, sculpture, literature – these are but contemporary fractures that are born of Architecture, or perhaps amputated from Architecture, for as Hugo notes, Architecture's holistic ownership as the expression of human knowledge was to be permanently displaced by the emergence of the word.

Everything Changed⁷

Of the plethora of genius minds that litter our collective histories, few of us would necessarily place the name Gutenberg at the top. As academicians, we certainly appreciate his contributions and would never question the epochal shift that his printing press has had on the evolution of culture, but to the population at large, names such as Einstein, Freud, or Edison resound far more quickly. While this may be quickly explained away as cultural shallowness, it is perhaps more telling of our ability to overlook genius when it has become commonplace. We associate nearly all documentation of knowledge with books, with words and phrases, thick tomes signified often by their sheer weight and impenetrability. The ownership of knowledge presides in the book – or at least that is the current myth to which so much of society subscribes.

Gutenberg certainly would not have been able to predict the massive ramifications his simple invention would induce. Much like a pebble dropped into a lake, the printed text has caused a series of harmonic rings, oscillating crests and troughs, many of which we are still trying to navigate. Each consecutive ripple has diminishes in depth, though the

first delivered an upheaval so strong as to displace Architecture, casting it adrift among the rising tide of competing domains for human knowledge.

*“The invention of printing is the greatest event in history. It is the Revolution’s mother. It is humanity’s mode of expressing, totally renewed, it is man’s thought shedding one form and arraying itself in another, the complete, definite casting off of the skin of that symbolic serpent which, since Adam, has stood for intelligence.”*⁸

Hugo precedes this passage with a simple but poignant statement, a rephrasing of the title in a way – *Architecture is dethroned*. No longer does Architecture serve as the mother of arts. It is severed, scattered and compartmentalized, and with it goes the holistic possession of human thought.

*“In the printed form the mind is more imperishable than ever: it is volatile, not to be grasped or destroyed. It mingles with the air. In the days of architecture it had grown to a mountain and powerfully weighed on a century and a place. Now, it has become a flock of birds, scattered on the four winds and at once filling every point of the air and space.”*⁹

And what is left of Architecture? Though diminished, it is certainly not extinguished. Rather it lies exposed on freshly turned soil, waiting to take root. The field is fertile, but awash with debris. The residue of an onslaught that has stripped the ground, upon which will appear a thousand poppies, blossoming upon the new earth like a draped sheet of red. This image of poppies is perhaps an odd partner in our discussion and certainly is chronologically misaligned, born in the wastelands of The Great War. But as we are wandering through the mist of human thought, linearity to us seems of less consequence, making ripe for our inclusion of this curious anecdote. But before we make this heroic leap, perhaps we should take one more fragment from Hugo to better anchor ourselves.

It is that setting sun which we mistook for the aurora¹⁰

There are numerous histories that try to unpack the remarkable origins of the humanities, struggling with the singularity of each field, locked into its own set of jargons and modus operandi, overlapping with some of its siblings and quarreling with all of them. We are cautious to enter this realm, and rather than attempting to unravel these Gordian knots, we again opt for Hugo’s precision, brevity, and eloquence:

*“From the moment when architecture was no more than any other art, no longer the total, sovereign, tyrannical one, it had lost the strength to rein in the others. They were emancipated, they burst the yoke, and each flew its way, gaining every one by their divorce. Isolation increased everything. Sculpture became statuary, imagery painting, the canon became music. One would have said, it is an empire, dismembered by its Alexander’s death; the provinces make themselves into kingdoms.”*¹¹

Hugo’s dissection of the former Architecture into its constituent parts, the broad array of new disciplines and inquiries that now make up the Humanities, speaks to a condition

with which we are all too familiar. His comments are directed to the immediate point of severance, establishing an elaborate series of singular strands of thinking and expression that have, over the five centuries since Gutenberg, woven themselves into an elaborate and colorful tapestry. We do not contest this and do not question the legitimacy of any singular discipline. Rather, we are steered by the idea of knowledge and its vessel that Gutenberg started, that is to say the ultimate containment of knowledge in the form of words on a page, which in turn takes us back to the fore-mentioned field of poppies.

Poppies are beautiful flowers that carry two characteristics for our needs. We will introduce the first here, as save the second as a tidbit for later. The natural reproductive cycle of a poppy is one of patience and endurance, with the seeds often resting on untilled soil for years until a dramatic rooting of the ground exposes fresh earth and removes the competing vegetation. This cycle occurs regularly throughout Europe, typically in modest numbers dispersed through the agricultural fields and cultivated pastures of the European landscape, dusting the rises and falls of the land with a thin veil of red. The intensity of their appearance varies year to year, though nothing could rival the drama revealed at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. The military strategies of the period left in their wake a tragic reshaping of the ground, with untold acreages between the trenches exposed to relentless shelling and gunfire, leaving the soil raw. During a pause on the sixteenth day of battle, Major John McCrae took a brief moment of quiet to compose the poem *In Flanders Fields*, a testament to the glorious magnitude of blooming poppies amidst the trenches, dressing stations and fence lines that bounded the pockmarked no-man's land – awash in a sea of red. McCrae's poem is widely viewed as one of the greatest of such documents from this war to end all wars, juxtaposing with a humble clarity the surreal juxtaposition of beauty and desperation. For us it offers a more modest service, providing a metaphorical ground in which each discipline is entrenched, locked in place and fighting for the illusions of ownership of this field of human thought.¹²

This is perhaps an exaggeration, but the analogous alignment seems adequate to describe the tenuous and quarrelsome relationship between the various fields of the humanities. Many will argue otherwise about our suggestion of an adversarial relationship between our selected disciplines, contending that they all share in the remnants of a common goal, a tireless search for capturing the fleeting moments of human thought. Yet each of us is inherently locked into an increasing esoteric element of our own field, for if there remains a commonality to all of the fields of the humanities, and its extension back to Architecture, it is this slow and steady migration towards the microscopic. Let us view Architecture in this light. While we like to hold ourselves as one of the last remaining bastions of renaissance thought, stalwart against an enforcement of myopic expertise, when we look carefully at our academic predicament, we consciously isolate ourselves into the most minuscule moments, reducing architectural knowledge to the rarified degree of expertise in modernism perhaps, or better yet post-war modernism with a geographical proximity akin to a pinpoint. Our sibling disciplines are no better off, perhaps worse in their voluntary compartmentalization. With each subsequent sub-categorization comes an increasing irrelevance to a larger whole – we have lost ourselves in the proverbial forest for we no longer even see the trees. This phenomenon is not unique to Architecture or the Humanities. Salvadori's depiction of architects has its parallel in his

idea of the engineer as the knowing everything about nothing.¹³ Engineering however has relevance quite different than that which the humanities can provide for it is both empirical in its origins and provides fodder to the fires of industry. Curiously, it too is but a splinter of Architecture.

The humanities severed themselves from their Architectural host, and in doing so took with them the privileges to human thought. Their migration as disciplines has carried followed the path of an inward spiral, funneling itself into an increasing escapable entrenchment in the depths of academia. This gravitational pull towards specialization has in effect rendered them irrelevant other than to themselves, confusing academic rhetoric for knowledge and in doing so, bearing the residue of Narcissus in his perpetual self-infatuation.

Of course we are perhaps taking these points too seriously, painting a dour image of the state of human thought in Architecture and the Humanities, so let us restate one of our earlier questions, this dilemma of architecture being an act of building. But if it is so, then why do we as academicians find it so necessary to extract design legitimacy in the works from which it has emerged? Have we as a discipline perhaps confused the origins of architecture when rooted in the humanities as having greater bearing than an examination of the work itself? Hugo can tell us:

*“Henceforth if architecture rises up again accidentally, it will not be a master. It will suffer from the law of literature, which it received from it in the past. The respective standing of the two arts will be inverted.”*¹⁴

There is an amusing phrase that can be applied to our question – *Quidquid latine dictum sit, altum videtur* - or in our more pedestrian verse: whatever has been said in Latin seems profound. This hopefully raises a chuckle and is intended to be light-hearted, though there is also a more critical implication lurking in its shadow, waiting to topple our house of cards. The issue we raise is not that of the profundity of human thought, but the mistake we seem so willing to make: the confusion of design as an act of speaking rather than as an act of making. Paul Shephard, in his first book *What is Architecture?* wrestles with a similar dilemma, arriving at similar conclusions to Hugo and posing the comments on this dilemma as well:

*“What has happened? Why has **architecture** come to mean only **buildings**? Why do some architects try to copy machines while others try to ignore machines altogether? Why do architecture students fall in love with mystic practices? And most of all – why does architectural theory these days sound like literary theory?”*¹⁵

In his subsequent essays, Shephard offers his ideas to these questions, debating the concreteness of building to the vaporous quality of literature. His preferred term for Architecture in this search is *conclusive*:

“I invoke nature, the land, to illustrate what I mean by conclusive. For this essay, I put it up against two other varieties of meaning. One is the communication between people –

ambiguous, imprecise, value laden, and sparkling and shorting with the problems of language like an old wiring loom. When a stone is put on top of another stone, the conditions of the land – gravity, weathering, and stability – are certainties. There is nothing to be done about them but to comply. Every exchange of language, however, proceeds on a hypothesis about what the words mean, and something quite different from certainty, ambiguity, is the result. It's beautiful, exciting, productive, meaningful – but not conclusive in the way that landed things are.”¹⁶

In some ways, Shepherd helps us bring Architecture back to the forefront, grounding us on firm soil with this notion of conclusiveness and tempering our skepticism about the confusion of thought as “neither good nor bad, but just mixed up.”¹⁷ The dilemma for us, however, is that our confusion of Architecture has become increasing intertwined within the strands of the humanities, themselves adrift in the rising tides of social irrelevancy.

And what of Architecture in this muddled knot? To examine this, we have one more leap to make. Thankfully we can use Hugo one more time, though not in the lyrical fashion we've employed thus far. Now we must turn him on his head.

It is the second tower of Babel of the Human Species¹⁸

Hugo closes his chapter with the precious heading, depicting the construction of a second mythical tower of Babel, built not of stone but of the perpetual accumulation of human thought in the form of the printed page. His description bears an uncanny resemblance to the contemporary fascination of blogs and the miasma of information diffused through the internet. But here we must relieve Hugo of his burden and thank him for the journey, for while his tower exists, it also offers the precipice from which we can see the new flood of barbarians...and they are at the gates.

We are referring to the concerns of image culture, mentioned long ago and recollected only briefly and unknowingly by Hugo. The surging importance of image in contemporary culture is undeniable and while we could postulate on the origins and consequences of this shift, our suspicions are that the debate would be largely academic, beguiled by the same sort of rhetoric that has encouraged the migration away from words alone in favor of the image expediency, reversing Hugo's ideas of the edifice and the image in a pendular motion, albeit one accepting the hollowness of both the coffin and image that sits upon it.

But why would the image be hollow? The encrustations of ancient architecture were loaded with meaning and legible, offering back to the masses a way to make meaningful their existence. Are contemporary images not also potent, themselves operating out of the language of the humanities, either in affirmation or contradiction? Perhaps we are better to recall the poppies once again, though not just for their metaphorical value in vision, but also for the narcotics that can be derived from them – namely morphine. Its application in the war is obvious, but we are citing it for its euphoric values, for when attached to our earlier metaphor of the field of poppies, we can perhaps explain the

emptiness of our images, assembled from the accumulation of decayed ideas and thoughts, too immense to collect and too ambiguous to navigate.

But what then are we left with? Surely we cannot end on such a sour note, as if the predicaments of architecture and its relevance can be so quickly cast aside. This is not our closing point. Instead we offer the most obvious of solutions, involving a simple adjustment to our initial question about architecture. Perhaps it is time for us to consider architecture not as human thought through words, but as an act of constructing first, reaching for truths beyond the adequacy of words. There are no shortage of scholars who can happily argue and dissect the philosophical layers, the narratives and quotations of remote sources in our work. It is what they are good at. We are not. So to close, we will follow the advice of Paul Shephard and step off our soapbox. The edifice has truly fallen.

*“The trouble with discrediting old rubbish is, you just make more rubbish doing it.”*¹⁹

Notes:

1. Mario Salvadori, *Why Buildings Stand Up* (New York: Norton, 1980).
2. Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* trans. Catherine Liu (New York: The Modern Press, 2002), p. 162.
3. *ibid*, p. 164.
4. *ibid*, p. 163.
5. *ibid*, p. 166.
6. *ibid*, p. 166.
7. *ibid*, p. 168.
8. *ibid*, p. 168.
9. *ibid*, p. 168.
10. *ibid*, p. 169.
11. *ibid*, p. 169.
12. <http://www.greatwar.nl/>
13. Mario Salvadori, *Why Buildings Stand Up* (New York: Norton, 1980).
14. Hugo, p 172.
15. Paul Shephard, *What Is Architecture?* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 43.
16. *ibid*, p. 35.
17. *ibid*, p. 73.
18. Hugo, p. 173.
19. Shephard, p. 16.