Book Review

Branko Mitrović

Serene Greed of the Eye:

Leon Battista Alberti and the Philosophical Foundation of Renaissance Architectural Theory

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After his previous book, *Learning from Palladio* (reviewed in the *Nexus Network Journal* vol. 7 no. 1), Branko Mitrović has turned his powerful attention to the more difficult Leon Battista Alberti. *Serene Greed of the Eye* aims at a new understanding of the concepts presented in *De re aedificatoria* through the examination of Alberti's background in Scholastic Aristotelianism. What emerges represents a substantial shift in the usual interpretation of Alberti's treatise of architecture. What also emerges, however, is a polemic on the methods and rationalizations of architecture history itself.

As he did in *Learning from Palladio*, Mitrović opens his examination of the subject with a clear exposition of his methods and aims. First of all, the aim of this book is "the reconstruction of the argumentational framework underlying [Alberti's] theoretical system" (p. 17). This goes beyond the usual examination of terms, words and single concepts that are the usual focus of Alberti studies. If we think of Alberti's treatise as a heavily-laden fruit tree, we might say that while most scholars examine the fruit, Mitrović examines the tree itself, from which the fruit not merely hangs but draws its vitality. The tree in this case is the Aristotelian philosophy of Alberti's time. But somewhat surprisingly, Mitrović argues that while the tree is Aristotelian, the fruit is not necessarily so, and to demonstrate this convincingly he contrasts Alberti's ideas with those of the more orthodox Aristotelian Daniele Barbaro.

Once again Mitrović raises the question of whether architectural theory is concerned with the issue of meaning, or content, which can be verbally described, or the issue of form, which is visual. (The book's title obliquely refers to Alberti's preference for the visual. When I queried Prof. Mitrović about the meaning of the

titled, he wrote me that “Alberti says that human eyes are greedy for beauty and Aristotle describes the disinterested enjoyment in things visual. I assume that such greed can be properly called serene. But the original phrase / title was “The sovereign jewel of the eye”, which is a line in a poem by Geoffrey Scott”; the poem cited is “The Map of Spells”.) And as he did with Palladio, Mitrović locates Alberti’s interest in the visual. It is only the visual that is capable of entering into the realm of universals; the significance of meaning depends on an interpretation and is thus subjective. The concepts then that Mitrović focuses on to define Alberti’s theoretical framework are shape and the elements that define it, that is, lines and angles, and finally, the medium in which shapes are related, space.

One of the problems with which Alberti grappled was that the particular Aristotelian language and philosophical structure he adopted (as the only proper one, Mitrović argues, given Alberti’s formal education) was particularly ill-suited for the expression of his ideas about visual universals. In other words, he was trying to express concepts that lay outside the frame of reference of the terms within which he was confining himself. Architects are not so unfamiliar with this situation: consider those, for example, who try to construct a smoothly-curved wall with rectangular-shaped bricks. The curve is approximate, but our minds willingly smooth out the rough edges. Alberti was addressing an audience versed in a philosophical language that was in its nature prejudiced against what he is trying to express, and thus he is limited to expressing it as closely – if not exactly – as he can. He must have hoped that discerning readers would smooth out the rough edges.

Mitrović’s hopes to clarify for us the Aristotelian language with which Alberti worked, and at the same time shed light on Alberti’s meanings through the careful contrast of the use of conventional terms in *De re aedificatoria* and the use of those same terms by an orthodox Aristotelian such as Daniele Barbaro. By his choice of a conventional philosophical language, Alberti may have been attempting to make himself acceptable to a certain fold or camp of thinkers at the same time that his ideas were distancing him from it.

The contrast between Alberti and Barbaro highlighted by Mitrović tells one side of the story, but this push-pull between language and concepts tempts this reviewer to contrast Alberti with Galileo who, some two hundred years later, enjoined not to express or hold or teach or discuss the notions of the centrality of the universe of the sun or the mobility of the earth, nevertheless does exactly that through the use of a very careful choice of words, combined with irony and satire, in his *Discorsi* (*Dialogues*) – although the cloaks were not forceful enough to protect him from his ultimate painful denial of the ideas that were dearest to him.

Now, obviously language lends itself to both clarity and obscurity, or to revelation or deception. Alberti and Galileo were both addressing readers who were either unused to the ideas being proposed, or downright unbelieving, but while Alberti wished to make his real meanings clear beyond the conventions of his

chosen terms, Galileo used the conventions of the terms to cloak his meaning. (It is interesting to hear Alberti voice a complaint against Vitruvius for not being clear enough in his writing; if he wasn't going to write anything that could be understood, he might just have well not written anything at all.)

In addition to issues of linguistics and meaning, however, the contrast of Alberti and Galileo sheds light on the issue of Mitrović's pet peeve, which he calls the "fallacy of collectivism". Like Alberti and Galileo, Mitrović is setting out his argument in the face of prejudices against his basic premise. In his case he is arguing against the body of architectural historians who maintain that all thinkers are conditioned by the times in which they live. One argument of collectivism, and we hear it all the time even when it is not named, is that because we possess knowledge that appertains to one's specific period of time, it is basically impossible to understand a thinker conditioned by only that knowledge that appertains to his own time (that is, we cannot un-know what we know and put ourselves in the shoes of someone in a previous era who did know what we do). A corollary of collectivism is that it is impossible for a thinker to express ideas that are beyond his time. An example of this is the argument that Alberti couldn't possibly have thought in terms of homogeneity of space because that concept had not yet been formulated in the Quattrocento. To this reviewer, this appears to be a faulty way of thinking on the part of architectural historians, because in the history of the sciences it is assumed that the thinker *has* to think beyond the concepts of this time: the very essence of progress in science is pushing the envelope. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the spirit of the times can condition quite forcefully the way that science is practiced. Alberti and Galileo were both conditioned by the dominant culture of Catholic Aristotelianism. But Alberti didn't risk incurring the displeasure of the Inquisition, as Galileo did; he merely risked being either misunderstood or ignored. This is due to the fact that no matter how unconventional, architectural theory is simply not as dangerous as cosmic theory.

Does *Serene Greed of the Eye* bring us any closer to a definitive understanding of Alberti? Yes and no. Yes, to the extent that understanding the Aristotelian context of Alberti's time is truly helpful in revealing his background and points of departure. For this we can be grateful to Mitrović, because he is one of the very few scholars who have the formal training and background to be able to do this for us. But no, in the sense that Mitrović's careful explanation of concepts really cries out for a new translation of *De re aedificatoria*, as Mitrović's comparison with his own translations of given sections of the treatise with that of Rykwert, Tavernor and Leach shows. Until we have access to a full translation in Mitrović's terms, it is really impossible to pronounce a judgement on Alberti's ultimate meaning.

If there is a flaw in Mitrović's argument, I think that it lies in its being occasionally too forced. I am willing for instance to accept the basic argument that Alberti was trying to go beyond his times and its conventions, but descriptions of

how the precise wording was determined seem to me to be unfair projections of Mitrović's own thought processes onto Alberti.

But if we concentrate on linguistic problems, or problems of translation, or problems of an author's unknown thought processes, we begin to despair of ever fully understanding what the author is trying to tell us. That brings us dangerously close to the justification of renouncing the possibility of understanding that is the bane of Mitrović's existence.

Although *Serene Greed of the Eye* is difficult, and not without an attitude, it is a welcome addition to Alberti scholarship. If nothing else, it forces the reader to forget the platitudes he has learned about Alberti and think carefully about this extraordinary thinker. Mario Carpo's thoughtful preface provides a very helpful overview.

About the reviewer

Kim Williams is editor-in-chief of the *Nexus Network Journal* and director of the conference series "Nexus: Architecture and Mathematics".