



Improper arrangements

Description

There's a long tradition that thinks about architecture as the art of arranging things according to Vitruvius, "the putting of things in their proper places" (13).

According to architectural theorist Mario Carpo, that architecture is an art of arrangement reached some kind of epogÃ©e with the invention of the moveable type printing press, developed around the time of the architect Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) who in turn was impressed by the idea that letters could be selected and arranged to produce reproducible printed pages.

Alberti admitted this influence, and in his *Art of Building* even used letters of the alphabet to describe the profiles of cornices and mouldings. For example, the astragal is shaped "like the letter C surmounted by the letter L" (204).

Misuse of letters

That use of letters as metaphor or explanatory device hinted at the idea of the misuse of letters, a perverse obsession with their shape and rearrangement to produce something outside of their usual signifying function, a rudimentary "word art." Other than this creative digression the architectural tradition seemed to lack a language of innovation.

Like the letters of the alphabet, the elements of architecture (columns, walls, roofs, rooms) didn't need to be invented, but selected and arranged correctly. There was no appeal here to creation or innovation in the parts.

Nor was innovation encouraged in the way elements were to be arranged. In fact, architects were warned against inappropriate placement. Alberti said "When even the smallest parts of a building are set in their proper place, they add charm; but when positioned somewhere strange, ignoble, or inappropriate, they will be devalued if elegant, ruined if they are anything else" (310).

Out of place

Nature provided the model for perfect arrangements: “Look at Nature’s own works: for if a puppy had an ass’s ear on its forehead, or if someone had one huge foot, or one hand vast and the other tiny, he would look deformed. Even cattle are not liked, if they have one eye blue and the other black: so natural is it that right should match left exactly” (310).

By a 21st century interpretation, it’s as if Alberti’s negative examples harboured the seeds of dissent, if not invention – as when explaining to children or contrarians in detail what should *not* be done you end up suggesting they do what they shouldn’t.

Perverse combinations and rule breaking, as in architecture and all the arts, did of course exist in these traditions, but exercised in the outcast world of the carnival and the trickster. See post [Unnatural acts](#).

Though *The art of Building* was saturated with convention and propriety, I’m prepared to concede that Alberti was on the way to thinking of architecture in terms of inventive arrangement and rearrangement. If that observation aligns architecture with media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan who also overstated the influence of the printing press, then I’m content with that.



References

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- McLuhan, Marshall. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Note

- Image is from inside the Palladio’s (1508-1580) Basilica Palladiana, Vicenza, Italy – 100 years after Alberti, but my Florence collection is pre-digital.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. Alberti
2. ciphercity
3. McLuhan
4. print

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