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Review Article

On Representation: The Greek and Roman Roots of the Idea of Character in Architecture

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Abstract

The French term caractère (character) was frequently debated during the second half of the eighteenth century and was meant to establish a relationship between the form of a building and the purpose for which it was built. Its importance was twofold: it raised the issue of the intelligibility of architectural forms beyond their beauty, and, as a consequence, it directly maintained that architecture was similar to a language, in poetry or prose, capable of conveying social, civil, and religious meanings. By emphasizing the possible parallels between architecture and literature, this article analyses some ancient texts—by the likes of Aristotle, Theophrastus, Horace, Cicero, and, of course, Vitruvius—that are at the foundation of the notion of character. This "dive into the past" has nothing to do with the will to reestablish the classical style (or classicism); quite differently, it aims to rediscover the philosophical basis of architectural theory, by means of which architecture can hopefully get back to expressing collective meanings. Some final questions connect the ancient theme of character to open contemporary issues.

Keywords: Architectural Character, Architecture and Philosophy, Architecture and Poetics, Architecture and Rhetoric, Classical Culture.

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İnceleme Makalesi

Temsil Üzerine: Mimaride Karakter Fikrinin Yunan ve Roma'daki Kökleri

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Özet

Fransızca terim olan "caractère" (karakter), on sekizinci yüzyılın ikinci yarısında sıklıkla tartışılmış olup, bir yapının biçimi ile inşa edilme amacı arasında bir ilişki kurmayı amaçlamıştır. Bunun önemi iki yönlüdür: estetik kaygıların ötesinde mimari formların anlaşılırlık meselesini gündeme getirmesi ve dolayısıyla mimarlığın, sosyal, sivil ve dini anlamlar iletebilen bir dil gibi, şiir veya düz yazı ile benzerlik taşıdığını doğrudan ileri sürmesidir. Bu makale, mimarlık ve edebiyat arasındaki olası paralelliklere vurgu yaparak, karakter kavramının temellerini oluşturan Aristoteles, Theophrastus, Horace, Cicero ve tabii ki Vitruvius gibi isimlere ait bazı antik metinleri analiz etmektedir. Bu "geçmişe dalış", klasik tarzı (veya klasizmi) yeniden kurma arzusuyla ilgili değildir; aksine, mimarlığın kolektif anlamları yeniden ifade edebilmesini umarak, mimari teorinin felsefi temelini yeniden keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Sonuçtaki bazı sorular kadim karakter temasını güncel meselelere bağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mimari Karakter, Mimarlık ve Felsefe, Mimarlık ve Poetika, Mimarlık ve Retorik, Klasik Kültür.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of *caractère* (character) took on great significance in French architectural literature from roughly the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth. Over that period, it was meant to unambiguously convey the reasons why a building had been built or designed. Initially it was employed in the realm of private (or residential) architecture to establish a societal hierarchy through an aesthetic one, in the sense that the use of the five orders in the façade of a building, as well as the abundance of luxury in its interior, had to reflect the status of its owner. During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, public architecture took on renewed importance; as a consequence, the idea of character began to include the moral and intellectual response that institutions, through the architectural forms of the buildings that housed them, were expected to arouse in viewers. In analysing this era, several historians and critics of modern architecture trivialized the idea of character and reduced it to the relationship between form and function, with the more or less overt goal of discovering the origins of modernity, which grounded its theories in that very relationship. Indeed, the idea of character was not focused on the issue of the functional performance of a building, so much as it dwelled on its institutional significance. In turn, this implied the farfromobvious conviction that architecture should be viewed as a possible artistic language whose forms allowed civic meanings to be conveyed.

The idea of character, then, exposed the question of architectural representation in all of its magnitude, keeping in mind that the word representation does not refer to the drafting technique; instead, it means the capability of architectural forms to represent the intended uses of a building. To avoid any misunderstandings, it bears repeating that this use of the word does not coincide with the notion of mere function; rather, it points to a civic ritual, depending on context. In this sense, representation blended the form and the content of a work of architecture.

The term character, however, was not totally new in eighteenth-century France, since it recalled another one from the ancient world, decor, to which Roman architect Vitruvius had dedicated a section of his *De architectura libri decem*. In Book I, he listed this term between the categories of architecture, along with *ordinatio*, *dispositio*, *eurythmia*, *symmetria*, and *distributio*. Still, the Vitruvian term had its roots in an even more distant Greek and Roman past, where it had become charged with multiple meanings that arose both from spoken language and from its use in other disciplines, such as philosophy, theatre, poetry, and oratory. Because the many facets of the idea of character are only partly described in Vitruvius's work, we must go further back in time to better understand its semantic range.

ΧΑΡΑΚΤΗΡ AND TECHNIQUE

Reading the few and not too recent philological studies on the etymology of the term character (Körte, 1929; Van Groningen, 1930), we understand that when the Aristotelian meaning of the word that gave it its universal notoriety took hold, the term character already had a long history.

Χαρακτήρ (*charaktēr*) comes from the verb *χαράσσειν* (*charássein*) and is a *nomen agentis*, a noun that can refer either to an individual who performs an action or to a tool used in a job. As far as we can tell, it was initially used to designate 'one who sharpens [something]';[1] but its original meaning seems to be

1 Hesiod, *Opera et dies*, 387 and 573.

connected to the verb 'to lacerate' (or 'to tear').[2] The term was used primarily in a technical context, in reference to stone carving or to the minting of coins, but in a specific Dorian text it acquired an additional meaning that pertains to the act of creation: people give things their name, and thus become their creators.[3]

From a certain point forward, the word character underwent yet another transformation: no longer did it refer to the person who performed an action, but to the object of the action. Eventually, it came to overlap the action itself, so that *χαρακτὴρ* (*charaktēr*) no longer indicated the person that made a mark, but the mark itself.

The term subsequently became gradually disengaged from the technical sphere and began to take on metaphorical meanings, sometimes signifying the physical appearance of people from one country or another,[4] and other times the idiosyncrasies of language or a set of facial features,[5] or even a type of speech.[6] The meanings that were linked to language provided the passageway for those connected with style or manner.[7]

ΗΘΟΣ AND MORALS

The idea of character in reference to the moral qualities of humans was expressed in Greek primarily with the word *ήθος* (*ethos*), which had already appeared in Heraclitus's famous aphorism, *ήθος ανθρωποι δαίμων* (*ethos anthropoi daimon*): character is a man's demon, his fate.[8] With Aristotle, the word acquired a connotation associated with behaviors and customs, as evidenced by *Ethica Nicomachea*, a collection of lessons on ethics, in which the quest for the highest good—and, consequently, happiness—requires the pursuit of such virtues as may relate to ήθος (*ethos*), or character, and *διάνοια* (*diànoia*), or thought; in this sense, virtues are characterized as ethical or dianoetic virtues.[9] Ethical virtues linked with everyday acts were classified in such a way that the principle of excellence was defined as the golden mean between excess and deficiency. For example, courage was defined as the golden mean between cowardice and recklessness.[10]

The convergence of the terms *χαρακτὴρ* (*charaktēr*) and *ήθος* (*ethos*) happened thanks to Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle's and the author of *Charaktēres*. But the key to this development can be traced to the title of the work that Diogenes Laërtius cited in his *Vitae philosophorum*, first as *Charaktēres ēthikoi*, and later as *Ēthikoi charaktēres*, or ethical characters (Van Groningen, 1929; Volt, 2007).[11] The adjective is probably used to indicate that, until that time, the word character had not been used in an ethical sense. In any case, from that moment on, this new connotation became the prevailing one, to the point of appearing obvious. Proof of this is the fact that many subsequent versions of Theophrastus's work appeared under the simple title *Charaktēres*, a word that, in the author's intentions, was meant to signify various human types,

2 Pindar, *Pitica*, I, 28.

3 This is, according to Körte, a neo-Pythagorean fragment mentioned in Joannes Stobaeus, *Eclogae* physicae et ethicae, IV, 39.

4 Aeschylus, *Supplices*, 282.

5 Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 15 and 57.

6 Aristophanes, *Pax*, 220.

7 There are also other meanings, which must be omitted for reasons of space.

8 Heraclitus, *Fr. 22, B 119*, Diels-Kranz.

9 Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, 1102a.

10 Ibid., 1104a.

11 Diogenes Laërtius, *Vitae philosophorum*, 5.47 e 5.48.

defined according to the way they acted in known situations (work, family, and social interactions). Because all the behaviors described therein—sycophancy, boorishness, boastfulness, etc.—are negative in nature, we can deduce that these character variants initially played the role of *signa*, signs that aim to denote the recurring caricaturable traits of those who are inclined to abandon the ethical ideal that underlies civic virtues.

ΦΥΣΙΟΓΝΩΜΟΝΙΚΆ AND THE BODY

The concept of representation was also implicit in a tract titled *Physiognomonica,* which had historically been attributed to Aristotle and was included in the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, but which in fact had most likely been written after Aristotle's death. Arising from the conviction that a correspondence exists between body and soul, physiognomics established a link between the character and the physical appearance of human beings, or—more generally—of any living thing in the animal kingdom. This led to the belief that a person's character could be fathomed through exterior signs that were lasting, clear, and incontrovertible.[12]

Starting from such premises, the discipline aimed to accomplish two goals: on the one hand, it attempted to gain knowledge about, and to measure, the inner world of a person based on his or her appearance; on the other, it tried to classify the different types that made up the animal kingdom using a descriptive, observation-based approach. Both objectives raise a general issue with identification: first, the identification of the soul through the body; second, of the distinctive traits of each species. In any case, the mechanism of identification required a correspondence between exteriority and interiority in which the detection of distinctive marks could not but lead to a tautology. The appearance of a lion or a fox only shows that the lion is a lion and the fox is a fox. Or, if you prefer, that the lion and the fox are two different animals. Nothing more. To solve the problem of tautology, supporters of physiognomic theories had to pay a steep price: they had to hypothesize a relationship, in name but without evidence, between physical features and character. Only by doing so could a lion's mien be a sign of its courage, or a fox's appearance reflect its cunning.

In the tract, the arguments used for humans seem even more questionable than those employed for other animals. For example, a brave man might have spiky hair and a broad forehead, and an upright posture. Conversely, a coward might have soft hair and glazed eyes, and move nervously. And a dullard might have a wide neck, an empty stare, and pale, tired eyes. And the list goes on.[13]

ἜΘΗ AND *LEX OPERIS* IN THE POETIC SPHERE

While in a technical context the idea of character carried mostly an instrumental sense, in an ethical context it articulated a hierarchy of moral qualities and values expressed as a merit judgment on the behaviors of human beings, with the goal of establishing the boundaries that allow behaviors to be recognized as good and evil, moral and immoral, and right or wrong. Even so, it was only in the poetic and rhetoric spheres—where the issue of literary or artistic creation was more obvious—that the notion of character established a closer relationship with the idea of representation.

In Greek culture, representation was akin to imitation. The two concepts almost overlapped (Tatarkiewicz, 1970, 1977). In his *Poetics*, a text devoted to the

12 [Aristotle], *Physiognomonics*, 806 a.

13 Ibid., 807b.

genres of epic, tragedy, and (perhaps) comedy,[14] Aristotle wrote of *μίμησις* (*mímēsis*) as of an innate activity in human beings, one that delivers pleasure in addition to making knowledge possible.[15] In tragedy and comedy, he opines, the imitation process is based on a dual explanatory mechanism. First, the two genres imitated lofty individuals and debased ones respectively, so that their peculiarity was a consequence of the subjects they represented: individuals who were either exalted or ordinary.[16] At the same time, a parallel was established between the peculiarities of tragedy and comedy and the nature of the poets who wrote them, who could themselves be morally superior or inferior to the average person, just like their fictional characters.[17]

According to Aristotle, the representation of characters, or *ήθη* (*ethē*), was one of the six parts of tragic theater, which had to be understood as the imitation of human actions performed by individuals that were portrayed differently, depending on their character and on their way of thinking. For him, myth, or *μύθος* (*mythòs*), consisted of intersecting plots; character, or *ήθος* (*ethos*), was the means by which this or that quality could be recognized in each different actor; and thought, or *διάνοια* (*dianoia*), was the reason for which an actor expressed a particular judgement or intention.

In particular, fictional characters had to display four qualities: goodness, propriety, verisimilitude, and consistency.[18] On the one hand, goodness implied a sort of ethical ideal with regard to the tragic hero, who had to be endowed with a noble soul. On the other hand, propriety, verisimilitude, and consistency allow the audience to distinguish the specificity of each individual fictional character by hypothesizing an identifiable relationship between his actions and his disposition. If character as choice implied a judgment on the merits of the different actors (the nobility of the tragic hero, for example), character as distinction entailed a simple description of them. Nevertheless, after declaring that in representing fictional characters playwrights should strive to stick with what is necessary and plausible, Aristotle conceded that the object of mimesis is open to improvement, and cited painters as the example to be followed, in that they embellish the subject of a portrait while preserving a likeness with the original.[19]

Aristotle also declared the superiority of storytelling with regard to another type of primacy: that of poetry over history.[20] This is how myth—that is, *fabula,* or the narrative element—became a decisive factor of dramatic action. Without it, the events portrayed by the actors would be hard to comprehend. The issue of how dramatic characters should be portrayed came later, since they were not strictly essential,[21] as did the matter of language, which needed to be embellished in tragedies.[22] Obviously, this did not imply that language was a secondary matter, but only that the relationship between the theme of a work of poetry and its literary style began acquiring its importance based on two premises: the first one

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14 There is a clash of opinions on this subject: some believe that the second book of *Poetics*, dedicated to comedy, was lost; others are convinced that it has never been written. Either way, comedy is mentioned time and again in the portion of the work that was preserved for posterity.

15 Aristotele, *Poetics*, 1447a. The different genres of poetry can be distinguished by their medium, their subject, and the way in which each of them imitate reality.

16 Ibid., 1448a.

17 Ibid., 1448b.

18 Ibid., 1454a.

19 Ibid, 1454b et seq.

20 Ibid, 1451b

21 Ibid., 1450a, where the author maintains that tragedy is an imitation of action, not one of characters. See also 1450b.

22 Ibid., 1449b.

is that there should be a plot that can be developed through storytelling; the second is that there are recurring and recognizable feelings to represent, such as piety and fear.[23] As a result, storytelling connotated by a particular sentiment, as well as the choice of an appropriate narrative style, would determine the specificity of a literary genre. The belief that works of poetry should be consistent in terms of form and content, and also be realistic, endured in the Roman world. An example of this is *Epistula ad Pisones* by Horace, a letter in verse that is better known as *Ars poetica*.

According to the Roman man of letters, poetry should be viewed as a technique aimed at rousing emotions through a specific form of writing; consequently, no man could call himself a poet who misidentified the characteristics of various styles or who could not respect the spirit of appropriateness, which implied a precise relationship between the subject of a work of poetry and a literary genre.[24] With such premises, epic poems were suited to describing the deeds of kings and military leaders, and bloody wars; elegies could be expressions of lamentations, but also of wishes fulfilled; iamb, both harsh and direct, worked just as well for comedies and tragedies, because it is a good fit for dialogue and it kept the audience's interest alive; and poetry, accompanied by the sound of a lyre, was appropriate for singing of gods and heroes, of athletes and youth. Therefore, as Horace admonishes his readers after his long explanation, it is not sufficient for poetry to be good: it should also be moving for the souls of its listeners.[25] The gist is that poetic vocabulary should be sad to describe a sorrowful face; menacing for an irate visage; jocular for a playful look; and solemn for a stern one. The response that the poet was called to elicit in a reader, or a listener implied the adoption of a poetic genre that obeyed a specific *lex operis* (Labate, 1993).[26]

ΠΡΈΠΟΝ AND *DECORUM* IN THE CONTEXT OF RHETORIC

The issue of the appropriateness of expression was felt also in contexts that did not contemplate the process of imitation; for example, rhetoric. In antiquity, rhetoric was used mainly, though not exclusively, in the field of public speaking and concerned itself with eloquence. Unlike poets, rhetoricians did not have realism of representation as their primary objective; instead, their main goal was effectiveness in discourse. By effective speech, they meant the kind that allowed them to garner the agreement of their audience. For ancient Greeks, this idea of the appropriateness of expression went by the name of *πρέπον* (*prepon*) (Pohlenz, 1933). Initially, this notion signified a kind of beauty that was immediately manifest, almost absolute; later, it began to denote a beauty that was fitting, appropriate for a given purpose or situation (Perniola, 1982). This is evident in Aristotle's *Rhetorica*, his work in which the theme of character, *ήθη* (*ethē*), resurfaces. Here, however, it does so with respect to orators and their audiences: they who give speeches, and those who listen.

If rhetoric was to be regarded as a technique—*τέχνη ρητορική* (*téchne rhetorikè*) —one that had the goal of persuading a person or an audience, rhetoricians could therefore prove persuasive in one of three ways: through the reliability of their character; by their ability to bring forth *πάθος* (*pathos*), that is an emotional state that is conducive to earning a favorable judgment from the audience; or by the ability to demonstrate the truth, or what appears to be truthful. The matter of passions provided additional room for a broad range of dispositions

23 *Ibidem*.

24 Horace, *Ars poetica*, 73-103.

25 Ibid., 99-100.

26 Labate references Horace's *Ars poetica*, 135, as well as Tacitus, *Dialogus de oratoribus*, 10.

and temperaments, of ages, and of the economic and social conditions of the people or audiences that the rhetorician was addressing.[27]

In the latter part of his work, Aristotle discussed the style of speech from different perspectives, particularly regarding the feeling that it was intended to elicit in the audience. After differentiating poetry from prose, he affirmed that style could be considered appropriate when it was capable of transmitting emotions by adjusting to the subject matter; it could make no concessions to improvisation in matters of certain consequence, nor should it be solemn in ordinary situations. Moreover, style has the duty to make a speaker's feelings clear. Therefore, the speaker should be: angry, if the topic represented outrageous acts; offended, when faced with ungodly or shameful acts; admiring, in relating praiseworthy actions; and mournful, in the presence of deeds that merit compassion. Finally, style should be adjusted in response to the character of the audience, as well as to its moral and intellectual tendencies.

While poets appreciated by Aristotle and Horace were moved by the desire to capture the various facets of the real world using mimesis, rhetoricians rather followed the taste of their listeners, and focused their primary field of inquiry not on reality itself but on judgments about reality and on the reasons that led to such judgments being made.

In his *Orator*, Cicero reexamined this topic. In pondering the perfect type of eloquence, he described three *genera dicendi*, or the three styles of oratory: the magniloquent or grand style; the humble style, and—in between—the temperate or medium style. These are also known as High Style, Low Style, and Middle Style.[28] Some orators, he maintained, excel in one style but have no mastery of the other two; a true orator, however, can use any of these styles, depending on what is appropriate for specific circumstances. He knows what to say, and where and how to say it.[29] The orator should therefore be meticulous in his effort to convince his audience, moderate in pleasing it, and vehement in rousing its emotions, and should choose his speaking style carefully.[30] Only by so doing can his expressive force be effective. In other words, he needs to discern what is appropriate, which the Greeks called *πρέπον* (*prepon*) and the Romans would call *decorum*.[31]

According to Cicero, there are three types of orators, who use three types of speech: the humble orator, simple and modest, reproduces the popular manner of speaking, and at the same time lets his elegance transpire with careful neglect;[32] another type of orator uses the medium style, with little force and much grace, to turn out a figurative and polished speech;[33] the final type of orator is majestic and rich, solemn and ornate in his speeches, and it is he who holds the most extraordinary power.[34] Cicero did not establish a hierarchy of the three styles, because the ideal orator should be able to speak of lowly things with simplicity, of great things with solemnity, and of ordinary things with

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27 Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, II, 1389a - 1391b.

28 Cicero, *Orator*, 20-22. At line 36, Cicero uses the Greek term *χαρακτὴρ* (*charaktēr*) to identify the perfect type of orator and reiterates the same definition at line 134.

29 Ibid., 43.

30 Ibid., 69.

31 Ibid., 70. Cicero was first to mint the term *decorum*, in *Orator*, to translate the Greek term *πρέπον* (*prepon*). See Pohlenz 1993.

32 Cicero, *Orator*, 75-90.

33 Ibid., 91-96.

34 Ibid., 97-101.

moderation.[35] In sum, he should be capable of picking the right type of speech based on circumstances. Perfect oratory, therefore, is context-based.

These premises produced a change in how the appropriateness of expression was perceived: in a poetic context, its purpose was the acquisition of knowledge; in a rhetorical context, it sought to generate a consensus. If the representation of fictional characters, *ήθη* (*ethē*), was anchored in reality and configured itself as the principle of natural identification, respect for *decorum* took on the connotation of a principle fit to generate approval based on the notion of appropriateness.

DECOR IN ARCHITECTURE

Vitruvius spoke of decor as 'beauty in appearance' (Ferri, 1960) or the 'formal perfection' (Gros, 1997) of a work, which the architect could achieve by acting in compliance with the principles of *statio, consuetudo,* and *natura,* each of which represented a particular meaning of appropriateness.36

Statio, which can be translated as 'a mode of being' (Ferri, 1960) but also as 'rule' (Gros, 1997), is a term that Vitruvius used for the architecture of temples.[37] His writing seems to allow two possible interpretations: the first one suggests the idea of standing inside a temple and refers to the observance of given rituals made possible by the spatial design of the building; the second one relates to the idea of standing outside the temple to examine its exterior forms.

Initially, Vitruvius began by speaking of hypaethral temples, which are a type of temple that does not have a roof over its central portion. This configuration was designed to allow a kind of ceremony in which viewers could witness a sign from the celestial vault, where—they believed—the gods that this type of temple had been built to honor (Jupiter Fulgur, the Sky, the Sun, and the Moon) would make themselves known. In this form, the absence of a roof was the defining element of the character of the temple.[38]

Later, however, Vitruvius delved into the worthiness of the belief that a temple should be fashioned using a style befitting the disposition of the deity that it was dedicated to, thus establishing an analogy between the temperament of some divinities and the *modus aedificandi*, which could be of three types: strong, medium, and delicate. It was at that time that Vitruvius also introduced his theory of the three orders of architecture, which—not without hazards—lends itself to a parallel with the three genres of speech in oratory.[39] By this logic, architectural styles should be employed in the following way: the Doric style, austere and unadorned, could be applied to temples dedicated to Minerva, Mars, and Hercules, to highlight their warlike virtues; the Corinthian style, rich and slender, is suited to the gentleness of goddesses such as Venus, Flora, and

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35 *Ibidem*.

36 Vitruvius, *De architectura*, I, 2, 5-7. The Latin term *decor* is a translation of the Greek term *πρέπον* (*prepon*), which had been used by authors like Vitruvus (*De architectura*, I, 2) and Horace (*Ars poetica*, 156–157). See Pohlenz, 1933.

37 With the term *statio*, Vitruvius translated what he believed to be the Greek equivalent for θεματισμός (*thematismos*). However, his conviction seems to be based on a misunderstanding. See Pohlenz, 1933 and Ferri, 1960.

38 On the subject of hypaethral temples, see Tosi, 1991.

39 The parallel between the three genres of speech and the orders of architecture can be found in Onians, 1988; the refutation of this argument is in Gros, 2006.

Proserpina; and finally, the Ionic style represents a medium between the other two orders, so it is a good fit for temples honoring Juno, Diana, and Liber Pater.[40]

The use of different architectural styles is rather easy to detect in temples, for which Vitruvius did provide other types of classification as well; but it slips into vagueness and lacks theoretical backing when applied to other kinds of buildings. In Book V, the Roman architect simply stated that the columns used in theaters – specifically, in the portico of the postscenium wall – should be arranged into two sets of rows: Doric ones on the outside, because they were more robust; Corinthian or Ionic columns, more delicate, on the inside.[41] The contrast between *gravitas* and *subtilitas* appears clearer when, soon afterwards, Vitruvius affirms that the appearance of columns in theaters should not be confused with their appearance in temples. In the case of the latter, their purpose was to suggest the idea of gravitas, so they should have an austere look and be tightly spaced. On the contrary, columns for theaters should be slender and more widely spaced, to communicate a sense of gracefulness.[42] In this context, Vitruvius raised the question of what type of feelings are inspired by different modes of construction, which can be sturdy or delicate. Thus, he suggested an ethical use of architectural representation, one in which gravity should bring religious subjects to mind, and slenderness would denote civil and mundane subjects.

If we set aside the narrow logic of characterization based on the adoption of the *genus architectonicum*, or the orders of architecture,[43] we realize that the defining element of a public building, for example a theater, actually resides in its specific spatial configuration. In other words, character is rather a consequence of type than one of style.

Consuetudo, or custom, served to regulate both the degree of luxury in the rooms of private residences and the stylistic principles of each of the orders of architecture.

In terms of custom, decor could be lacking where a home mixed lavish rooms with modest ones. Vitruvius raised the issue of the appropriate display of the rank of the owner and hinted at the fact that character was not just a form of symbolic expression for public buildings (and, specifically, for temples), but also a form of social representation for private residences. He mainly focused on the *domus*, the patrician city residence, which had to be equipped with such spaces as the atrium, the tablinum, the peristyle, a library, and a reception hall. In contrast, the homes of modest folk should merely satisfy the criteria of comfort.

Decor as a matter of custom could also be flawed when the elements of the Doric order encroached upon those of the Ionic order. In such cases, the issue of the expressive value of the orders of architecture resurfaced, albeit not with reference to the character of a certain deity, but to a specific mode of construction. This is a matter of stylistic consistency that the Roman architect pursued in Book V, where he explained that monumental stone buildings have roots in those made with wood, for both the Doric and the Ionic style. Under this

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40 Note that Minerva, a goddess, is represented using the Doric order, which is masculine in kind, whereas the Ionic order, which is feminine, is used for Liber Pater. It is not gender that matters, so much as the temperament of the deity.

41 Vitruvius, *De architectura libri decem* V, 9, 2.

42 Ibid., V, 9, 3.

43 To refer to orders, Vitruvius mostly used the term *genus* (sometimes, *mos*, *opus*, and *ratio*), while the phrase “orders of architectures” became established during the Renaissance, where it coexisted with the term *maniera* (style) thanks to Sebastiano Serlio, Daniele Barbaro, and Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola. In this regard, see Ferri, 1960 and Forssman, 1961.

premise, the *ornamenta*, that is the ornaments of architectural orders, were the translation into stone of a woodbased building technique; thus, architecture was the metaphorical representation of the act of building.[44]

However, we should not forget that in the treatise by Vitruvius, architectural orders are mentioned also because of their anthropomorphic origins, which is how they came to take on specific ratios. Also in Book IV, we encounter the analogy between different kinds of columns and the human body: the Doric column exhibits the sturdiness and the beauty of a male body, whose feet are the sixth element of its stature, whereas the Ionic columns display the elegance of a woman's body, whose feet are the eighth element of its stature. The former is sober and, apart from the metopes in the frieze, unadorned; the latter, more elegant, is not only decorated with volutes and flutes meant to match the hair and the folds of a matron's gown respectively, but it also rests on a base that resembles a woman's footwear. The Corinthian column is not different from the Ionic kind, even as it appears to be slenderer still, thanks to its ornate and tall capital, which reminds us of the delicate proportions of a young lady's figure.[45]

The concept of *natura*, or nature, was meant to encompass both ceremonial needs and the requirements for the proper operation of the building. For example, a temple dedicated to Health should be in a most salubrious area. And again, the baths and the winter rooms of the *domus* should be westerly-facing, libraries should be oriented to the east, and picture galleries to the north.

Despite the total lack of a method in his treatment of the subject,[46] *decor* according to Vitruvius exhibited different facets of representation intended as a device for identification: the symbology of architectural orders allows us to recognize the kind of temple we are viewing; the proper use of the ornaments of each specific order allows us to recognize its style; the abundance of luxurious elements helps us to establish the status of the owner of a private residence; and finally, the location of a building is a sign of its purpose, either practical or symbolic.

FROM *DECOR* TO *CARACTÈRE*

During the Renaissance, architects treated orders as something akin to a system of ratios, proof of what they saw as the perfectly harmonious relationship between microcosm and macrocosm. Only occasionally did they use them in a semantic sense (sometimes allegorically, sometimes metaphorically). It was only on rare occasions that the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders, or the Tuscan and composite ones, were used to represent the religious, civic, or social character of a building. For example, in his 1537 book *General Rules of Architecture*, which is also Book IV in *Seven Books on Architecture*, Sebastiano Serlio attempted to adapt to the saints of Christianity the arguments that Vitruvius had already used for pagan deities, with added reflections on the possibility of using the rustic-Tuscan order in a semantic way.[47]

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44 Vitruvius, *De architectura*, IV, 2, 1-6.

45 Ibid., IV, 1, 1-12, where we can also find the mythological tale of the invention of the Corinthian capital, which was attributed to the sculptor Callimachus. For the correspondence between architectural orders and the human body, see Rykwert, 1996.

46 Regarding the difficulties that Vitruvius encountered in translating the Greek terms of aesthetics into Latin, see Ferri, 1960: 48-52.

47 On the semantic use of orders, see: Forsmann, 1961 and Ackerman, 1983. On the possible social meaning of the construction method used most frequently by architects of the Renaissance—the bearing wall, with or without windows, adorned with a system of columns and entablature—see Thones, 1998.

First with the Enlightenment, and subsequently with the French Revolution, public institutions gained new importance, leading architects to begin asking themselves about their civil meaning and, consequently, about their architectural character. However, it was not an architect but a man of letters who exhumed the concept of *decor* from the ancient world, calling it *caractère*.[48] Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux used it as a synonym for appropriateness and verisimilitude in a verse from his *Art poétique* (Poetic Art),[49] published in 1674. In 1683, Nicolas-François Blondel mentioned *caractère* briefly in his *Cours d'architecture* (Course of Architecture), which was published in three volumes between 1675 and 1683. In the first volume, he explicitly mentioned orders, but mainly because of his interest in their valuable use of ratios, which—in his opinion—determined their beauty.[50] The writings of Charles Perrault—both his translations of Vitruvius of 1673 and 1684, and his *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes selon la méthode des Anciens* (*Ordonnance for the Five Kinds of Columns after the Method of the Ancients*) of 1683, destroyed those arguments that defined architectural beauty based on what he considered "absurd" rules and proportional prescriptions. (Pérez-Gómez, 1993); thereafter, it was the semantic value of orders that piqued the interest of architects.

The notion of character gained popularity in part thanks to the successful publication of *Les caractères*, which Jean de La Bruyère published in 1688. Soon thereafter, in 1691, Augustin-Charles d'Aviler already described orders as expressions of good architecture, but he also declared that a building could be regarded as Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian even in the absence of columns. A single other element, like an entablature, a cornice, or a window panel, sufficed to classify them as belonging to a particular order.

Once again, a decisive contribution to the definition of the idea of character in architecture came from a separate discipline. Long before the aforementioned texts were published—in 1668, to be exact—Charles Le Brun, who had been appointed as First Painter of the King at the Court of Louis XIV, had tackled the theme of facial expressions in his famous lecture titled *Conference sur l'expression générale et particulière* (Lecture on General and Particular Expressions), which he delivered at the *Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture* (the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture); the lecture, enriched by a series of drawings, was published posthumously in 1698. It is through the mediation of this work, which was itself influenced by *Traité des passions de l'âme* (Treatise on the Passions of the Soul) by René Descartes, published in 1649 (Damish, 1980), that the theme of character in architecture was linked with the theme of the expression of *pathos* (Middelton, 1992).

In 1734, Germain Boffrand gave a lecture at *Académie d'architecture* (Royal Academy of Architecture) on an essay curiously titled *Principes tirés de l'art poétique d'Horace* (Principles drawn from Horace's Ars poetica). In 1745 he published it, along with other writings, in the introductory section of his *Livre d'architecture*. It was on this occasion that the idea of character was injected into the notion of appropriateness, as channeled by Boileau, and into the notion of the effect upon the spirit of an observer (Szambien, 1986), which had already been mentioned by Le Brun; both concepts had already appeared in Horace and, even earlier, in Aristotle.

Thereafter, other architects and critics of architecture, such as Jacques-François Blondel, Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, Nicolas le Camus de

48 For these topics, see Egbert et al. (1980:128-129).

49 Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *Art poétique*, chant III, line 112.

50 Nicolas-François Blondel, *Cours d'architecture*, I, p. 399.

Mézières. Etienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, developed their interpretation of the idea of character.[51] However, those works lie outside the scope of this essay, which focuses instead on how the idea of character has integrated the various semantic meanings of the ancient world, and left a legacy of issues for contemporary architects to examine.

POSSIBLE PARALLELS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND LITERATURE

As shown in the previous sections, the term character implies a relationship between architecture and literature that raises some unanswered questions for contemporary architects.

In a technical context, as well as in spoken language, the term *χαρακτήρ* (*charaktēr*) initially signified a mark made onto an object, but it soon acquired those metaphorical meanings that made a process of identification possible. With the notion of *ήθος* (*ethos*), the idea of character disclosed the moral and social sphere, in which the behaviour of individuals in relation to the community became the main object of study and judgment, thus raising the issue of appropriateness in ethical terms. Similarly, according to the architects of the second half of the eighteenth century, buildings were to take on both a social and moral character, a set of intellectual ideas capable of conveying the reasons why they had been built in the first place, using recognizable architectural forms. Still, some unanswered questions remain: What feeling is each individual institution tasked to rouse in those who observe it? Who decides what that feeling should be? Is it a shared, concerted feeling, or a convention that has been bequeathed to us?

Another problem is "how" such feelings should be represented. And "where", meaning in which part of the building. The architects of the second half of the eighteenth century focused mainly on the façade, which served the purpose of announcing (in French, *annoncier*) the intended use of the building. However, modern and contemporary buildings do not always have a main façade or view. Even when they do, we would do well to ask: how can we establish a one-to-one correspondence between form and substance that can make the language of architecture unequivocally understandable? Such a hypothetical correspondence, in fact, reintroduces the insurmountable ambiguities of physiognomics, which held that the nature of a person can be revealed, albeit in totally arbitrary terms, from their physical features. Similarly, the association of certain forms with specific feelings (essentially, with specific contents) would fall into the conventional. Is this a flaw, or something to be explored?

Moving from the ethical sphere to the poetic one, the issue of the intelligibility of architectural forms morphed into a problem of expressive appropriateness. Both within theater and poetry, the character of human beings was represented by individuals who acted a certain way in certain situations, and become recognizable through the sensations and the passions that they elicited in audiences or readers. Likewise, architectural characters were tasked with signifying institutional meanings and uses, building systems, and social conditions. Therefore, the notion of *lex operis* extended from the poetic language to the language of architecture. Whereas in the former it had to realistically portray the feelings of the performers in a theatrical piece, or the characters described in a literary work, in the latter it served to illustrate the rationale that had resulted in a project or in the construction of a specific building.

51 See the chapter "The Neoclassical Interlude" in Etlin, 1994: 88-123.

And here is another question: the realism of a situation, in the poetic sphere, requires that feelings can be universally recognized. But is this really the case? And even if they are, another issue immediately arises, tied to the matter of the effectiveness of architectural language, which should be as convincing as the language of the rhetorician in ancient times. If the *genera dicendi* covered the three styles of oratory, the three orders of architecture even after they were augmented by the two Roman ones, were far from capable of revealing the institutional purpose of a building using their character. This does not mean that Greek and Roman architecture were inadequate; it simply means that the different orders had not originated to characterize different types of buildings, except in the specific situations that Vitruvius had discussed in dealing with different kinds of temples.

Architects like Boullée and Ledoux, who recognized this limitation, commingled the classical forms with those of basic geometry, thus inventing unprecedented spatial configurations. What matters most is that even as they continued to use them, they never made architectural orders the main instrument of characterization. For a brief period, they pushed the notion of character away from the idea of *style*, instead bringing it closer to the notion of *conception*, which encompassed not only the façades of a building, but its plan and its volume as well. In the nineteenth century, their *architecture parlante*, or speaking architecture, was judged with scornful skepticism and pushed aside. For almost the entirety of the nineteenth century, and in the first half of the twentieth, the expression of the civil character of buildings was delegated to the eclecticism promoted by the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, which on the one hand offered an alternative to neoclassicism as the official academic language, and, on the other hand, desisted from producing a new architectural style. The Modern Movement did assert the privilege of doing so, but it ended up diminishing the matter of the architectural expression of the civil meaning of public institutions, to focus instead of the topic of the constructive realism of buildings. This is a theme that it had inherited from the muchdespised nineteenth century![52]

CONCLUSIONS

Why should we exhume the notion of character nowadays? There are at least three good reasons to do it.

The first one is that, in every country, the world of finance pushes to replace the world of politics in terms of authoritativeness; therefore, the issue of the civil meaning of institutions is becoming urgent again, as is the matter of how to represent them through architecture.

The second reason is that returning the focus of contemporary architects back to a notion like character involves the need to once again picture architecture as a language with a high (though not total) degree of intelligibility.[53] In other words, architecture can once again be considered as a tool capable of producing meaning, after its relatively recent demotion to a nondescript self-referential gesture, one purely aimed at causing a sensation.

The third reason is that architecture conceived as a language can be regarded as a critique of architectural language itself. What does this mean? With the term *caractère*, the French architects of the eighteenth century had destabilized

52 Think, for example, of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Karl Bötticher and Auguste Choisy.

53 Architecture cannot be considered a language in the narrow meaning of the term, but it has a lot to do with this notion. On this topic, see the chapter "Architecture at the Limits of Language" in Pérez-Gómez, 2006:137-145.

the classical language of architecture even as they continued to use it themselves. In fact, they managed to highlight some of its qualities that had remained hidden until then. With the help of elemental geometry, Boullée and Ledoux invented a new way to conceive space and to configure architectural volumes, but they did not renounce the language of walls and columns that they took from the classical tradition. They arrived at *poésie de l'architecture* (the poetry of architecture) by exalting ordinary language. In this sense, poetry was a kind of intelligible and rightful transgression, because it could avail itself of a conventional language that could become the subject of a debate. The lesson that contemporary architects can draw for the present is that the exceptional, transgressive language of poetry cannot exist without its ordinary, conventional counterpart: prose. In other words, transgression cannot exist without conventions to be transgressed. Absent such conventions, transgression is nothing but posturing; basically, an ill-disguised form of conformity. If everything is transgressive, then nothing is. Moreover, it should be clear, prose does not necessarily equate with sloppy expression. It is the vehicle for novels, long and short, for critical essays, and for position papers.

Here, then, are other questions for contemporary architects: nowadays, what are the elements of an ordinary, common kind of architectural language? Should we envision it on a local or on a global scale? On which terms can it promote the definition of a civil meaning for architecture at a time like the present, which seems to have given up on the notion of meaning both deliberately and definitively? These questions should spark a debate, since the answers are far from obvious. There is no doubt that it would be wrong to liken the ordinary kind of language that we are looking for to the language used in current professional practice, where clients dictate decisive choices, not architects. But it would be equally wrong to view poetry in architecture as a selfreferential artistic gesture that aims to shock observers; a gesture that, over the last thirty years, has sparked the construction of architectural icons that pursue the most boorish kind of consumerism.[54]

In the search for a new balance between prose and poetry, between convention and transgression, contemporary architects will benefit by reconsidering the Greek and Roman origins of the idea of character. Instead of pedantically reproducing the architectural forms of the classical tradition, they should aspire to instill new vigor into the idea of representation and to reopen the debate over it, which was too hastily archived by contemporary philosophy.[55]

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54 The spectacular (or iconic) architecture meant as a strategic aim of the so called "transnational capitalist class" is addressed in Sklair, 2017.

55 The notion of language in architecture seemed to have been dismissed in the Nineties and in the following decade; in this regard see Mitrovic, 2009. Nevertheless, a new approach called IPL (Italian Philosophy of Language), documented in Cimatti, 2015, is slowly reopening the debate. A possible application of this approach to architecture can be found in Djalali, 2017.

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