

Authorship and Authority in L.B. Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*

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Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on architecture, *De re aedificatoria* (*On the Art of Building*, c.1450) can be seen as a quintessentially Renaissance text in that it began life as a commentary on an antique source, the *De architectura* of Vitruvius.¹ But as the current wealth of scholarship on Alberti makes clear, to consider his work in the secondary terms of rebirth is insufficient. Alberti's treatise founded a genuinely new view of the discipline of building and marks a transition in thought that appears ever more marked over time. *De re aedificatoria* is now celebrated as an "instauration" rather than a "restaurational" text.²

This article will consider the revolutionary claims made in *De re aedificatoria* about the status of the architect. Most radically Alberti identified the architect as a figure "semi-divine", and established the idea that a meaningful authorial relation can be sought between an architect and a building. From this identification three factors are put in place that have proved central to later discourse about architecture: an emphasis on the faculty of *judgement*, on the idea of *authorship*, and on the issue of *representation*. Since Alberti, architects have staked their claims, defended their territories and maintained their status through arguments that

find their locus in one or all of these areas. At the same time these categories establish an uncertainty surrounding the role of the architect that the profession has never escaped. In providing an historical account of the origin of these concepts, one can create a platform from which to address contemporary challenges to which the discipline is subject, particularly the problematic issue of interpreting *intention* in architecture.

The architect and his model

De re aedificatoria suggests the architect must use his intellect to order events in the world.³ In doing so he is able to articulate a "divine sense of beauty" and this, Alberti maintains, is his primary aim.⁴ Building is seen in Alberti's text as the medium through which that beauty can be sensed. Directly, then, one is invited to discover in the phenomenal object a single valuable quality which is distinct from its physical presence, and whose existence is evidence of the will and mind of a (single) "creator": the architect as author has arrived. After Alberti's text the architect will become a figure open to the scrutiny of the world; and in this sense *De re aedificatoria* was a self fulfilling prophecy – simply by

writing the book the architect's position changed. Within the text this change, signalled by the establishment of a meaningful authorial relation between an "architect" and a "work" of building, is reinforced by a second assertion. An architect, Alberti explains, is valued for the judgements he makes in relation to acts of building, and, conversely, by the result of such actions he will himself be judged:

He must calculate ... the amount of praise, remuneration, thanks and even fame he will achieve, or conversely... what contempt and hatred he will receive, and how eloquent, how obvious, patent and lasting a testimony of his folly he will leave his fellow men.⁵

This suggestion, as will be seen, is reciprocal with the idea of architectural authorship. In both cases the link between architect and actual, physical building is assumed as secure. For the authorship function to be valid we have to believe that what we experience, the reality of the built construction, reflects exactly that which is willed by the architect; only in that case can our judgements about him be made with conviction; only in that case can the value of his judgement be seen. However Alberti goes on to make a final division which immediately undermines this security, for he claims that there is a structural distinction between the building as physical object, over which the builder rules, and the building as idea, which is the architect's province. It becomes clear that the architect does not "make" buildings; he makes representations of buildings:

...to make something that appears to be convenient for use, and that can without doubt be afforded and built as projected, is the job not of the architect but of the workman. But to preconceive and to determine in the mind and with judgement something that will be perfect and complete in its every part is the achievement of such a mind as we seek.⁶

Alberti's claims, quoted it must be noted from a twentieth century translation by three architects, fit our contemporary model of the architect extremely closely, not least in their contradictory nature. But this type of claim on Alberti's part must have appeared radical when his text appeared. No one before had made such claims about the judgement of the designers of buildings, unless such figures had other solid semi-divine credentials (King Solomon would be a good example).⁷ Antique precedent, exemplified in Vitruvius,

had nothing to say on such matters as the divinity of the architect's judgement; medieval Master Builders were valued for their experience rather than their genius.⁸ While it may have been accepted that a cathedral could reveal the inspiration of god over its builder, that is a subtly different thing from suggesting that the author of *any* building, sacred or not, might aspire to articulate something divine. Where, one must ask therefore, did Alberti find the model for his comments about the figure of the architect? The image Alberti projects in *De re aedificatoria* was not immediately present in the culture of building Alberti would have known, but neither was it a complete invention. Its origins appear to lie in the discipline of Law, the field that shaped Alberti's early perspective.⁹

Judgement

If the architect is to be considered an *author*, then it can be suggested that this status is traded on a hidden analogy with the *judge*. This inference can be drawn through textual analysis of *De re aedificatoria*, of Alberti's texts on painting (*De pictura*, 1435) and on the Law itself (*De iure*, c. 1436), and through comparison with the documented traditions that pertained to the Law during Alberti's period.¹⁰ In the fifteenth century the judge was understood as a figure privileged with the ability see beyond the confines of the *mundane* to a divine set of relationships that underlie earthly matters.¹¹ Alberti attributes to the architect the same power to see beyond the world of appearances and to act according to some superior, unseen, and ideal standard.¹² Indeed, in describing the "Art of Building" Alberti's reliance on the discipline of Law appears to be have been extensive.¹³ Alberti creates for architecture a distinction between actual buildings and ideal principles which reflects that between the written law and the idea of justice; and he adopts for the architect the characteristics attributed to the judge who is able to resolve the gap between these two. If the architect, like the judge, is to "create something new",¹⁴ to provide appropriate remedies to new situations which simultaneously reflect a divine quality of beauty, then the exact nature of the art of building must revolve around the figure of the architect mediating between individual precedents and divine principles, between an architectural *ius positivum* and an *ius naturalis*. The figure to achieve such a feat would be no mere builder, but would possess exactly those qualities required

by Alberti of the judge – he would be what lawyers called a *persona mixta*.

Authorship

The connection between the figure of the judge and the Renaissance idea of the artist was first traced by Ernst Kantorowicz. As Kantorowicz pointed out, the judge's status was traded on an analogy to the King, for as law givers, kings and princes were considered *persona mixtae* – part human, part divine – able to act within the world, but directly inspired by divine wisdom.¹⁵ The King's authority was in turn dependent on his reflecting Christ, the principle *persona mixta*, as a model. In late medieval theory, the lawyer occupied a unique position in that he was accorded the ability to genuinely *create*, to produce something from nothing, an act of “divination” wholly dependent on his status as a *persona mixta*. It was this privilege Kantorowicz argued, which, more than any other, defined the emergent figure of the artist in the Renaissance.¹⁶

Such fifteenth century claims for the status of the artist were first made in relation to the art of painting. Several humanist works reinterpreted classical texts, principally Pliny and Cicero, to establish a new notion about authorship among painters. The clearest and most radical of these claims is contained in Alberti's own *De pictura* (*On painting*, 1434): “The painter Zeuxis,” Alberti declares “...did not believe any price could be found to recompense the man who, in modelling or painting living things, behaved like *a god among mortals* [...]”.¹⁷ Alberti was one of the first Renaissance writers to attribute a semi-divine status to the artist as the creator of works reflecting higher truths. His descriptions of both the painter and the architect are radical attempts to view the creators of earthly objects in a new light, and they have radical consequences for their conception.

The idea that the judgement of an artist is divine carries with it the notion that this judgement can be measured by the work he produces. Here *De pictura* provides the precedent for what Alberti will say in *De re aedificatoria*:

The virtues of painting therefore are that its masters see their works admired and feel themselves to be almost like the creator.¹⁸

Similarly the architect, if successful will achieve “fame for posterity, and glory” from his works.¹⁹ In this regard, however,

the choice of the figure of the judge as a model for Alberti's description of the architect would begin to have significant consequences. The authorship function of the judge acknowledged the separation of judgement – the act of deciding – from *execution* – the rearrangement of bits of the world according to this new set of relations (the removal of heads, the division of lands, the reuniting of persons and property). The judge's “authority” is part divine and integral (his privileged ability to make decisions based on divine justice) and part earthly and external (the unquestioned assumption that such judgements will be reflected in execution by others). Like architecture, justice has to be *seen to be done* – it requires an action. But for this to happen the judge relies on a whole mechanism of authority embedded in law, in canons upheld by the state or commune; the judge's authority is as real as it is vicarious.

Alberti's figure of the architect aspires to a similar status: “through his intellect he must invent, through experience recognise, through judgement select [...]”.²⁰ However, at the same time, it is evident that, as a re-invented figure, the architect would lack that externally guaranteed authority that steers events unquestioningly according to the will of the judge. If the judge “embodies the law”, and if his decisions cannot be questioned without in turn questioning the authority of the state, the architect figure hangs free. Alberti's description of the god-like painter bypasses any such shortcoming by suggesting an authorial line around judgement and execution, around the artist and the work. No separation is to be made in *De pictura* between the divine seeing of the artist's mind and the action of the hand that makes this judgement visible; metaphorically, judgement and execution have been merged.²¹ But in Alberti's portrayal of the architect this assurance in relation to authorship is never established. The architect, Alberti tells us, “is no carpenter”; he does not build. Although he “will hardly be able to avoid having sole responsibility for all the errors and mistakes committed by others” he does not even supervise building, allotting that responsibility to a “zealous, circumspect and strict clerk of works”.²²

Representation

One should pause for a moment to consider the implications of these statements. In a sense, perhaps the line of argument is inevitable. The discipline of architecture must

always accept some kind of separation between the body of the creator and the mechanisms of execution, purely on the grounds of physical possibility. This is evident in Alberti's own definition:

to realise by construction, whatever can be most beautifully fitted out for the noble deeds of man, by the movement of weights and the joining and massing of bodies.²³

And certainly the tradition of building would have provided Alberti with models as to how this separation could be negotiated in practice. Scholarship on late medieval building practice by figures such as Richard Goldthwaite and Roland Recht has shown that there existed sophisticated systems for the division of labour, the administration of contracts and sub-contracts, for all the organisational complexity required to erect large structures.²⁴ In this context Alberti's insistence on the separation of architect and builder remains disturbing. He could have suggested that the architect should establish a "workshop" type of practice, such that the relationship between decision and execution could be gathered under a single authorial umbrella. This, surely, is the dominant tradition that building would have provided as a model.²⁵ The master masons, *capomaestri*, while they did not claim divine authority, derived their earthly authority in much this way – the hands that executed did so under the direct authority of the master. Such a model would be also close to the way in which a figure such as Filippo Brunelleschi, who is the single contemporary architect-figure Alberti praises in his writings, had worked within the *opera* of the Duomo of Florence.²⁶ But instead of developing the implications of this model, Alberti self-consciously sacrifices the physical, or quasi-physical link between judgement and execution for the statement that the architect is *not* a builder.

For Alberti the divinity of the architect's judgement is to be read in works created according to his decisions; the evidence on which we judge is the evidence of the building. Thus the lack of a sure tie between judgement and execution constitutes a problem; architects must, if they are to survive, establish by some means an authority over execution that they do not have of themselves, *per se*. Having taken this turn, Alberti could alternatively have identified the architect with another source – as a figure, sometimes a courtier, owing allegiance to, and deriving authority from,

a particular patron. A similarly defined role existed already in the *ingenieri* who worked for both city-states and powerful families – the Gonzaga in Mantua, the d'Este in Ferrara; such a description also defines a figure such as Antonio Averlino who worked later for the Sforza in Milan. These men were not *capomaestri*, and were not limited to the theatre of a single building project but gave advice – theoretical advice – across a wide area for their respective masters. This model would ensure at one level that execution would follow the architect's direction, for in it the architect "represents" his master, with vicarious authority. Yet at the same time it challenges the presumption, fundamental to Alberti's definition, that the architect will have a claim to personal glory in the work produced. Alberti's architect cannot be seen as a mere "tool" through which a patron realises his desires. He must remain outside the jurisdiction of a particular patron and at the same time outside the authoritative position adopted by a traditional *capomaestro* over execution.

In order to cover the authoritative gap that results from this position the Albertian architect will turn increasingly to rhetoric, both to do all that can be done to exercise influence *without* authority and to lay claim to a vicarious authority through which he can exercise his *own* judgement (and although this authority stems from outside himself, the architect will claim personal glory from the actions taken according to it). The beginnings of this history are evident in Alberti's treatise, as well as in the fragments of correspondence in relation to building that he has bequeathed us. "To have others" hands execute what you have conceived is a toilsome business;" he notes in *De re aedificatoria*, adding "and who is unaware of the complaints that always greet any proposal to spend someone else's money as you think fit?"²⁷ His letters preserved in relation to the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini and S. Andrea in Mantua show clearly an architect who is physically separated from the theatre of construction (both letters are written from Rome) and who is equally clearly not in absolute control of the projects in question – he makes appeals to builder and client, not decrees.

What is implicit in the argument of *De re aedificatoria*, yet remains invisible in the text, is the potential use of visual representation as a rhetorical tool. The history of the Renaissance architectural treatise, of writing about architecture for an elite audience, and the history of the use of illustration in such treatises, can both be seen as tied to the architect's

pursuit of influence through rhetoric.²⁸ Through later history representation has become that piece of partial execution which the architect can directly control and which is offered as a guarantee of genius. Its status has become so central that we can no longer think architecture without it. This status emerges directly from the uncertainties established in Alberti's text; without the awkward gap between judgement and execution, the history of architectural illustration would never have taken the direction it did. Why, many have wondered, did Alberti not illustrate *De re aedificatoria*? The above analysis suggests that the condition in which we pose this question, our expectation that architectural texts should be illustrated, is a repercussion of the formulation of the architect as a figure that Alberti's treatise itself contains.

Postscript

Alberti's claim for the significance of the architect's judgement foreshadows, it might be argued, both the rise of, and a central methodological paradox for, the discipline of architectural history and criticism. Once the judgement of the architect is a subject worthy of interrogation, and once the evidence for that genius is seen to reside in buildings, it becomes possible for other figures to speculate about intention in relation to the production of built form. Alberti's claim for a structural distinction between the building as physical object, over which the builder rules, and the building as idea, which is the architect's province, produces at the same time an uncertainty about adducing intention for every building constructed within the history of architecture that developed out of the new

configurations predicted in his treatise. The complexity of understanding authorial intention in architecture may be more acute in some cases than others. Where secondary evidence is scarce, for example, or where compositions are fragmentary, "disfigured", mixing different architectural "bodies" in a system that overreaches the limits of a particular architectural syntax, interrogating the built work for evidence of the intention of the architect becomes complex. Yet the problem is really a general one, generated out of the implicit uncertainty around architectural authorship set up in Alberti's model. One could add, to take the other side of a very important coin, that there is a counter issue: the question of how that same gap in relation to authorship in architecture is used to sustain particular interpretations of what intention *should* be in the face of building evidence. In this respect the historiographies of "Alberti's buildings" constitute textbook examples. The existing facades of buildings such as the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini or the Palazzo Rucellai in Florence are both fragmentary and asymmetrical compositions, creating potentially paradoxical and intriguing commentaries on ideas contained in Alberti's architectural treatise. But because of the gap posited in Alberti's definition of the architect, a long tradition of Renaissance scholarship has been able to deny such characteristics significance in the interpretation of the authorial intention behind these facades: characteristics defined as aberrant by a tradition of analysis can always be attributed to the limitations of realising the architect's idea – to the possibility that what was built was not that which was planned.

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Notes

1. All the references to *De re aedificatoria* in this paper are given using the most recent English translation, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Rykwert, R. Tavernor, N. Leach, Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1988, hereafter abbreviated as *De re aed.* See also Giovanni Orlandi (L.B. Alberti, *L'architettura*, ed. G. Orlandi and P. Portoghesi, 2 vols, Milan: Ed. E. Polifio, 1966), and the facsimile of the 1485 edition prepared by Hans-Karl Lücke (Hans-Karl Lücke, *Alberti*

- Index: Leon Battista Alberti, De re Aedificatoria* (Florence, 1485), 4 vols, Munich: Prestel, 1975–).
2. This case is put most eloquently by Francoise Choay, *The Rule and the Model*, English trans. of *La Règle et le Modèle*, Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1997, pp. 65–135.
 3. *De re aed.*, Introduction, p. 3.
 4. *Ibid.*, VII, 3, p. 156.
 5. *Ibid.*, IX, 10, p. 315.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. Alberti's treatise is distinctive in identifying royal figures such as Solomon as exemplars for its model of the architect, and noticeable also for the limited use it makes of antique architects as exemplary figures. On these matters, particularly on the implications of Alberti's choice of exemplars, see Liisa Kanerva, *Defining the Architect in Fifteenth-Century Italy. Exemplary architects in L.B. Alberti's De re aedificatoria*, Helsinki: Soumalainen Tiedekatemia, 1998, pp. 38–88.
 8. The classic account of the changes in the status of the architect in the early Renaissance is to be found in Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence. An Economic and Social History*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. On comparative practices and the role of the master builder in medieval society in other parts of Europe, see Roland Recht, ed., *Les bâtisseurs des cathédrales gothiques*, Strasbourg: Les Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, 1989, and, by the same author, *Le dessin d'architecture: origine et fonctions*, Paris: A. Biro, 1995. Wolfgang Schöller, "Le dessin d'architecture à l'époque gothique", in Roland Recht, ed., *op.cit.*, pp. 227–237, questions assumptions often made about the role of master masons, emphasising the difference between their role and what we would now consider to be the role of the architect. See also Robert Branner, "Villard de Honnecourt, Archimedes and Chartres", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 19, 1960, pp. 91–96, for an interpretation of the significance of Villard's body of architectural drawings in relation to this question.
 9. Alberti was educated for the law. He spent five years (1421–1426) at the University of Bologna studying for the degree of *doctor utriusque iuris*, of canon and civil law, and also produced a text on the subject, *De iure*, written in 1436. The impact of the discipline of Law over humanist culture in fifteenth century Italy has been traced by, among others, Ernst Kantorowicz in the numerous essays included in *Selected Studies by Ernst H. Kantorowicz*, Locust Valley, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin, 1965, and Donald R. Kelly in *The Human Measure. Social Thought in the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990. See also Robert Jacob's study of the imagery of justice and its broader cultural significance in *Images de la Justice*, Paris: Le Léopard d'Or, 1994.
 10. For a detailed development of this argument see T.A. Anstey, "Divinity and Difference: On Unity and Distortion in the work of Leon Battista Alberti", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Bath, 1999.
 11. L.B. Alberti, *De pictura* [1434] is printed in *Leon Battista Alberti. On Painting and On Sculpture. The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De statua*, trans. and ed. C. Grayson, London: Phaidon, 1972; *Della Pittura* [1435] in *Leon Battista Alberti. Opere volgari*, ed. C. Grayson, Bari: G. Laterza, 1973, vol. 3, pp. 5–107. The quotations here are taken from the later edition of Grayson's translation, L.B. Alberti, *On painting*, trans. C. Grayson (1972), London: Penguin, 1991.
 12. See E. Kantorowicz, "The Sovereignty of the Artist", *op. cit.*, pp. 357–362.
 13. See T.A. Anstey, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–82.
 14. For the significance of newness in fifteenth century culture generally see Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 88–97.
 15. See generally Ernst Kantorowicz, *The Kings Two Bodies*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957. On Alberti's habit of referring to judge/ruler figures from antiquity as exemplars for his figure of the architect see Liisa Kanerva, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–62.
 16. For a background discussion see Kantorowicz, "The Sovereignty of the Artist", *op.cit.*, pp. 357–362.
 17. *De pict.*, II, 25, p. 61, author's emphasis. See Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, Oxford, 1991: Oxford University Press, esp. p. 38 on Alberti's reuse of antique sources in formulating his arguments, and for the general history of this in Humanism.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. *De re aed.*, IX, 11, p. 318.
 20. *Ibid.*, IX, 10, p. 315.
 21. A similar merging in relation to judgement and execution occurs for the majority of the exemplary figures chosen by Alberti in *De re aedificatoria*. These are often rulers – kings, queens, princes – figures for whom the continuity between judgement and execution is, of course, certain: they are defined both as semi-divine and wield absolute earthly authority over the acting bodies of their subjects. Such examples may define a projected authority for which the architect might strive, but they serve to illustrate also the conceptual problem Alberti must have had in advancing his construction. On Alberti's use of rulers as exemplars, see Liisa Kanerva, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–62.
 22. *De re aed.*, Introduction, p. 3; IX, 11, p. 318.
 23. *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. 3.
 24. See generally Goldthwaite, *op. cit.*
 25. *Ibid.* The records Goldthwaite examines suggest that, in fourteenth and early fifteenth century Italy, where the role of designer of a building is identified, this role coincides with formal responsibility as leader of the opera, that is to say of the actual building operation. This figure, at least in the context of fourteenth century Italy, was responsible to the patron or building committee, if the opera was part of a state or church

controlled project (for example, the opera of the Duomo in Florence). This traditional model implies an automatic authorial link between “design” and execution, the leader of the opera controlling the project rather in the way that a painter or goldsmith would retain authority over the hands in his shop. It is this model that Albert’s formulation appears to disturb.

26. *Ibid.* For the reference to Brunelleschi see L.B. Alberti, *De pictura*, *op. cit.*, Dedication, pp. 34–35. On Filippo Brunelleschi see Eugenio Battisti, *Brunelleschi*, [Milan: Electa, 1972] London: Thames and Hudson, 1981.

27. *De re aed.*, IX, II, 318.

28. A beginning to this process can be witnessed, possibly, in the writings of Francesco di Giorgio Martini, which begin in the middle of his career when he is already established as *ingegnere* in Siena, but shortly before he moves into a wider, courtly, context. Directly one entertains the possibility that Francesco di Giorgio’s texts helped establish his credentials in this new theatre, one is attributing a function to them similar to that outlined above.