

Architect and Service Architect

The Quarrel Between Charles Barry and David Boswell Reid

The quarrel dealt with herein takes place over the course of more than a decade between the years 1839 and 1852, and involves disparate actors including architects and scientists, workers and parliamentarians as well as the London public and the English prime minister. The subject of this quarrel is the reconstruction of the parliament building of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the London Houses of Parliament designed by Charles Barry. Consequently, the realms of politics and architecture in it are closely interlaced. However, the debate treated here is not ignited by questions which pertain to the specific relationship of architecture and the exercise of power. It concerns neither the forms of the orchestration of power in a parliamentary monarchy nor the structural realization of the intricate balance of power between the monarch and parliament. Instead, the focal point of the quarrel is the problem and the issue concerning a particular and relatively new architectural quality which consists in spatially effective services and can therefore be subsumed in contrast to the notion of power with that of servitude, as well as the relation of this quality to the traditional customs of architecture in general—and the architecture of power in particular.

The background to this quarrel is a personnel situation that is possibly unique in modern building history: whereas Charles Barry as the architect of the Houses of Parliament is responsible for designing a new representative and convenient parliament building within the contemporary standards of architecture, an independent person named David Boswell Reid is in charge of realizing specific technical appliances and processes within the same building. With no less architectural means, although on more uncertain ground, his task is to ensure the advantageous environmental circumstances for a successful parliamentary exercise of power. David Boswell Reid thereby has an appointment which—in the absence of an original occupational title as well as in contrast to Charles Barry as architect of the building—could be subsumed as that of a ‘service architect’. With similar

authority, an architect and a service architect thus stand face to face at the Westminster Palace construction site. This constellation is the basis for the controversy that is going to unfold in the following years and occupy dozens of parliamentary investigative committees as well as the British press. Primarily because of its institutional background, it is documented in the form of hundreds of pages of newspaper articles, minutes of meetings, and reports, and thereby perhaps like no other incident beforehand, produces a discourse which puts the architectural problem of technical servitude up for debate.

The exact beginnings of the differences between Reid and Barry cannot be reconstructed. They first become manifest as delays in the construction work ensue, subsequently they cause substantial delays in the construction process and finally bring the work on the parliament building to a complete standstill. As a consequence, a good five years after the start of construction one begins to gradually strip the service architect of his competencies and transfer them to Barry. First, Reid loses the responsibility for the House of Lords in 1846, and in 1852 also for the entire remaining building. Thus the traditional authority of the architect ultimately prevails in the quarrel over the Houses of Parliament. But where is the problem? Why does the co-operation between Reid and Barry fail to such an extent? In addition to the complexity of their project, in addition to the unfortunate distribution of competencies and in addition to a stated difficulty of their characters, can a reason be determined that their co-operation so radically fails?

A main reason for the differences between Reid and Barry is to be sought beyond these contingent substantiations in the fact that there are two fundamentally different concepts of architecture encountering each other in their personalities. What becomes manifest on the basis of the reconstruction of the Houses of Parliament and the special arrangements between Reid and Barry, and finally escalates is therefore a spatial controversy which for several decades already pervaded the architectural practice: the conflict between the principles of a representative architecture and those of a service architecture, between the visible front side and the concealed reverse side of the building construction. It is the particular constellation in which the architect Charles Barry is placed alongside an independent service architect on the construction site of the Houses of Parliament which juxtaposes different architectural practices concurrent in the middle of the 19th century and makes them visible in the form of competing mindsets. For this reason it is important not to let the quarrel between Charles Barry and David Boswell Reid rest with the dismissal of the latter, but to consider the specific new positions and knowledge which are therein expressed. To take into account the technical appliances and the bricks and the mortar, in other words, not only as material arguments in a dispute, but also as knowledge objects.

In 1844, shortly before the quarrel with Barry escalates, David Boswell Reid publishes a treatise entitled *Illustrations of the Theory and Practice of Ventilation, with Remarks on Warming, Exclusive Lighting, and the Communication of Sound*. On over 450 pages it presents in detail his principles and experiences in the design and research of ventilation and heating systems as well as room lighting and acoustics. Conceived as a fundamental scientific work, the book is equally a polemic for the importance and proper conception of architectural servitude. In a chapter with the heading “Architecture and Ventilation”, Reid brings in a definition of architecture which goes far beyond the problem of ventilation and is astounding in its radical nature. It breaks with all contemporary doctrines, probably first gains a certain degree of validity with the emergence of architectural modernity and in its fundamental traits still underlies present-day spatial concepts such as that of an ambient intelligence. “After all”, writes Reid, “though the invisible air is too apt to be forgotten amidst the more obvious attractions of architectural art, still, in a practical point of view, the visible structure is only the shell or body of that interior atmosphere without which existence could not be supported, while it is also the *medium* of intellectual communication, and the *channel* through which heat, light and electricity convey their influence upon the human frame. It is no exaggeration to say, that along with those means of defence and seclusion which they naturally present, the great and primary object of architecture is to afford the power of sustaining an *artificial atmosphere*, such as the constitution under each variety of local circumstances may require.”¹

1 Reid, David Boswell: *Illustrations of the Theory and Practice of Ventilation, with Remarks on Warming, Exclusive Lighting, and the Communication of Sound* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans) 1844: 70.

Against this background, it is evident why the cooperation between Barry and Reid failed and had to fail, and why such a hopeless quarrel erupted between them. It is the equal distribution of tasks to architect and service architect itself which eliminates any basis of cooperation between them by leading to the explication of two different architectural regimes: while Barry is necessarily ever obligated to the traditional orders of architectural practice, while he artfully designs rooms, views and perspectives, Reid is solely and independently charged with taking into consideration certain processes and operations of servitude. Every door, every staircase, and every ornament—in short, every single structural element of Westminster palace was thereby suitable of becoming an issue between them, because it no longer exclusively belonged to a representative or tectonic order, but at the same time was always also a part of an operative relation. One could say that Barry and Reid not only built with stone and mortar on two different buildings in the same construction site, but also on two different architectures of knowledge. The iconic government palace of a world power originated from this – as well as an early step to the understanding that beyond any representation architecture is the interaction of a series of service operations.

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