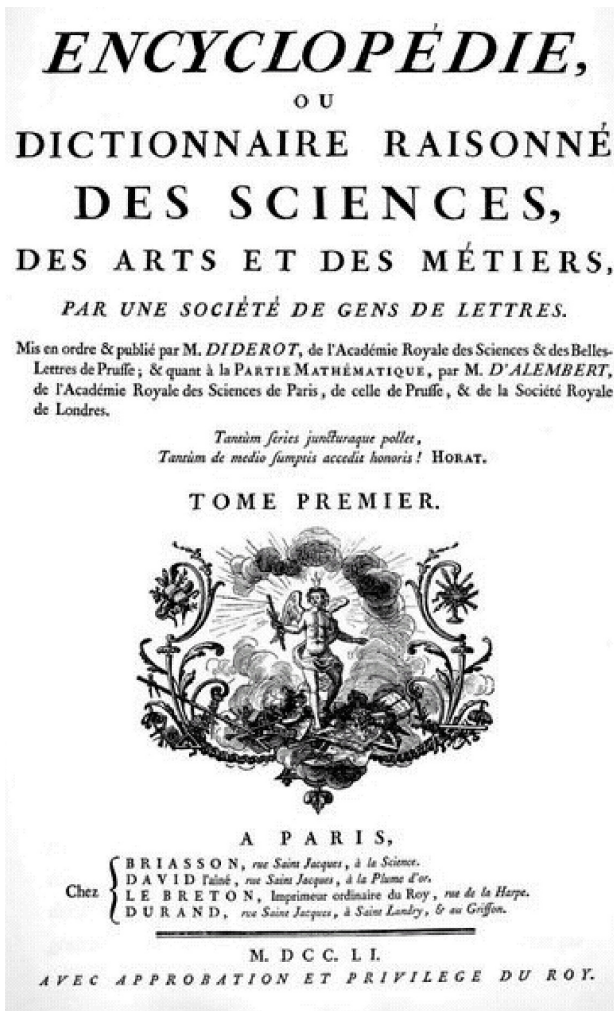


RIBA GOLD

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Frontispiece to
Diderot's 1715
Encyclopaedia

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Last Wednesday, RIBA Gold Medal winner Ted Cullinan took part in a review of the Dissertation, Bronze and Silver Medallists in front of an invited panel of critics, journalists and teachers. Steve Wescott, one of my Bartlett students, had won the Silver Medal and I was invited to attend with my teaching partner Yeoryia Manolopoulou. We heard a presentation from each medal winner. Ted led the questions and comments, and then the discussion was opened to the floor.

Joanna Rapp showed how Piranesi used multiple viewpoint perspective to construct his Vedute or views of Roman antiquities. Amandine Kastler used an examination of the Amalienburg Hunting Lodge near Munich to propose a theory of anthropocentric decoration, which she developed into a design for an exhibition gallery in the V&A. Steve Wescott presented a Perceptual Observatory in Greenwich, based on an investigation into the great English scientists, Hooke, Flamsteed and Newton.

I observed that all three students, from different schools, were using references from a limited period of history between about 1660 and 1760. I have noticed that this era seems to exert a fascination for students from the emerging generation and it affects their output in many ways, from drawing style, typography, subject matter and the use of specific kinds of decorative motif. I wondered whether this diffuse phenomenon had something to do with our contemporary attitude to knowledge. In the hundred-year period I refer to, it would have been possible for a person of good

and general education, an architect for example, to understand and participate in the leading pursuit of knowledge at that time. Now, a perceptive person will experience knowledge as highly specialised, inaccessible and subject to profound philosophical scepticism. Architecture students showing an interest in this period might be inviting discourse with a condition of knowledge that is perceived as having transparency and certainty. Some speakers suggested that this is nostalgia, but I'm not sure that it is. *The Architects' Journal* asked me to write this piece in order to provide a gloss on my observations.

The vocation of architecture is to make manifest the sense of purpose of buildings and to represent the world. The purpose of a building is embodied in space whose constructed enclosure is supported by structure. By presenting a system demonstrating capacity, comfort and material character, the architect reveals the identity of the building. The ability of the construction to resist and support may be represented in a way that will repress or enhance its significance. The building represents the world by bearing symbols of religious, political, social, agricultural or scientific knowledge. Architects use different tropes to embody this information.

The hundred-year period, we have in mind, is typified by Diderot's Encyclopaedia (1751). A quick glance will confirm the similarity between the graphic language of the Encyclopaedia and the kind of drawings one sees at the leading London schools' summer shows. Diderot's drawings are terse delineations of the principles of knowledge. At the time, drawing was the key tool for investigating and representing advanced science. What there was to know could be seen by the, occasionally assisted, eye and drawn by the engraver. Science was still in the business of visible cause and effect. Diderot was a Christian man, living

in a monarchy and he was able to demonstrate the whole range of knowledge to other educated men by drawing it. The society he belonged to could legitimately make architecture that was connected to ancient practice.

The collapse of the authority of traditional religion in the developed world, the advent of liberal democracy under capitalism and the specialisation of scientific knowledge have created a society unlike the one that produced Diderot's Encyclopaedia, Piransi's Veduta or Hooke's Micrographia. Jean Francois Lyotard, describing the condition of knowledge in our time, uses the term 'incredulity towards metanarratives'* to describe a crisis of legitimation. Put simply, there is no consensus about what we know to be true, it is too specialised to be understood and we are unwilling to believe that such a thing as truth can be represented. How should an architect today embody the world under these circumstances?

The energy crisis of the last forty years has changed the tectonic basis of architecture. Now, the outside layer of a building is a surface that is, by necessity, not structurally connected to the interior core of the construction. It is therefore a screen, which must use some form of representation to communicate the hidden structure. The difficulty is how to legitimately represent the concealed interior. The twentieth century trope of transparent or 'honest' construction is no longer viable. Ontological construction has become, like knowledge itself, inaccessible and resistant to representation. Taken together, the representations of the purpose of a building and the representation of the world, those two things which architecture traditionally embody, have become problematic for the critical designer.

It has been suggested that, by making direct reference to a time

of greater epistemological certainty, students and architects are indulging in nostalgia. I don't quite agree with this because it is not a sentimental engagement with some idea of home. Instead, I think that the key trope is one of irony. Irony is a representation of reality whose eventually fictive nature I recognise but which I decide to employ as if it corresponded to reality. In our case, legible knowledge is used as if it were truth, in the full recognition that it is no longer considered true, but with the necessary realisation that it is legible. So, an older legible representation of truth is allowed to stand in for our contemporary impenetrable condition of knowledge. We recognise the necessity of having representations of knowledge and the impossibility of creating ones that are adequate for our time. As Beckett's Unnamable says, "In the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." **

I am aware that the complex range of issues, raised by the three projects presented, cannot resolve themselves neatly in one argument and so I would like to touch upon the issue of decoration in the Amelienburg. The Rococo period, embodied in the Amelienburg Lodge, is a natural point of reference for those contemporary architects who have revived an interest in decoration. The ethereal and whimsical nature of Rococo decoration had the consequence of repressing the expression of architectural systems at the expense of a strenuous display of style. Today, decoration is usually employed without concern for its place in the architectural or tectonic system. It has become a floating sign, alluding to an idea of representation, unable to adhere to its subject.

Many architects, for whom the sense of purpose in a building is paramount, will consider the current environmental crisis as the key driver for architecture in the immediate future. Quite so, but

I can't help feeling that it is a *deus ex machina* (where else?) for architectural positivists. Here, once again, is a measurable set of conditions, showing cause and effect, against which a building can claim to be legitimate or to have worth. As such, it can assert itself as an organic expression of the prevailing social, scientific and political sentiments. By demonstrating its sense of purpose as a balanced environment, on a global and local scale, it can claim to represent the world. Yet I can't help thinking that it is a repetition of a modernist instrumental paradigm, which ignores the deeper vocation of architecture to embody the whole condition of knowledge. This cannot be done in our time without cultivating a sense of paradox. The students we saw, in opening a discourse with another period of history, using irony, are pointing to a broader crisis of legitimation that exists in our time. As a technique it is not instrumental, but it embodies a poetic logic. It reminds us that buildings don't just tell us what they are. They tell us what we are too.

* Jean-François Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi p.xxiv

** Samuel Beckett 'The Unnamable' in *The Three Books* (New York: Grove Press, 1994) p.418