

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Shadows in Ruskin's Lamp of Power

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7tx1s4c6>

Journal

Places, 2(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Bloomer, Kent

Publication Date

1985-04-01

Peer reviewed

Shadows in Ruskin's Lamp of Power

Kent Bloomer

Notions of light seem to dominate architectural criticism today, while careful discussions of shadow are seldom heard. Yet, shadowy darkness is a powerful presence in our lives and may deserve more attention.

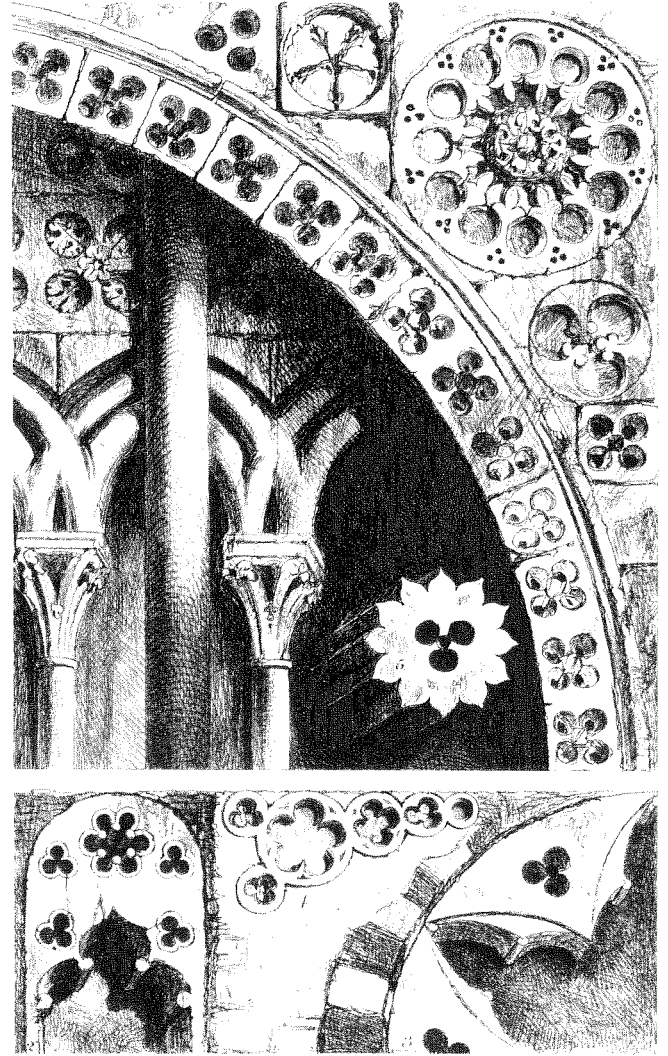
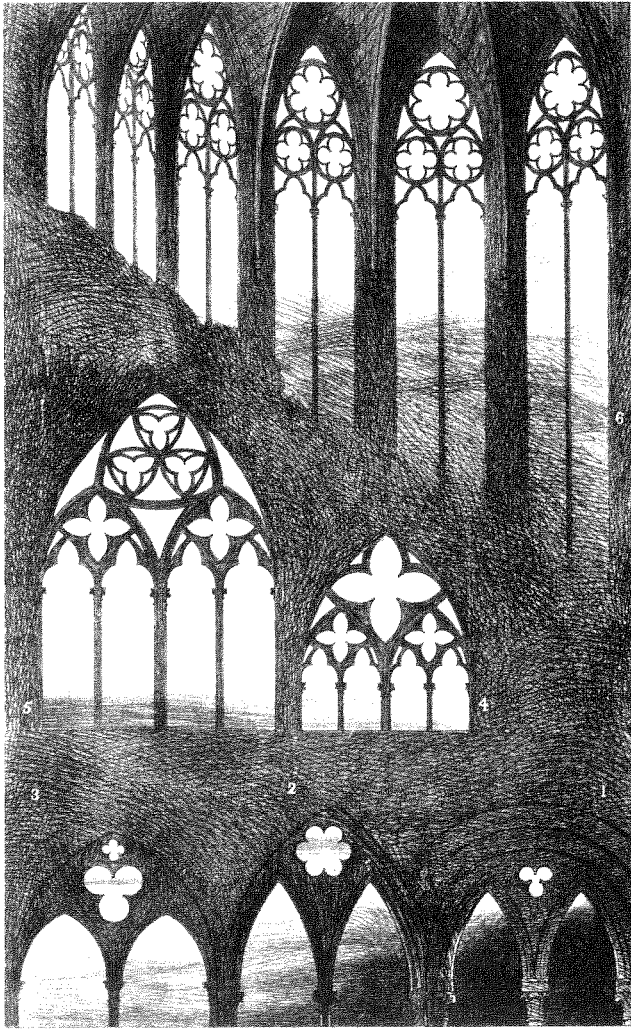
Perhaps the common association of light with truth and beauty inspires us to dwell on brightness; and, perhaps, we have been tacitly instructed that darkness is sinister and unsafe, to be avoided if possible. But this has not always been so. Shadow was given a positive value in the ancient and middle ages; it was an element of beauty in traditional Japanese aesthetics; and it was one of the most powerful virtues in John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

I believe Ruskin's message is the most useful and the most prescriptive for the modern designer. Not only does he provide us with a theory of meaning about shadow (that would satisfy the history-theory piece in today's architecture school), he also instructs us in techniques of design and placement (that we might use in a studio assignment).

To locate his theory, it is helpful to examine a late medieval image of shadow that Ruskin would firmly dismiss. We know that Ruskin was a modern "gothicist" who positively disrespected neoclassicism. Some of that disrespect was rooted in his lack of faith in the omnipotence of light as a supernatural value as well as classical notions of regular



I Entrance portal of Farnam Hall, Yale University, by Russell Sturgis. Photograph by Kent Bloomer.



2 **Ground in the traceries** from Caen, Bayeux, Rouen, and Beavais. Drawings by John Ruskin from *Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

3 **Penetrative or "pierced" ornaments** from Lisieux, Bayeux, Verona, and Padua.

perfection and ideal form. Specifically it was the notion of perfection that he ridiculed because he could not find its presence in his examination of nature. Ruskin was earthbound and, although somewhat God-fearing in the early part of his life, demanded that all virtues be manifested in the observable panorama of earthly nature.

The medievalist, on the other hand, located the realm of greatest virtue in the skies away from earth. Employing the model of concentric spheres, the earth was a dark and inferior mass at the center of the universe, while the supercelestial realm of eternity and perfection resided in the outermost sphere. Giordano Bruno in his chapter on the “secret-of-shadows” written in the sixteenth century illustrates the ancient vision:

As the ideas are the principal form of things, according to which all is formed . . . so we should form in us the shadow of ideas . . . so that they may be adaptable to all possible formations.¹

The shadows about which Bruno spoke could be found in starry patterns between a dark earth and the brightness beyond. He treated images in the stars as properties of an intermediate world; thus the constellations of Aries and Taurus that we perceive as we look upward were, for Bruno, shadows of a dazzling perfection behind the stars, which, though slightly dimmer, were not as dark as the inferior shadows on earth. This stationing of heavenly light in a

position outside the earth and independent of the earth’s rotation necessarily fixed emblems of celestial virtue into frozen patterns.

Ruskin, by contrast, examined his shadows on earth and declared that

After size and weight, the power of architecture may be said to depend on the quantity (whether measured in space or intentness) of its shadows; and it seems to me that the reality of its works . . . should express a kind of human sympathy by a measure of darkness as great as there is in human life.²

Here shadow takes on an independent meaning and is not treated as an echo of that which forms it. Shadow is darkness, and darkness is a force belonging to mystery and sublimity rather than to beauty and perfection. It is precisely the nature of unknowing in contrast to knowledge that prompted Ruskin to celebrate shadow as a sign of power in one of his *Lamps of Architecture*. He understood that mystery was a fundamentally creative force in our lives.

The positive nature of the sublime was described in the eighteenth century by Edmund Burke, who argued that our sense of the sublime originated in terror, pain, and grief, while beauty provided a respite from all of that with feelings of joy, pleasure, and limited knowledge.

Mere light is too common a thing to make a strong impression on the mind; and without a strong impression nothing can be

sublime. But such a light as that of the sun . . . is a very great idea. . . . But darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light. Our great poet was convinced of this; and indeed so full was he of this idea, so entirely possessed with the power of a well-managed darkness, that, in describing the appearance of the Deity, amidst that profusion of magnificent images which the grandeur of his subject provokes him to pour out on every side, he is far from forgetting the obscurity which surrounds the most incomprehensible of beings.—“*with the majesty of darkness round circles his throne*”—³

Ruskin, understanding Burke’s message, sought the means to incorporate shadow in the ornaments of architecture in a controlled and deliberate mass rather than as accidental shade, as a figure rather than a texture, and as a presence more powerful than light.

The composition of the whole depends on the proportioning and shaping of the darks . . . like dark leaves laid upon the snow.⁴

It is an example of Ruskin’s genius that he identified the “penetrative ornament” as an architectural device able to provide the designer with a means of configuring darkness. That species of ornament is basically a graphic hole cut in a wall as a dominant void in a tracery or lattice, although Ruskin was careful to suggest that the strongest darkness should begin a certain



4 Gold ornaments on the ceiling of the Capillo de Rosario, Church of Santo Domingo, Puebla, Mexico. Photograph by Kent Bloomer.

distance behind the outer surface as a murky, static, and starless mass leaving the ad hoc and brightly moving shadows up front to caress and illuminate the sculptural and material features of the architecture. Ruskin chose to enshrine the darkness, centering its presence and making intense shadow the figure on the field of light.

Such are the principal circumstances traceable in the treatment of the two kinds of masses of light and darkness, in the hands of the earlier architects; gradation in the one, flatness in the other, and breadth in both.⁵

Employing the mechanics of the figure-ground as a visual system that permits two or more figures to interact is characteristic of Ruskin's way of thinking when he is attempting to nourish the coexistence of several meanings in a single composition. The depth of Ruskin's thought develops from his insistence that architecture embody the many, the cyclic, and the interactive characteristics of nature rather than focus on a classical unity bending under the distant and frozen omnipotence of a luminous deity.

An example of Ruskin's multiple vision, and one of my favorite compositions of penetrative ornaments, is to be found in the portal of Russell Sturgis's high Victorian Farnam Hall facing the Old Campus at Yale University. This powerful pediment transforms stars into black beacons that are legible from a distance of several hundred feet. The power and severity of

those ornaments proclaim the Victorian belief that academic learning is both painful and elegant, while the composition includes a curious mixture of the classical, the gothic, and the spirit of industrialism.

The distinction between the sublime and the beautiful and the assignment of those values to the specific conditions of light and dark provides the designer with an elementary meaning system useful to the design of architectural ornament. The very fundamental nature of that distinction and the possibility of realizing that distinction in shaping architectural elements offers a systematic way of designing new ornaments for our modern age.

It is useful in that respect to examine a traditional Japanese understanding of shadow and darkness, at least the version reported by Junichiro Tanazaki in his essay *In Praise of Shadows* written in 1933. In that essay he regrets the elimination of shadows in modern Japanese architecture by the excessive use of electric light and an acceptance of the "Western" obsession with brightness. He argues very convincingly that beauty and repose, not terror, is the gift of darkness. In describing the dark intersanctum of a temple he says

Surely you have seen, in the darkness of the innermost rooms of these huge buildings, to which sunlight never penetrates, how gold leaf of a sliding door or screen will pick up a distant

glimmer from the garden, then suddenly send forth an ethereal glow upon the horizon at sunset. In no other setting is gold quite so exquisitely beautiful . . . or again you may find that the gold dust of the background, which until that moment had only a dull sleepy luster, will, as you move past, suddenly gleam forth as if had burst into flame.⁶

A phosphorescent jewel gives off its glow and color in the dark and loses its beauty in the light of day. Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.⁷

Unlike Ruskin and Burke, Tanazaki directly assigns the property of beauty to darkness and even includes a measure of fear in his sense of beauty.

Have you never felt a sort of fear of the ageless, a fear that in that (dark) room you might lose all consciousness of the passage of time, that untold years might pass and that upon emerging you should find that you had grown old and gray?⁸

Unlike Bruno and the ancient Westerners, Tanazaki assigns no pervading or celestial value to light as a quality. If anything he tends to regard too much light as a pollutant, which might sap the beauty out of things.

He is right. Gold, pearl, and lacquerware do lose their luster in bright light, and our sense of the dimensions of time and space may become greater or at least less confined in shadowy places. Indeed the clarity of time and space that we

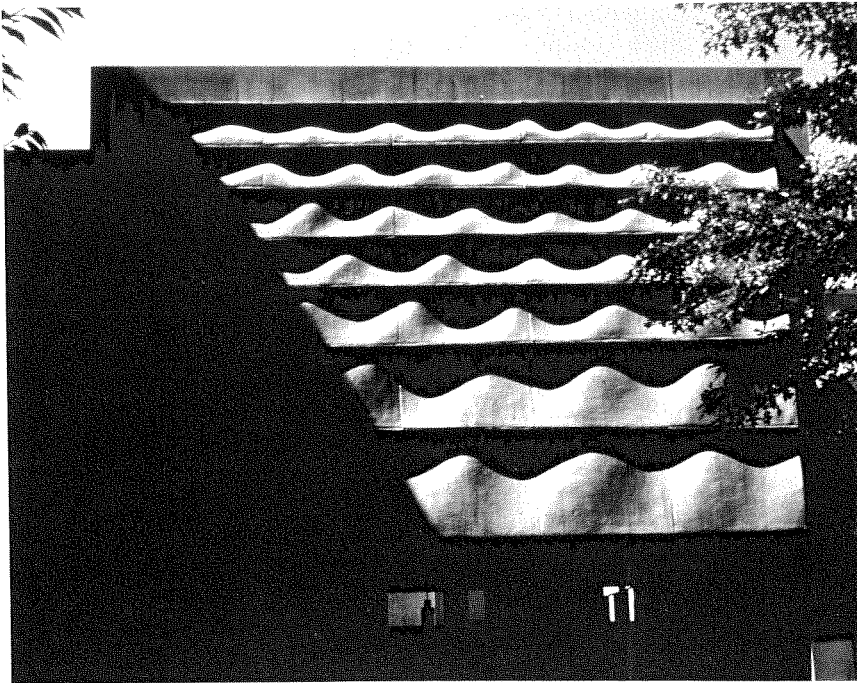
lose in intense shadow assigns to darkness that property of mystery that Burke and Ruskin respected.

Tanazaki and Ruskin are more together than apart in their sentiments because they are both observing the temporality of earthbound nature. Both of them hold a reverence for materials; if one is granite, the other is jade. Their different concerns are similar by turning one's figure into the other's ground. If Ruskin enshrines his penetrative ornaments with illuminated stone, Tanazaki enshrines his gold with shadow. They both observe the respective intensities of their media with extraordinary sensitivity, and neither appear to abdicate their senses to the realm of abstract ideas.

Tanazaki, however, laments the loss of tradition and makes no effort to imagine re-creating the shadows of repose and beauty as a property of modern times.

Mrs. Tanazaki tells a story of when her late husband decided, as he frequently did, to build a new house. The architect arrived and announced with pride, "I've read your *In Praise of Shadows*, Mr. Tanazaki, and I know exactly what you want." To which Tanazaki replied "but no, I could never live in a house like that."⁹

Not so with Ruskin. He saw the modern age begin a century before Tanazaki's essay, and he intended, in those early years of industrialization, to conserve and identify principles that might



5 Frieze by Kent Bloomer above entrance portal to the Temple Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh. Photograph by Kent Bloomer.

belong to all ages. His analysis of shadows and his identification of the penetrative ornament was meant to establish strategies rather than styles. Above all he attempted to assign modern psychological meanings to the power he found in some great examples of traditional architecture.

The meanings he gave to shadows are still a part of our lives, and thus I wonder why we talk about light so much. Perhaps more puzzling is our tendency to deny light its real power and magic by not paying a commensurate amount of attention to darkness.

NOTES

- 1 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 216.
- 2 John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), p. 83. (Originally published in 1848.)
- 3 Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (Glasgow: The University Press, 1818), p. 88. (Originally published in 1757.) The quotation is from Milton, *Paradise Lost II*.
- 4 Ruskin, p. 91.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 6 Junichiro Tanazaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, Thomas Harper, translator (New Haven, CT: Leetes Island Book, 1977), p. 22. (Originally published in 1933.)
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 9 *Ibid.*, afterword by Thomas Harper, p. 48.