

James Stevens Curl

A New Edition of Vitruvius's *De Architectura libri decem*

INGRID D. ROWLAND and THOMAS NOBLE HOWE

(Eds.) (1999)

VITRUVIUS: Ten Books on Architecture

(Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press), ISBN 0-521-55364-4, PP. 352, 110 line drawings, Fifty Pounds.

I have to start by declaring an interest. Some time ago I suggested to Cambridge University Press that a new edition of Vitruvius's *De Architectura libri decem* would be a good idea, preferably having the Latin text on the left-hand page and a translation on the right, with footnotes at the bottom of each double-page spread to be really useful. In addition, carefully considered illustrations would have to be provided, for pictures are of paramount importance in any consideration of architectural matters. In the previous published editions of Vitruvius, the illustrations were confusing, few, and unsatisfactory. Most architects, in any case, never read the text, but look at the pictures, which is probably why very few of them read Vitruvius at all these days. William Burges (1827-81), for example, observed that his generation of Gothic Revivalists owed much to Viollet-le-Duc, but only to the illustrations, because nobody bothered with the text.

Having used Morris Hicky Morgan's serviceable edition (1914) for many years, and had Joseph Gwilt's (1784-1863) edition of 1826 (with its pretty but rather useless illustrations) on

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my shelves as well, I was fully aware of the enormous undertaking any new version of Vitruvius would involve, so when I learned that a project had just been agreed and contracted I was both pleased (because I felt a brand-new illustrated translation was a necessity), and a trifle disappointed that my bid had gone in too late. It is therefore extremely interesting to have the results of so much effort before me for review now, at the end of 1999. I am very glad to have the book, and there are many virtues in its favour (as well as the unfortunate faults to which I shall allude below).

I have never fully understood the received opinion among scholars and commentators that Vitruvius was somehow pedestrian and dull, or that certain architectural treatises during the Renaissance period (notably Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*) were regarded as models of learned Latin writing. In Alberti's case, he set out to supersede Vitruvius's authority, and many regard his Latin as far more elegant and precise than that of the Augustan compiler (who obviously drew on works by Hermogenes and other Greek texts, now lost to us). I always felt this was an unfair assessment, for Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (fl. 46-30 BC) was unquestionably an important writer, and undoubtedly among the most influential who ever lived: he was addressing a wide range of different topics, perhaps for the first time in Latin, and, because he had to draw upon Greek sources, he sometimes had difficulty in finding appropriate and equivalent means of expressing in Latin what he intended. He did quite well, therefore, considering the problems he faced. There is another factor, too, and that is he was writing about matters more familiar to his contemporaries than to later readers, so his text was probably a lot less obscure in his own lifetime than it was during the Renaissance or than it is now.

In contrast (and here I may be out on my own), I have always found Alberti less riveting than do his admirers, yet his *De re aedificatoria*, the first treatise on architecture since Antiquity, was also divided into ten books, and Vitruvius looms large as an influence on Alberti, although the latter found the earlier texts 'corrupted', with 'many omissions and shortcomings', and 'not refined'. Alberti went so far as to say Vitruvius wrote neither Latin nor Greek, and that he might just as well not have written at all, his work was so incomprehensible. To me, Alberti therefore seems a bit of a prig, a slightly stuffy fellow, self-consciously precious and faintly disagreeable, considering that he owed the Roman author so much and modelled his own treatise on the works of the earlier master.

Vitruvius, on the other hand, comes over as a recorder of many aspects of his epoch, noting architectural theories and practices of Hellenistic architects who had lived during the preced-

ing four centuries or so. In particular, Vitruvius codified the Orders of Architecture, and his work in this respect was of immense significance during the Renaissance. His *De Architectura* reveals much about machines, warfare, building-types, construction, materials, and much else, but whatever its perceived deficiencies as a work of Classical literature, it is nevertheless one of the major books on architecture of all time. I would go so far as to hail Marcus Vitruvius Pollio as a proto-*Encyclopédiste*, anticipating the efforts of Denis Diderot (1713-84) and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717-83) by around 1750 years, and therefore perhaps he might be said to have his place as a distant founding-father of the Enlightenment. Humane and intelligent, he was certainly no fool, whatever the shortcomings, real or imagined, of his prose-style and argumentative devices.

Vitruvius began to emerge as a towering figure in the Middle Ages when Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) publicised the existence of the fine manuscript in the Library of the Abbey of St Gallen, Switzerland: a printed edition came out in 1486, then Fra Giovanni Giocondo da Verona (1435-1515) published an illustrated version in 1511, before an important edition of 1521 appeared with copious illustrations and notes by Cesare di Lorenzo Cesariano (1483-1543). Daniele Barbaro's Vitruvius of 1556 had plates by Palladio, no less, and since then the text has been published in many forms and translations, of which Guillaume Philandrier's (1505-65) version of 1543 (and later), Claude Perrault's (1613-88) encyclopaedic edition of 1673, and Frank Granger's useful two-volume set of 1931-4 may be cited. The earliest English translation of the first five books, by William Newton (1735-90), which appeared in 1771, was augmented with the remaining books in 1791, edited by James Newton, but this, like the Gwilt 1826 edition, was overtaken by later scholarship.

Thus a new Vitruvius has been due for many years, and as far as it goes, the 1999 publication is useful and welcome, but unfortunately, a glorious opportunity has been missed: why the Latin text could not have been printed opposite the convincing and not inelegant English translation by Ingrid D. Rowland defies comprehension, and surely a bibliographical essay, or at least a comprehensive bibliography of all known editions, would have helped to establish the venture as definitive?

However, disappointing though these aspects undoubtedly are to this reviewer (who was genuinely looking forward to seeing the finished product), the many scratchy illustrations let the book down rather badly. These drawings, to my eye, are crude, look unfinished, and for the most part, are (to sensibilities used to architectural drawings) ugly: editorial control was clearly at fault here, and although an attempt has been made to illustrate Vitruvius's text comprehensively for the first time, this has not

been a success. A professional draughtsman with access to a suitable computerised drawing system could have done wonders to rescue the situation, using the drawings (unhappily now published) as starting-points or sketches for guidance (and in my opinion that is all they are or should ever have been). A major contribution to architectural scholarship has been spoiled, and spoiled very much, more's the shame, for the translated texts read quite well and stand up to scrutiny: in parts they are fine, and even rise to greater heights at times. So the new Vitruvius has this reviewer's qualified welcome.

An immense amount of labour has gone into the making of this book, yet too many opportunities have been missed. For this state of affairs Cambridge University Press must carry at least part of the can, for at fifty pounds Sterling a better fist of things should have been made. It was a glorious opportunity to create the definitive edition of Vitruvius: is it too much to hope for that a second edition might address issues which are by no means unimportant and to which this review has drawn attention?