

THE SEVEN LAMPS OF ARCHITECTURE

John Ruskin

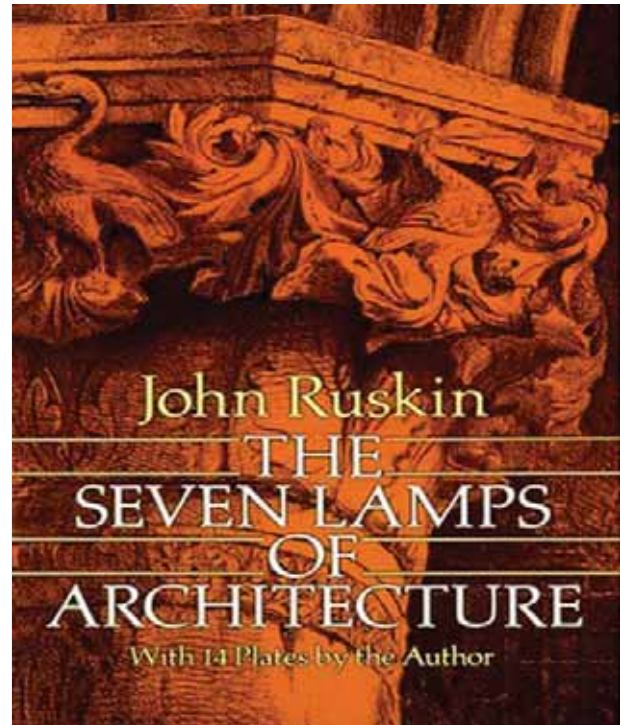
Reviewed by Ar. Humaira Nazir*

“The Seven lamps of Architecture” a treatise by John Ruskin is an interesting description of the deterioration of European development from the Renaissance style, forwarded through an investigation of lost idea of Gothic style. The main concept behind this book was to make people aware about the noblest Gothic style which lost its identity due to different innovations. The treatise combines a series of lectures on architecture with detail description of principles of architecture.

Ruskin was an English writer, lecturer and renowned art critic who through his eighty-one years of life, painted, composed and crusaded for (boundless) societal change. Despite the fact that he was not a designer himself, he survived the stature of the British Empire with Queen Victoria at its rudder, and spearheaded the expansion of the Romantic and Gothic Revival developments in England. He was granted uncommon power of expression and observation. The story of this treatise started in 1948 when he visited northern France and felt that he needed to write something about the essence of Gothic Architecture in England. One year later in 1949, he compiled his thinking into this treatise. This treatise not only focuses on the revival of Gothic Architecture with criticism of the flourishing architectural style of that era but also expresses his love for nature and aesthetics in architecture.

The seven lamps are moral virtues that must incorporate art and architecture with logic. These lamps are not guiding tools for creating buildings, but serve as foundation for building with honesty. Ruskin was the first person to explain good and bad “taste” in art and architecture, and he uses seven lamps for this explanation. The seven lamps are sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory and obedience.

In the lamp of sacrifice he differentiates between architecture and building, through considering architecture as art, and building as engineering. In the notion of sacrifice, Ruskin does not mean sacrifice of money but that architects have



to sacrifice certain desires of design, to make God happy.

In the lamp of truth Ruskin urges on the importance of honesty in the buildings in terms of structural, surface and ornamental truth. He is against these three deities of architecture, just because of dishonesty in them. He explains the honesty of structure by criticizing the nineteenth century self-supporting masonry system, which was replaced by reinforcement of materials and with these reinforcements, cladding of stone is used to give feeling of masonry and to mislead the viewers. Then again, according to him the building's façades should not be treated with fancy elements, so that building flaws are hidden behind them. For surface honesty he targets the frescoed walls and ceilings of chapels. He mentions the painting of Micheal Angelo on the ceiling of different chapels, which respects the construction materials, but in the ceiling of Milan Cathedral the vaults are covered

* Ar. Humaira Nazir, Lecturer, Department of Architecture and Environmental Design, Sir Syed University Karachi.
Email correspondance:architect.humaira@gmail.com

with stone fan motifs and these motifs are just painted with the missing shadows and depth of carved stones, which is misleading. He suggests that nobody in this world wants ornaments. Ruskin criticizes the replacement of hand work of skilled masons by machines, which creates dead ornaments.

In the lamp of power he describes three elements which are view, setting and lines for creating buildings. Buildings must provide view of all sides. Shape, mass, scale and shadows are addressed in this section. Power is increased by making buildings taller and massive, but this power is achieved only when buildings evoke awe inspiring emotions in viewers. On the contrary, for smaller buildings it is essential to make their masonry bold. Power of architecture lies in the shadows of buildings, because visible components are derived from the shadows they cast. In discussing the element "line", Ruskin goes into the details of "bounding line", which is continuation of an edge and gives the feeling of mass as a whole. Therefore, it is essential for architects not to disrupt the line. In Greek temples, it is the line of frieze, which helps the reading of the mass as a whole.

The lamp of beauty is the brightest lamp of Ruskin. According to him, beauty is an objective matter and it is related to shared values among humans. He emphasizes to adapt nature as a model of beauty and the elements of architecture should relate to lines and shapes of nature. He further explains this phenomena by taking the example of Greek columns, and how their structure depict the plant's stem. However, after careful observation of Doric column he clarifies that the cornice and triglyph are not imitations of nature and the only use nature as an inspiration is their severity and simplicity. The Ionic and Corinthian columns are however imitations of nature, with the capital depicting the leaves of acanthus and scrolls. However, this does not mean that they directly copy nature, it only means that they incorporate curves, patterns, webs or textures into the design.

The lamp of life, indicates that skilled crafts men are required to make buildings timeless. Masons and carpenters must pour their lives into buildings and should be constructed with hands, not with machines. Ruskin criticizes mass production, large scale buildings and new techniques which reduce the skilled labor's craft.

In the lamp of memory, Ruskin emphasizes conservation of the old and existing culture of places. He states that the buildings must be a representation of their present culture as well as a reflection of the past. According to Ruskin, the life of buildings automatically increases if they reflect cultural meanings to the viewers. People should build their buildings not for their present use, but also for the use of future generations.

"The utmost beauty of building is not its stones, not the gold but only its age".

The lamp of obedience describes that architecture must obey the necessities of time. It must grow from the spirit of people, their lives, their history and faith. For Ruskin, architecture is not irregular or fantastic, but it obeys the customs and the schools, which are invented due to natural growth and development, not because of mechanical obligation.

Conclusively after reading this book it is observed that the timeless observations of Ruskin are significant today as well, as the issues tackled in the book are still relevant. The book is thoughtful and must be read by all architects, students and individuals who are interested in the art of building. This book is easily understandable by those who have ever visited France and England, and have carefully observed the architecture of these places, especially the churches and cathedrals.

The tone used by Ruskin is very noble, but at some points he discusses the same ideas at length, which could have been edited. One way of having a greater impact of this book for students is to deliver its contents through a series of lectures.