THE PRIMITIVE HUT

as a legitimizing construct in architectural discourse (1750-1850)

Linda Bleijenberg, Leiden University

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In 1753 the abbé Laugier published his Essai sur l'architecture, in which he presented 'la petite cabane rustique', primitive man's first building consisting of four poles, four beams and a roof, as the ancestor and leading principle of grand architecture. In doing so, he referred to a notion that has a long pedigree in architectural history. So far, two scholarly publications have devoted some attention to the idea of the primitive hut: Joachim Gaus's article 'Die Urhütte: über ein Modell in der Baukunst und ein Motiv in der bildenden Kunst' (1971), and Joseph Rykwert's monograph On Adam's house in paradise: the idea of the primitive hut in architectural history (1972). In this paper I will employ a brief comparison between the two texts as a

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point of entry into the topic of my research project (as summarized in the title of this paper), and conclude with a problem statement.

Published only a year apart, the texts by Gaus and Rykwert differ both in form and content. Obviously there is the difference in length\(^4\), but what really distinguishes the authors is the way they approach their subject; Gaus opts for the systematic, historical tracing of an idea and Rykwert for the sprawling, associative exploration of what he calls a ‘persistent vision [haunting] everyone involved in building’.\(^5\) Comparing the goals the authors set themselves in their respective introductions, we see that Gaus commences his article with the observation that his topic has not yet been studied within its broader context, and proposes to fill this gap by tracing the roots of the idea of the primitive hut; the meanings that were attached to it in the art theory of the past; and its relation to broader themes in intellectual history. The ensuing article is divided in four parts, the first three chronologically and thematically tracking the evolution of the primitive hut in architectural theory and practice up to the mid-nineteenth century\(^6\), the last one concentrating on the visual arts. Rykwert, on the other hand, declares his aim to be to ‘show how the notion of a first house \(\text{right because it was first}\) was invoked by [some architects who are our near contemporaries] as a justification: the first principle of their radical reforms\(^7\), and to trace the history of this notion from the recent past back to more remote times. He proposes to do this by first examining architectural theory, where ‘the notion of a first house was a piece of conceptual apparatus’; and beyond that, by studying legend and primitive ritual aimed at recalling its form and nature. His book is organized in seven chapters, entitled ‘Thinking and doing’; ‘Necessity and convention’; ‘Positive and arbitrary’; ‘Nature and reason’, followed by a ‘Gothic excursus’; ‘Reason and grace’; ‘The rites’; and ‘A house for the soul’. Rykwert and Gaus have many of the sources they cite in common: Vitruvius, Filarete, two cycles of paintings by Piero di Cosimo,\(^8\) Raphael’s letter to pope Leo X, the illustrated Vitruvius-commentaries and -translations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,\(^9\) Palladio, Scamozzi, the late seventeenth century French

\(^4\) An article of 63 pages of which only the initial 31 pages are dedicated to architectural theory, versus a book of 250 pages more or less exclusively concerned with the primitive hut. Another difference is the use of notes: Gaus supplies 245 detailed references in the last 12 pages of his text, whereas Rykwert’s seven chapters are supported by 25 to 50 very concise notes each, except for the sixth chapter, on rites, which sports an uncharacteristic number of 146 notes.

\(^5\) Rykwert, p. 13

\(^6\) Part I discusses the hut within the context of the classical doctrine of imitation of nature; part II focuses on the 18\(^{th}\) century connection of the idea of the first hut with certain styles, such as the Gothic and the Doric; and part III introduces the 19\(^{th}\) century erosion of the idea that art should imitate nature.

\(^7\) Rykwert p. 13

\(^8\) Both Gaus and Rykwert refer to Panofsky’s interpretation of these paintings. See Erwin Panofsky, ‘The Early History of Man in a Cycle of Paintings by Piero Di Cosimo’, \textit{Journal of the Warburg Institute}, 1 (1937).

\(^9\) Fra Giocondo 1511, Cesare Cesariano 1521, Walter Riviis 1543 and 1548, Jean Martin 1547, Daniele Barbaro 1556, Philibert de l’Orme 1567
and the canonical eighteenth and nineteenth century authors on architecture. Both refer to some examples of actual buildings; Gau also points to images of rustic huts in model books for landscape gardens. Rykwert lists some works Gau does not discuss, such as Viollet-le-Duc, Boullee, Durand, Le Roy, Piranesi, Lodoli; and adds some more recent sources as well, among them Rieg, Le Corbusier, Loos, Mendelsohn and Wright; but what distinguishes him most from Gau is what a review called an ‘unfortunate tendency to stray from the main argument’, leading him to introduce texts on architecture that do not employ the primitive hut as such, but are in some way related to it (at least according to Rykwert), such as the various seventeenth- and eighteenth century reconstructions of Solomon’s temple, and the gothic reveries of Ruskin and Pugin. Again unlike Gau, he sweeps past many sources outside architectural theory, such as the literary and philosophical works of Defoe, Pope, Vico, Rousseau, Hegel, Thoreau and Emerson; and in the last two chapters devotes much time and effort to legend and building ritual.

As the title of his monograph suggests, Rykwert’s point of departure is Adam’s in fact non-existent house in paradise, which might explain his choice of sources. Throughout the book he tries to connect architecture to matters of meaning, for instance when he explores the relation between architecture and language, at the end of the fifth chapter, and between architecture and ritual in the sixth. In the conclusion at the end of the last chapter, ‘A house for the soul’, Rykwert defends his title in a passage on the Jewish huppah, which he interprets as ‘both an image of the occupants’ bodies and a map, a model of the world’s meaning. That, if at all, is why I must postulate a house for Adam in Paradise. Not as a shelter against the weather, but as a volume which he could interpret in terms of his own body and which yet was an exposition of the paradisiacal plan, and therefore established him at the center of it. To many readers such a claim ... might seem exaggerated or even absurd. But an awareness of quite complex matters of this kind does not necessarily imply an ability to articulate them, or even to hold them in a half-conscious way. Further along he refers to the human passion for building enclosures, children making ‘homes’ under tables or chairs, and the ensuing play on inclusion and exclusion, as noted by psychologists.

10 Roland Freart de Chambray, Claude Perrault, Francois Blondel. Both Gau and Rykwert discuss Charles Perrault’s Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes (1688) as well
12 Wolfgang Herrmann’s review of Rykwert in the Burlington Magazine, Vol. 116, No 859 (Oct. 1974): ‘The author certainly provides the reader with much food for thought. In fact, there is almost too much food ... It would have been better if Professor Rykwert could have brought himself to forego the pleasure of indulging in discussions on unrelated subjects ... This unfortunate tendency to stray from the main argument reduces the effectiveness of an otherwise most stimulating study.’
13 Rykwert p. 119
14 It was exactly this type of reasoning that reviewers of the monograph reacted to. The Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects called the book ‘a psychoanalysis of architectural meaning’, ‘looking inward rather than backward’, John
By contrast, Gaus firmly sticks to the historiographical tradition of taking Vitruvius as his point of departure in matters of architecture. On the first page of his article, he places the primitive hut within the context of the problem of imitation of nature, and points to the first chapter of the second book of Vitruvius’ *De architectura*, where the author reconstructed the beginnings of civilization, as the mother of all architectural discussions of man’s first building. In this passage, Vitruvius presented a variety of huts as part of an origin myth: the so-called ‘initium-topos’ that he copied from contemporary writers on rhetoric and poetry. Being the humble beginnings of what became an art only at a much later stage, Vitruvius’ huts were a mere historical phenomenon with no relevance for current practice; the earliest example of the idea that the first hut could still be meaningful can be found with Filarete, who, in a Christian version of the initium-topos, introduced Adam as the first builder. Interpreting columns as imitating trees, he also supplied an alternative to the Vitruvian idea that architecture imitates nature by following the proportions of the human body. This more literal mode of imitation went on to thrive in later theory. In the second section of his text, Gaus moves on to the idea of perfection and its place in time, as it developed in architectural theory from Vasari onwards: perfect forms could be found at the beginning of history, were they were closest to ‘nature’; in the highly developed architecture of ancient Greece; and in the more or less near future.

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Summerson remarked in the *Architectural Review* that ‘there is no limit to the field of speculation which Professor Rykwert has undertaken to explore and has at least partly explored in this learned and important book’. Ernst Gombrich was markedly more critical in his review for the *New York Review of Books*: ‘Mr. Rykwert is not really concerned with the history of an idea – an idea that never was – but with ... memories or fantasies of an archetypal dwelling ... To track down and to map this cluster of associations the author adopts the methods of the psychoanalyst rather than those of the historian ... There is indeed no dearth of material when it comes to speculations about origins and about the demands of nature in eighteen-century writings. It certainly would not be easy to organize this vast material, but here as elsewhere Mr. Rykwert prefers suggestive allusion to systematic presentation ... one must ask oneself what readers he had in mind. He presumably writes for architects and designers ... but would this class of readers know, for instance, who Filarete was? ... He is looking for what is perennial ad universal in man’s reaction to buildings, but ends by investigating a tribe of Australian aborigines who have no buildings but carry a ceremonial pole which apparently stands for a totemic animal or object ... One cannot but wonder whether the method adopted by the author is best suited to throw fresh light on his underlying theme – man’s nostalgia for the past and his desire for renewal ... a romantic and almost whimsical essay.’ See also Wolfgang Herrmann’s review referred to above.

15 A text Rykwert refers to in Chapter 5, which opens with: ‘At this point I cannot avoid a discussion of the text to which all the writers I have quoted are forced to allude, and which must be regarded as the source of all the later speculations about the primitive hut.’

16 Gaus immediately points out that both ‘imitation’ and ‘nature’ can be interpreted in various ways, and refers to Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, ““Nature” as Aesthetic Norm”, *Modern Language Notes*, 42 (1927). He adds that Vitruvius saw nature as the source of truth, a notion already found in classical Greek philosophy.

17 Remarkably, this is not the chapter concerned with the imitative nature of architecture: Vitruvius justifies architecture as an imitative art elsewhere in his treatise, when he connects it to the proportions of the human body.

18 The topos originated in ancient Greek texts, and saw the beginnings and progress of an art as passing through three consecutive stages: imitation of nature; answering to necessity; and the final stage of answering to pleasure and comfort, made possible by specialization, reflection, organization and experience. Gaus refers to the earlier mentioned article by Panofsky on Piero di Cosimo here. On the origin myths of classical antiquity, see also Arthur Oncken Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York: Octagon Books, 1935).
This combination of classical and Christian views of history stressed continuity\textsuperscript{19}, making it possible to postulate universal, suprahistorical forms of perfection. After Charles Perrault’s late seventeenth century observation that the Iroquis of the New World built huts that were remarkably similar to the ones allegedly erected by the ancient Greeks, this led to an increasing interest in comparative architectural history. With Laugier and his followers, the primitive hut became a weapon in the battle against traditional views on architecture; the second section of Gaus’s article discusses how its use was supported by the contemporary reorientation on nature and other primitivist sentiments, facilitating a revaluation of the Gothic and the Doric. The third section is devoted to the erosion of the dogma of imitation from the late eighteenth century onwards, and the alternative offered by Quatremere de Quincy and others: the idea that architecture has its own laws, and imitates itself. Gaus’s conclusion is that the primitive hut has been employed on two tracks: in early modern theory the notion figured in a historical investigation into original forms; from the eighteenth century onwards a second, a-historical search for essential forms that could re-orient architecture emerged alongside it.

In this paper I have outlined two approaches to the study of the primitive hut that could be said to occupy opposite ends of the scholarly spectrum. If we follow Gaus’s conclusion, Rykwert’s monograph might in itself be considered a primary source of the second type: the book is concluded with the prediction that our ‘perennial and inescapable desire for renewal’, in combination with our tendency to return to origins in order to realize it, will continue to give the primitive hut relevance; for ‘in the present rethinking of why we build and what we build for, the primitive hut will, I suggest, retain its validity as a reminder of the original and therefore essential meaning of all building for people: that is, of architecture.’\textsuperscript{20} While I admire the richness of sources and contexts assembled by Rykwert, I feel he often embeds them in a line of argument that might not always connect them in a proper way. Gaus provides a much clearer argument, by taking imitation-theory as the structuring principle of his article; but he can do so only to the exclusion of other, possibly more insightful interpretations. Finally, although both authors signal that the hut played a major role in the (re-)construction of meaning in architecture, neither specifies what was ultimately at stake: architecture’s legitimacy as an art, which could only be justified if buildings acquired meanings that, transcending the structural, spatial and functional aspects of architecture, were cultural in the broadest sense of the word.

\textsuperscript{19} See for a thorough discussion of the diverse ways in which historical development can be seen the first chapter of Lovejoy and Boas.
\textsuperscript{20} Rykwert, p. 119