MARC-ANTOINE LAUGIER'S AESTHETIC POSTULATES OF ARCHITECTURAL THEORY

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Views on architecture that hold a significant position in architectural theory are the ones by Marc-Antoine Laugier, a French theoretician from the 18th century. The research on his architectural theory that have been carried out so far are quite stereotypical and concern Laugier's concept of primitive hut as his only significant contribution to architectural theory. It is well-known that the concept of primitive hut plays an important role in Laugier's theory and it is what actually maintained his reputation up to now. However, by singling out this concept as an independent one, one actually neglects all the other aspects of Laugier's theory.

The aim of this paper is to present multidimensionality of Laugier's architectural aesthetics by crossing the borders of architecture and viewing Laugier's ideas in cultural, philosophical, religious and historical context, as well as applying the integrative process and considering the spiritual paths of the enlightenment movement in the mid-18th century.

A special attention is paid to considering the aesthetic aspect which represents the gist and an inevitable part of Laugier's architectural theory. His aesthetic theory is important in forming the classicist style, and despite its radical character, it influenced many architects in France and the rest of Europe. We may see Laugier as one of the first modernists considering his structuralist logic of the constructive circuit of architecture and aesthetic modesty of decoration. Laugier's functionalist attitude that the constructive circuit should at the same time represent a decorative element of architecture confirms the thesis that modernist approach has its roots in the 18th century.

Keywords: *aesthetic rationalism, enlightenment, classicism, syntagm: truthfulness, simplicity and naturality.*

CULTUROLOGICAL CONTEXT OF LAUGIER'S WORK

Marc-Antoine Laugier, also known as *l'Abbé Laugier*, lived and worked in France during the 18th century. As a Jesuit priest, Laugier fulfilled erudite education that surpassed theological frames. Furthermore, he was a highly gifted person, being eloquent, perspicacious and skillful orator, writer and translator, *home de letter* that produced significant works in music, architecture, painting, history, diplomacy and preaching. During his life, he was very respected by the highest cultural circles in France and other parts of the world, he was elected a member of the Academy of Science in Anger, Lion and Marsey, and his works were translated into the main world languages. When he wrote his first book *Essay on*

Architecture (1753), Laugier was already more than forty years old. Until the end of his life, during the next sixteen years, he published twelve books, as well as a significant number of articles, translations and short texts. Although he was interested in all other kinds of art, writing books on painting and music, architecture was actually his first love.

In the 18th century, Europe was marked by several revolutions that brought a complete change in socials norms and beliefs. Along with the industrial revolution when it comes to manufacturing and the French bourgeois revolution in terms of social-political relations, religious enlightenment represents an intellectual and spiritual revolution in terms of philosophical, religious and scientific thinking, while Laugier represents one of the first minds that introduced the revolutionary ideas in the field of aesthetic viewing of architecture.

Enlightenment as a spiritual and philosophical movement was based on reason as the highest human value and included every single aspect

of human existence. Using reasonable and logical viewing, enlighteners initiated a revolution in traditional structures that were imposed by the Church and the absolute ruler. The theological metaphysical learnings were rejected, while the optimistic faith in human advancement through practicing science was acquired. The new democratic social relations based on the postulates of justice and equality of all the people were demanded. With these goals, enlighteners wanted to form a humanist society that aims at progress, which is a characteristic that is even now one of the main virtues of society (Cassirer, 1951).

Laugier's views on architecture examined the whole history and theory of architecture, starting from Vitruvius. The beliefs that were regarded as irrefutable for centuries were considered wrong and vague by Laugier. The architecture that was defined by the arranged cosmic order with numerous symbolic meanings was now deprived of its metaphysical character. Laugier was among

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Fig. 1. Marc-Antoine Laugier's concept of the "primitive hut". Frontispiece from second edition of the "Essai sur l'Architecture", engraved by Charles Eisen, 1755.

the first theoreticians that used constructive logic that was more powerful than the secret symbolic meaning of numbers and proportions in architecture. With his radical attitudes he succeeded in starting a reformation of architecture, stressing that renaissance models of thinking were long gone and confirming his modernist views that were led by reason as the main postulate of enlightenment.

SEARCHING FOR A PERFECT STYLE IN ARCHITECTURE

In the beginning of the 18th century, France was in a bad financial state since the golden age of the country's advancement under the Sun King ended. Colossal palaces were no longer built, as well as the pretentious state buildings and magnificent gardens. Architecture was limited to more modest projects that were fairly different than those in *Grand Siecle*. The architects became more of decorators than architectural designers. They started using cheaper techniques of imitating expensive materials, ceiling plastering was used quite often, as well as painting and colouring the walls into bright pastel colours. There was a frizzy and frivolous style that emerged between 1730 and 1755 called rococo, which was used by many architects, even some of the members of the French Academy of Architecture. The popularity of this style was caused quite a lot by the great demand of it by the newly-formed bourgeoise class that strived to approach the aristocracy by owning the artistic mani-festations of this extravagant style. On the other

hand, the lack of money and the accessibility of the content that rococo offered made even the king Louis XV and his nobles become the main protagonists of rococo. Rococo was a quick escape from the cruel reality into the world of imagination and fantasy. The decadence of art represented a reflection of the decadence of the political and social system, the demise of which could be made out under the bunch of little flowers, sparkle and floral and animal motives which were used in rococo.

While defending the long tradition of the French classicism and the view which claimed that architecture could be beautiful only if it was simple, symmetrical and harmonic, the academic architectural public harshly judged rococo as a source of deviation of the ideal of beautiful. The academists considered rococo a worthless trend that distorted all traditional values. Rococo was compared to barbarian elements of gothic style, since their mutual characteristics were heavy usage of ornaments and eccentricities.[1]

Although they rejected rococo in their theories, the academists of architecture accepted it in practice. Germain Boffrand, a great advocate of classicism, is the author of the interior decoration *Hôtel de Soubise* which is one of the most extreme examples of rococo in Paris. Jacques-François Blondel thought that, while decorating smaller spaces, an architect might surrender himself to his lively imagination and fantasy, claiming that interior design demanded less strictness than composition of exterior (Blondel, 1754). This being said, some of architectural theoreticians praised rococo due to its qualities of being picturesque, while, on the other hand, believed that it didn't contribute to advancement of architecture, since it was oriented to interior decoration and objects that were short-lasting, such as clothes, jewelry and furniture. Rococo was considered to be a fashion that wasn't long-lasting, so it was possible to tolerate its ornaments in small, intimate salons, and thus, when it threatened to be included in exterior composition of architecture, it caused a strong theoretical rebellion.

The architectural experts found themselves in a great fear, believing that architecture was threatened by neglecting the rules of good taste. These reasons caused a sensible and spiritual search for a new style that would save the architecture from decadence and decline. The search for a new style was in a close relationship with striving to reach the perfection in architecture.[2]

A rapid discourse in French architecture began

in the mid-18th century, which confirmed the data that, between 1747 and 1753, over three hundred books, pamphlets and articles in magazines that dealt with architecture were published, which was more than during the fifty years before (Hautecoeur, 1943-1957). There was a chaotic interlacing of the professional and layman thinking in which stable value criteria were completely lost. The notion of *bon goût* (good taste) became problematic, the values were replaced by anarchy, while anarchy, according to some critics, led to destruction. The spiritual atmosphere of the beginning of the 18th century was marked by the feeling of fear and believing that art was going in the wrong direction, distancing itself from the concept of perfection and regularity, thus moving towards demise and deviation.[3]

France as a significant centre of enlightenment produced a constellation of prominent thinkers whose ideas influenced reforms of society, government, religion, science, culture and art. Architecture represented one of the pivots of the manifestation of social rebirth, so searching for a new style was the leading task in the second half of the 18th century. Voltaire,

Fig. 2. Germain Boffrand, Hôtel de Soubise, Paris, 1735-1740.

Diderot and Rousseau paved the way for the great social and political revolution with their ideas, while the architects and architectural theoreticians had difficulties adjusting their attitudes as far as further development of architecture was concerned. It was not easy to break the one hundred years old tradition of the French Academy of Architecture that was based on the Vitruvian theory and forming a style that was to end rococo's influence. In this atmosphere of hopelessness and searching for a firm basis of architecture, Laugier's views caused a big public attention. Based on the classicistic theory, Laugier's radical system of rules rejected all the elements of the "confusing and bizarre" (Laugier, 1753), an not only the ones belonging to rococo, but also the

elements that were used in architecture for centuries as parts of classical expression, like pilasters, niches and pedestals. Laugier criticized lots of baroque and renaissance elements, for example spiral columns and atticas. He completely rejected the Roman Toscan and Composite architectural order, but reformed the classic Greek Ionic, Doric and Corinthian order. Laugier paved the way for structural classicism (Trachtenberg and Hyman, 1986), seeing the column, the entablature and the pediment as the supreme elements of architecture and claimed that, except from their regular forming and distributing, nothing else was needed to add in order for a building to be perfect.

Laugier's *Essay on Architecture* was accepted with great enthusiasm and it caused wide reactions in public, it was thoroughly discussed by experienced architects, as well as all the other prominent intellectuals. This big response from the public was quite surprising for a book that dealt with the theory of architecture. One of the reasons for this success was the appearance of the interest of the wider public for art critic, while the simple style in which the book was written made the abstract theme of architectural theory understandable to the layman critics (Herrmann, 1962). *The Essay* made an excess in architectural theory (Blagojević, 2009). A great part of *The Essay*'s significance is found in Laugier's expressing a critical attitude towards the existing architecture. His views caused a series of discussions in public and directly influenced the forming of classicistic style in French architecture.[4]

THE PRINCIPLES OF LAUGIER'S RATIONALIST AESTHETICS OF ARCHITECTURE

In his system of structuralist aesthetics, Laugier established the following elements in architecture: *les parties essentielles* (the essential elements), *les parties introduites par besoin* (the elements introduced out of need) and *les parties ajoutées par caprice* (the elements used out of caprice). Led by this division of architecture, Laugier established three levels of aesthetic categories: *beautés* (beauty), *licences* (necessity or justification) and *défauts* (errors), which were equivalents to good, bad and wrong.

The essential elements of architecture respected the principle of primitive hut and consisted of column, entablature and pediment – they were fundamental and no architectural building could be built without them. The elements introduced out of need were walls,

windows and doors. Laugier approved them only because they were necessary due to *commodité* (commodity), but believed that they undermined the basic principles of primitive hut.

The elements used out of caprice represent major errors in architecture. They were utterly useless and redundant and only undermined the beauty and simplicity of basic elements of architecture, that is, the fundamental principles of primitive hut.

By analyzing Laugier's rationalist aesthetics, we may perceive three significant tendencies that are everpresent in his aesthetic concept of architecture. These are *vérité* (truthfulness), *simplicité* (simplicity) and *naturalisme* (naturality).

We may conclude that these tendencies make an entire syntagm that represent the most important contribution of Laugier's architectural aesthetics.

Truthfulness

Laugier advocated *architecture vrai* which represented a true, real and sincere architecture. He opposed everything that was false abot architecture. His aesthetics of valuing architecture established the column, the entablature and the pediment as the most important and main constructional elements by considering the constructive structure of a building. Believing that the parts of architectural order were, at the same time, parts of a buliding itself probably originated from aesthetic theoreticians Plato and Aristotelous. Laugier paraphrased Aristotelous' rule from poetry that claimed that "structural unity of parts should be constructed in a way in which, if one moved or removed any part, the unity would become distorted and disturbed" (Aristotelous, 1912).

Fig. 3. Jacques-Germain Soufflot, Sainte-Geneviève Church (Panthéon), Paris, 1755-1792.

The demand for complete integration of architectural parts into a unity belongs to the idea of classic. The idea of this connection can be traced back to Alberti's definition of beautiful that is basically connected to Vitruvius' views (Alberti, 1989). However, the renaissance view of integration was then viewed in an aestetically abstract sense. This meant that a whole building was pervaded by decoration, from the smallest ornaments to architectural orders, and all of them together made a unique and coherent unity. During the age of renaissance there was no word on the constructive role of architectural orders. Architectural orders were considered the best way of illustrating the mutual connection between parts and unity (Kurtović-Folić, 1998). It was thought that the order reproduced processes that were present in nature and macrocosmos, according to some claims they were God-made entities, something specific which stood in contrast to a building's unity, which was added to it in order to make it pretty and adorned. Architectural orders were the most important elements in aesthetic classification of architecture when it came to *venustas* – beauty (Vitruvius, 2003). During renaissance, especially in France, this classification was automatically applied. In practise, the oders were often included in construction of a building, but Laugier was the first theoretician to express the view that the orders, most of all, had to be constructive, and then decorative elements. With this view, Laugier broke the concept of metaphysical role of the orders and pointed out that their main role was to be functional. This being said, Laugier may be seen as one of the pioneers of modernism.

Simplicity

The tendency of *simplicité* (simplicity) is one of the basic characteristics of French architecture and art. When compared to European trends, all the French styles fostered the tendencies towards classicistic tradition, the main characteristic of which was *simplicité*. It is well-known that the French baroque and rococo were marked by a dose of *simplicité* - the simplicity which was related to everything that was related to classicistic doctrine and opposite to gothic style.

Laugier was criticized for reducing architecture to utter basics, limiting an artist's freedom by leading him to the strict system of rules by which one should project in order to reach the ideal of simplicity. Laugier claimed that only untalented architect adorned his work excessively, since he was not able to reach simplicity. He did not underestimate the

Fig. 4. Jacques-Germain Soufflot, Interior of Sainte-Geneviève Church (Panthéon), Paris, 1755-1792.

importance of talent in creating a work of art. On the contrary, he believed that an architect should be talented and a genius, but, if these two were not supported by the rules, the artist would inevitably fall into *licence* (justification) and *caprice* (decadence).

Laugier mostly expressed his aesthetics of reforming in church architecture, which, according to him, did not yet acquite *vrai goût* (true taste) of building, and thus he viewed French gothic as a style that was most acceptable. General opinion that was present during the 17th and 18th century considered gothic a barbarian style of bad taste which was opposed to the beauty of classic architecture and its canons of symmetry, balanced proportions and coherent conception. Laugier agreed with this and criticized gothic for its grotesque ornaments, while he appreciated the awe, magnificence, ligtness and sophistication that gothic cathedrals bore (Laugier, 1765).

Laugier wanted to adjoin the good characteristics of both gothic and classicism, primarily wanting to reach the gothic height and the classicist stability. He proclaimed his idea of a church an absolute *bon goût* of architecture and a building which was completely *naturel et vrai* (natural and true). The design of a church was very simple and based on the basic principles of Laugier's aesthetics with no arcades, pilasters, counterphores, pedestals, transverse ribs, statues and everything else which was considered kitschy and redundant, since a church as a sacral form of architecture was supposed to look elegant and supreme.

The author of the Sainte-Geneviève Church, the

greatest project of the 18th century France was Laugier's peer, the architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot. Led by Laugier's ideas, Soufflot applied peristyle that alluded to the simplicity of Greek temples, while he presented free-standing columns and flat entablature as the main construction elements, by which he succeeded in producing the lightness effect of gothic cathedrals, releasing the current sacral architecture of baroque weight. The Sainte-Geneviève Church marked the new way in which church architecture began to develop in terms of applying the new construction solutions and affirming the new style of classicism which reached its top level during the 37 years in which it was built.

Laugier's ideas strongly influenced the building of Madeleine Church, which is another superb work of art as far as architecture of classicism is concerned. Pierre Contant d'Ivry, the author of the church, literally applied Laugier's *vrais principes de l'architecture* that included columns, entablature and pediment as the fundamental principles of architectural composition.

Naturality

During the second half of the 18th century, the idea of nature played an important role in human interests. The age of enlightenment adopted the idea of nature as an expression of righteousness, sincerity, logic and kindness. The notion of "natural cognition" was not only related to the cognition of physical world and things that happened in it, but also the rights, religion, society, politics and art. Natural cognition was a search for the basic, fundamental truths in all areas of human existence. This kind of euphoria for the natural did not fail to affect architecture, while Laugier's ideas were based on viewing architecture through natural principles.

Laugier's radical and rationalist architectural aesthetics should be viewed in the context of religious dogmatism. Christianity was the main force of Western civilization for thousands of years, and then, when the age of enlightenment came, its influenced significantly shrinked (Hadživuković, 2005). Along with free development of rationalist philosophical and scientific thinking, a new view on the world was formed, which was based on reason and experience. What was especially prominent in the intellectual circles was deliverance from religious dogma and prejudice, but rarely did anyone give up Christianity in favour of Atheism. Most of the French intellectuals were deists. With the permission of the pope, Laugier left his Jesuit order, but it was not because he stopped believing in Christianity –

it was because he wanted to dedicate himself completely to science and art.

In the mid-18th century an empty space emerged, in which spirituality strived to be inspired by a new inspirational force, thus the enlighteners found this force in nature. They were assured that, in spite of difference, there was a mutual basis of the world and religion which was to be found in "natural religion" that was present in every man's heart.

It is important to acknowledge the greatness of spiritual advancement that the enlightenment movement achieved which was in contrast to the reformation and counter-reformation that marked the earlier epoch. The enlightenment was not exclusive in its work, it pointed out to the new perspectives of development based on humanity and religious and political tolerance. The faith in nature was shared by all people, no matter whether they were Christian, Atheists, French or English, while it represented an optimistic choice in search for happiness. Two prominent theoretician, each one in his area of interest, Rousseau and Laugier advocated similar principles that urged a man to go back to his roots, gist and nature as a pure source of life and creativity. Rousseau did not see the return to nature only as releasing a man from social rules and boundaries, but also stressed that, being raised, one becomes sensible, that is, natural (Rousseau, 1790). He did not rebel against the nobles, but against richness and social injustice (Rousseau, 1984). Deep inside he was assured that the source of new moral was not to be found in one's reason, but in one's heart and conscience. In analogy to these social views of Rousseau's, Laugier wanted to clear the architecture of everything that was redundant and non-functional, not only pointing out to excessive usage of ornaments that was developed during baroque and rococo, but also to the errors and fallacies that were everpresent in the centuries before.

Fig. 5. Pierre Contant D'Ivry, Madeleine Church, Paris, 1757-1842.

Just like Rousseau saw financial, political and social unequalities as unnatural deviations of the "natural state", Laugier saw pilasters, pedestals, niches and torsion columns as errors and deviations of the three fundamental principles of primitive hut which represented the embodiment of quality architecture. Rousseau's notion of *volonté générale* (the general will) is equivalent to Laugier's tendency to define general and universal principles of good architecture. According to Rousseau, an individual in a state was subordinate to general tendencies, while Laugier claimed that an architect was to adjust to the established principles of architecture, after which he could feel free to use his talent and imagination.

With the intention to purify, Laugier focused on architecture while Rousseau focused on moral and society. With the tendency of removing deviations, both of these theoreticians found the solutions in nature and primary states that were embedded into collective subconscious mind of an 18th century man, as well as the contemporary one. The ideas which makes Rousseau's and Laugier's views contemporary is even now related to the vision of progress that should be connected to one's moral emancipation. These thinkers went back to the roots of our civilization, Laugier with his primitive hut and Rousseau through his "noble savage". This was not a step backward that brought humanity back to tribe communities and primitive architecture – it was a search for new moral and architecture that were purified from civilization's dirt.

THE VALUE AND CONTRIBUTION OF LAUGIER'S ARCHITECTURAL AESTHETICS

Laugier's architectural aesthetics was extremely modern and progressive when compared to the processes that happened in the 18th century. Although considered to be among the pioneers of classicism, Laugier did not turn to ancient ideals in the same way that classicistic architectural style did. His major contribution was establishing the valorization of a complete work of architecture, on the basis of which he noticed some errors and drew conclusions and directions for bringing architecture to perfection. Although we may see some of his thoughts as absurd, we shall not judge their quality from the practical point of view. It is important to stress that Laugier made a progressive excess in architecture which was then between the periods of rococo and classicism. Laugier's ideas have inspired many architects, theoreticians and thinkers and

this is what actually gives him such meaning and merit.

The architecture back then might have been backward when compared to Diderot's and D'Alembert's *Encyclopedia*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and Voltaire's *Name of Conscience and Reason*, but Laugier certainly managed to defend the philosophical view on architecture, breaking up with the stereotypical concept of debates that had been written since Vitruvius' age. Laugier brought out certain freshness of a rationalist approach in thinking into a discipline that had become tiresome and dull. He created the new ways and, due to this, he is significant as a theoretician of architectural aesthetics. He was the first to demand a radical change in architecture. Classicism that had just emerged back then had many sources, one of the most important ones being Laugier's thinking.

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1) Regarding French architectural theoreticians' struggle against rococo, to see: Hautecoeur, L. (1943-1957) Histoire de l'Architecture classique en France, Vol. IV: Seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle: Le style Louis XVI, 1750-1792, Paris: A. & J. Picard, p. 46; Blondel, J.F. (1737) De la distribution des maisons de plaisance et de la décoration des édifices en général. Paris: C.-A. Jombert, p. 67; Frézier, A. (1738) Dissertation historique et critique sur les ordres d'architecture. Paris: s.n., p.3; Soufflot, J.G. (1744) Dans l'art de l'architecture, le goût est-il préférable à la science des règles ou celle-ci au goût?. Paris: Nouvelles Archives historiques de Rhone: Biblioteque Nationale de France, p. 114; Boffrand, G. (1745) Livre d'architecture: Contenant les principes généraux de cet art, et les plans, elevations et profils de quelques-uns des batiments faits en France et dans les Pays Etrangers. Paris: Apud Guillelmum Cavelier patrem, p.9; Blondel, J.F. (1754) Discours sur la nécessité de l'étude de l'architecture. Paris: C.-A. Jombert, p. 5.

2) The concept of bonne architecture (perfect architecture) in French architecture in the 18th century should be viewed as the tendency of reaching and overcoming the architecture of the 17th century golden age. This concept of bonne architecture establishes truthfulness and simplicity as the basic qualities, in contrast to deviant expressions of, so called, "barbarian" styles such as rococo and gothic.

3) On pessimism in architecture, to see: Blondel, J.F. (1727) L'Architecture française, III vol. Paris: s.n., p.14; Briseux, C.E. (1728) Architecture moderne ou L'art de bien bâtir: Pour toutes sortes de personnes, tant pour les maisons de particuliers que pour les palais..., II vol. Paris: C. Jombert, pp. 5-8; Dubos, J.B. (1733) Reflexions critiques sur la poesie et sur la peinture. Paris : J. Mariette, p. 221; Voltaire, F.M.A. (1752) Siècle de Louis XIV. Paris: Garnier, p. 522; D'Alamber, J.R (1955) Uvodna rasprava u Enciklopediju. Beograd: Kultura, p. 168; Helvétius, C. A. (1776) De l'Espirit, I vol. Londres: s.n., p. 162

4) Laugier's ideas directly influenced the architects of French classicism, among which the most prominent were Soufflot and Contant d'Ivry. Laugier was often quoted during the next decades, especially by English architects such as John Soane who appreciated him most. When romanticism became dominant in the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, Laugier's name was almost forgotten. In the beginning of the 20th century, Le Corbusier renewed Laugier's idea of primitive hut in which he recognised the supreme principle of the new modern style.