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Rocky Starts – Ephemeral Beginnings Mari Hvattum

Consider the following scene in Wim Wenders' much-celebrated film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987): the main character Damiel (Bruno Ganz) has just forsaken his status as angel in order to pursue his love of the trapeze artist Marion. After having pawned his angel's armor and equipped himself with what he considers a more suitable mortal outfit, he rushes to the site where her circus used to be. He comes too late: the circus has already moved on. Only a patch of sawdust remains where the circus tent once stood. Desperate with lovesick frustration, Damiel starts running around the circular patch of what used to be the circus floor. He runs like a circus horse, around and around. ^{fig.1} The moment lasts for only a few seconds before Damiel slumps to the ground, depressed to death. But for that little moment something interesting is going on. It is as if, in Damiel's mind, the act of running can somehow bring back the situation to which this running belonged, that is, the circus tent with all its content. As if the act can revoke its own physical setting. Those few seconds when Ganz runs through the mud and sawdust of a Berlin gap site form a sort of foundation myth in reverse. Rather than starting with a building, we here start with an act – a strangely primeval act, a sort of ceremonial conjuring – from which architecture, or at least some kind of built reality, follows. The building is conjured by the ritual act, as it were.

¹ See, for example, Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981).

² William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture, in Which the Principles of That Art Are Laid Down, and Illustrated by a Great Number of Plates, Accurately Designed, and Elegantly Engraved by the Best Hands* (London: J. Haberkorn, 1759), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ Chambers studied under Jacques-François Blondel in Paris and was strongly influenced by French Enlightenment architectural theory. He was also influenced by English thinkers such as Edmund Burke. See, for example, John Harris and Michael Snodin, eds., *Sir William Chambers: Architect to George III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Similar origin stories can be found in Julien-David LeRoy, *The Ruins of the Most Beautiful Monuments of Greece* (1758), trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), 209–10.

The Vitruvian Tradition and Its Challengers

For all its originality, Wenders' reversal belongs to a long tradition. The running scene echoes a way of thinking about the origins of architecture that runs in parallel with, and at times in opposition to, the so-called Vitruvian tradition. Despite its name, the latter was shaped less by Vitruvius than by his eighteenth-century interpreters. ¹ A typical representative is William Chambers, who in his *Treatise on Civil Architecture* (1759) includes what was at the time a near-compulsory section on the origins of architecture. The first human beings lived in caves, Chambers proclaims, but once they left their caves and started building, their buildings were "rough and uncouth." ² Only after generations and generations did any kind of adornment enter into the picture, in the form of moldings. "Insensibly mankind improved the Art of Building" Chambers writes, "and invented methods to make their huts ... handsome, as well as convenient." ^{3/figs. 2 a–b}

Chambers is not much read these days, perhaps because he is not very original. ⁴ For our present purpose that is a virtue, however, for Chambers' somewhat uninspired origin tale presents us with the Vitruvian tradition in its most basic form. The argument



is as typical as it is sensible: first you build something and make sure it stands up, then you decorate it. Structure is primary, adornment secondary. Like so many of his contemporaries, Chambers locates the origins of architecture in the archi-

fig.1 Daniel (Bruno Ganz) running, in *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987), directed by Wim Wenders.

tectural structure itself, albeit in an “uncouth” and primitive form. In doing so, he established a firm hierarchy between structure and ornament, according to which the unadorned structure is the primordial architectural form and the ornament is a secondary layer.

Precisely this hierarchy would come under attack some hundred years later, when a handful of nineteenth-century theorists turned this commonsensical but self-referential notion of the origins of architecture resolutely on its head. This essay is about that upheaval. From Chambers and the Vitruvian tradition’s “rocky starts,” I turn to a tradition that cultivated more ephemeral beginnings — beginnings that might still provide fresh and interesting insights. They might even point to the way foundation myths — their formulation as well as their deconstruction — potentially impact contemporary architectural discourse and practice.

Ephemeral Beginnings

The German architect and historian Karl Bötticher is an apt, if perhaps somewhat surprising, place to start such an investigation. Bötticher’s theory of *Kernform* and *Kunstform* (core-form and art-form), as presented in *Die Tektonik der Hellenen* (1852), seems, at first glance at least, to confirm the Vitruvian hierarchy. An architectural member such as a column or an architrave, Bötticher argues, exists on two levels. On the one hand, it possesses a structural core; on the other hand, it displays a decorative surface that gives the mute core its outward expression. “The core-form of each member is the *mechanical* and *necessary* component, the structurally functioning scheme. The art-form, by contrast, is only the functionally *clarifying characteristic*,” Bötticher writes, thus establishing a seemingly autonomous notion of architecture where the architectural ornament is seen as a mere representation of the inner, structural working of the architectural member. ⁵ The origin and essence of architecture is sought in the unadorned structure for which the ornament is but an added, expressive layer. ⁶

⁵ “Die Kernform jedes Gliedes ist das mechanisch notwendige, das statisch fungierende Schema; die Kunstform dagegen nur die Funktion-erklärende Charakteristik.” Karl Bötticher, *Die Tektonik der Hellenen*, 2 vols. (Potsdam: Riegel, 1852), 1:xv. Bötticher’s *Tektonik* has not been translated into English, although Harry Francis Mallgrave translated a small extract in *Architectural Theory*, vol. 1: *An Anthology from Vitruvius to 1870* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 531–32, from which the present translation is taken. On the question of the autonomy of architecture in Bötticher’s thinking, see Caroline van Eck, *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture: An Enquiry into Its Theoretical and Philosophical Background* (Amsterdam: Natura & Architectura Press 1993), 163–74; Mari Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 57–63.

⁶ This is an ambiguous point in Bötticher, discussed further in Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper* (see note 5), 209 n.57.

figs. 2 a–b William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture, in Which the Principles of That Art Are Laid Down* (1759).

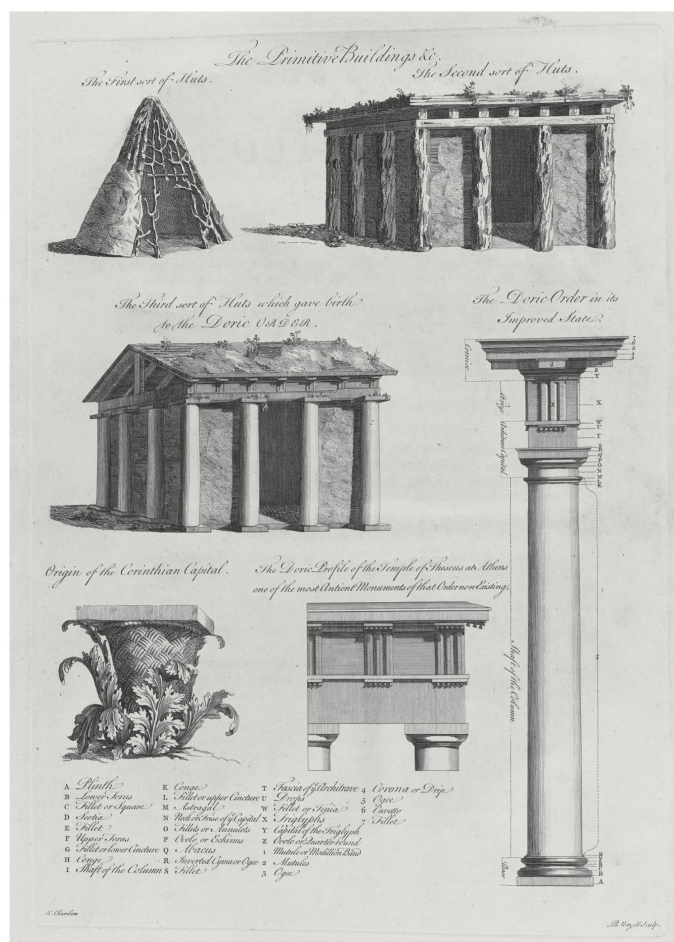
The Vitruvian hierarchy in Bötticher's tectonic system is soon cast into doubt, however. In the second volume of *Die Tektonik* he presents a rather different story about the origins of architecture. He writes about the origin of the Greek temple, which he believes previous scholarship has neglected. Why, Bötticher asks, has nobody examined "the origin and concept of the Hieron" not as built form but as institution, as use? ⁷ He would later explore this issue in a thoroughly revised second volume of *Die Tektonik*, published in 1881 under the title *Der Tempel in seiner räumlichen Anordnung und Ausstattung* (The Temple in its Spatial Arrangement and Equipment). ⁸

⁷ Bötticher, *Tektonik der Hellenen* (see note 5), 2:2. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

⁸ Karl Bötticher, *Die Tektonik der Hellenen*, vol. 2: *Der Tempel in seiner räumlichen Anordnung und Ausstattung*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1881).

⁹ Karl Bötticher, *Der Baumkultus der Hellenen nach den gottesdienstlichen Gebräuchen und den überlieferten Bildwerken dargestellt* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1856), 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9, 16. The original German reads, "Ja, weil der Baum das ursprünglich erste Gottesbild ist, trägt er nicht blos der Gottheit Namen wie das spätere menschengestaltige Kultusbild, sondern wird auch eben so wie dieses schon mit den Attributen und Hoheitssymbolen derselben bekleidet, in vielen Fällen sogar mit Gesichtsmaske, Gewanden und Kleidung ausgestattet um die Adoration mit allen den heiligen Riten des Kultus so zu empfangen wie sie später auf das Tempelbild übertragen wird."



The updated volume is an examination of precisely what Bötticher accuses his fellow architectural historians of ignoring; namely, the origin of the temple – and with it the origins of architecture – not in stone or wood but in cultic practice. **figs. 3 a–c**

This agenda comes even more clearly to the fore in a little book Bötticher wrote in 1856 between the two editions of *Die Tektonik*; namely, *Der Baumkultus der Hellenen nach den gottesdienstlichen Gebräuchen* (The Greek Tree Cult According to its Worship Practices). Bötticher here goes back to a time before architecture, to what he calls "the time without temples." ⁹ He traces the beginnings of the temple not in the primitive hut but in the ephemeral arrangements in and around sacred trees. "Trees are the first temples for the Gods," he writes: "Yes, as the tree is the first and original idol, it does not merely carry the name of the deity, like later human-formed cult images, but is also clothed with the same attributes and symbols, in many cases equipped even with face masks, draperies, and clothing to receive the sacred ritual of the cult that is later transferred onto the image of the temple." ¹⁰ The temple in the form of a building emerged only long after the shrine had been established around the tree. Bötticher describes the slow process of differentiation by which architecture

gradually separated itself from its cultic beginnings and gained an autonomous existence. Only at the end of this process did the temple "emerge independently from the tree."¹¹ The temple's origin, however, must be sought in the cultic practice of which the tree was the nucleus.

A key factor in Bötticher's tree-to-temple transformation is the adornment used to decorate the sacred trees. The wreath and the ribbon are the oldest forms of such adornment, he asserts, describing them less as formal attributes and more as parts of carefully choreographed rituals, metamorphosed into material

form.¹² Bötticher outlines a gradual transfiguration of the divine, starting from the religious ritual, transferred into the materiality of the wreath, the ribbon, and other forms of adornment, and finally manifesting itself in the temple proper. He illustrates the process in sixty-three delicate engravings showing trees in various stages of adorned transformation, such as the trees dedicated to Dionysus hung with bells and garlands and Artemis's trees adorned with ceremonial weapons and tied with ribbons. Gradually, built structures appeared

¹¹ "Erst mit Beginn der Zeit welche menschgestaltige Gottesbilder aus seinem Holze macht und diese dem Baume beifügt, oder ein Tempelhaus zu deren Aufnahme daneben gründet, scheiden sich diese Begriffe, es tritt Bild und Wohnung selbständig aus dem Baume heraus." Ibid., 17.

¹² Ibid., 14–17.

¹³ Ibid., 541, note to fig. 36: "FIG. 36. *Baumsacellum*, von einer thürformigen Aedicula überbaut und mit Binden bekränzt; auf den Akroterien der Aedicula Opfergefäße, vor ihr unter dem Baum ein Götterbild (Trivia?); Thyrsen oder Fackeln ebenfalls vor ihm angelehnt. Vgl. Cap. 10, §3. — Pompejanisches Wandb. bei Roux Pomp. Sér. 5 T. 19." The image reference is to Henri Roux, *Herculaneum et Pompéi: Recueil général des peintures, bronzes, mosaïques, etc.* (Paris: Didot, 1840). The note to fig. 33 reads, "FIG. 33. *Baum-Sacellum mit Aedicula*. Der Stamm des heiligen Baumes durch Binde bezeichnet; Götterbild auf einem Fussgestell dass mit geweihten Binden belegt ist darunter: ein geflügelter Löwe (Mithras) mit männlichem Antlitz auf der Mauer des Sacellum die mit geweihter Binde behangen ist. Auf den Akroterien der Aedicula Tympana; vom Gebälk hängt ein geweihtes Tympanon an Binden herab; von der Mauer ebenfalls geweihte Binden (licia) herabhängend welche die Votivinschriften tragen. Vgl. S. 150, 154 — Mus. Borbon. Vol. 12 T. 8. Die Staffage, eine sitzende Priesterin und ein herzuschreitender Mann mit Opfergaben, ist wegelassen." Bötticher, *Baumkultus der Hellenen* (see note 9), 540.

OF THE ORIGIN OF BUILDINGS.

ATIENTLY, says VITRUVIUS, Men lived in woods, and inhabited caves; but in time, taking perhaps example from birds, who with great industry build their nests, they made themselves huts. At first they made these huts, very probably, of a Conic Figure; because that is a form of the simplest structure; and, like the birds, whom they imitated, composed them of branches of trees, spreading them wide at the bottom, and joining them in a point at the top; covering the whole with reeds, leaves, and clay, to screen them from tempests and rain.

BUT finding the Conic Figure inconvenient, on account of its inclined sides, they changed both the form and construction of their huts, giving them a Cubical Figure, and building them in the following manner:

HAVING marked out the space to be occupied by the hut, they fixed in the ground several upright trunks of trees to form the sides, filling the intervals between them with branches closely interwoven and covered with clay. The sides being thus completed, four large beams were placed on the upright trunks, which being well joyned at the angles, kept the sides firm; and likewise served to support the covering or roof of the building, composed of many joists, on which were laid several beds of reeds, leaves, and clay.

INSENSIBLY mankind improved in the Art of Building, and invented methods to make their huts lasting and handsome, as well as convenient. They took off the bark, and other unevennesses, from the trunks of trees that formed the sides; raised them probably above the dirt and humidity on stones; and covered each of them with a flat stone or slate, to keep off the rain. The spaces between the ends of the joists were clofed with clay, wax, or some other substance; and the ends of the joists covered with thin boards cut in the manner of triglyphs. The position of the roof was likewise altered: for being, on account of its flatness, unfit to throw off the rains that fell in great abundance during the winter season, they raised it in the middle; giving it the form of a gable roof, by placing rafters on the joists, to support the earth and other materials that composed the covering.

FROM this simple construction the Orders of Architecture took their rise. For when buildings of wood were set aside, and Men began to erect solid and stately edifices of stone, they imitated the parts which necessity had introduced into the primitive huts; in so much that the upright trees, with the stones at each end of them, were the origin of Columns, Bases, and Capitals; and the beams, joists, rafters, and strata of materials, that formed the covering, gave birth to Arches, Traves,

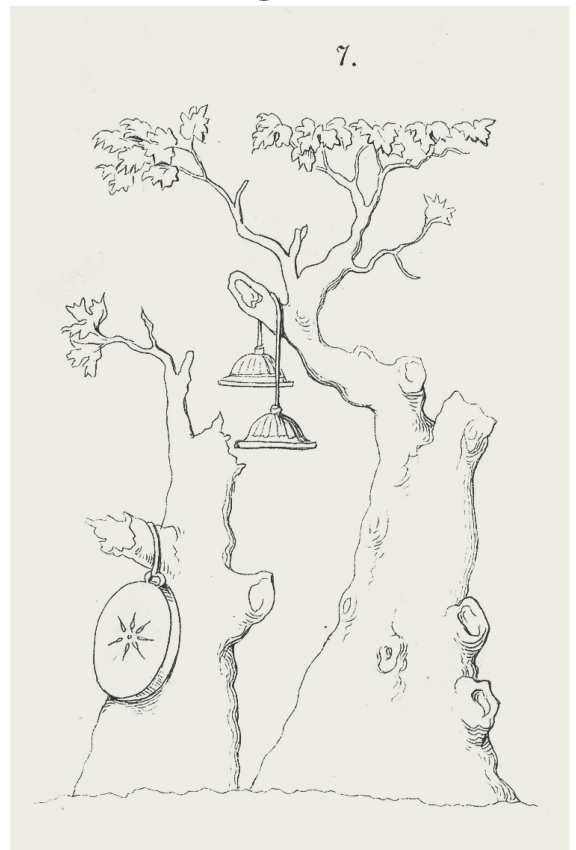
around the sacred trees, such as the curious tree sacella copied from Henri Roux's 1840 book on Herculaneum and Pompeii; or the arched tympanum with fluttering ribbons accompanying a sacred tree, a motif Bötticher had seen in the archaeological museum in Naples.¹³ Architecture here is not the self-referential translation of structure into ornament that we so often associate with Bötticher's tectonic theory, but a far more quirky, original, and imaginative way of thinking about the origins of architecture. Architecture, Bötticher hints, is a transfigured ritual, an ossified gesture, an embodied act. It does not originate in the unadorned hut. Quite the contrary: architecture originates in the act of adorning.

Architectural Metamorphosis

Bötticher's alternative foundation myth points us to his contemporary, Gottfried Semper, who also told an inverted origin story, one more complex than Bötticher's, perhaps, but with certain parallels. Semper was a well-known critic of the Vitruvian tradition, calling the story of the primitive hut a "homebred theory" and dismissing the eighteenth-century debate about the origins of architecture as a futile dispute. ¹⁴ If, for Vitruvians like Chambers, the structural reality of the hut preceded its adornment, for Semper it was precisely the opposite. The motifs of adornment were far older than architectural construction, he argues, existing long before the first hut or temple. ¹⁵ That Semper begins his magnum opus, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder Praktische Aesthetik* (1860–1863), with analyses of the string (under which he includes the wreath), the band, and the textile cover should not surprise us. These are the root forms of architecture, he claims: original motifs that are "*much older than architecture* and had already in premonumental times—even before the sacred hut, the house of God, acquired the *monumental* framework of *its* art-form—achieved their fullest and most marked development in *movable domestic furnishings*." ¹⁶

Like Bötticher, Semper broke with the Vitruvian tradition and located the origins of architecture in the act of adorning. The insight carried very different weight for their respective oeuvres, however. While Bötticher treated the ritual origins of the Greek temple as a historical episode, Semper elevated it to a theoretical principle. The complex metamorphosis of ritual action into the motifs of the technical arts and from there into architecture became a key feature in his architectural theory, articulated most fully in the concept of *Stoffwechsel* (metamorphosis). In the prolegomena to *Der Stil*, Semper outlines how the primitive human being imitated the rhythms of nature through bodily movement and how these movements were slowly reified into objects and adornment.

"Primitive human beings delight in nature's creative law as it gleams through the real world



¹⁴ Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder praktische Aesthetik*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1860/63). Published in English as *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), §145, 665. All subsequent quotations are taken from this English edition with original emphasis. However, because of the notorious difficulty in translating nineteenth-century German into modern English, I also give the original German for particularly important quotations.

¹⁵ Ibid., §130, 623: "The Formal Language of Tectonics Was Fixed before Its Use in Monumental Architecture."

¹⁶ Ibid. The original German reads, "Nun sind aber diese Wurzelformen der Tektonik viel älter als die Baukunst und bereits in vormonumentaler Zeit an dem beweglichen Hausrath zu vollster und sehr ausgesprochener Entwicklung und Ausbildung gelangt, ehe die heilige Hütte, das Gottesgehäuse, das monumentale Gezimmer seine Kunstform erhielt." Semper, *Stil* (see note 14), vol. 2, §128, 210.

figs. 3 a–c Plates from Karl Bötticher's *Der Baumkultus der Hellenen* (1856).

in the rhythmical sequence of space and time movements, in wreaths, a string of pearls, scrolls, round dances, the rhythmic tones attending to them, the beat of an oar, and so on. These are the beginnings out of which music and architecture grew." ¹⁷

Semper found a particularly important example of this metamorphosis in weaving, which he saw as simultaneously a ritual imitation of cyclical time and the technical origin of the architectural wall. "[I]t is certain," he states, "that *the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles.*" ¹⁸

Semper's metamorphic origin story comes together in section 60 of the first volume of *Der Stil* (section 62 in the second edition on which the English translation is based), discussing the masking of reality in art. Having established that the architectural wall derives from the textile enclosure, he traces both textiles and buildings back to the festive celebration:

"the outward reason for monumental undertakings has always been, and still is, the wish to commemorate or immortalize some religious or solemn act. ... [T]he first beginnings of a monumental art ... was in an analogous way suggested to its founders by similar festive celebrations. The festival apparatus — the improvised scaffold with all its splendor and frills that specifically marks the occasion for celebrating, enhances, decorates, and adorns the glorification of the feast, and is hung with tapestries, dressed with festoons and garlands, and decorated with fluttering bands and trophies — is the motive for the permanent monument." ¹⁹

The origin of architecture, for Semper, is not found in a building — real or imaginary — but in human action. **figs. 4 a–b**

The quotation above well illustrates one of the most fascinating and radical aspects of Semper's origin theory; namely, his blatant refusal to equate simplicity with originality. Just because primitive man builds primitively, Semper held, does not mean the primitive hut is original. In fact, what we consider primitive today is more likely to be a product of decay than a testimony to originality. "The most primitive tribes we know present us with an image not of primeval human condition but of its impoverishment and stultification," Semper proclaims. ²⁰ Insisting on the complexity of architectural origins, Semper considers these origins an anthropological rather than an art-historical entity.

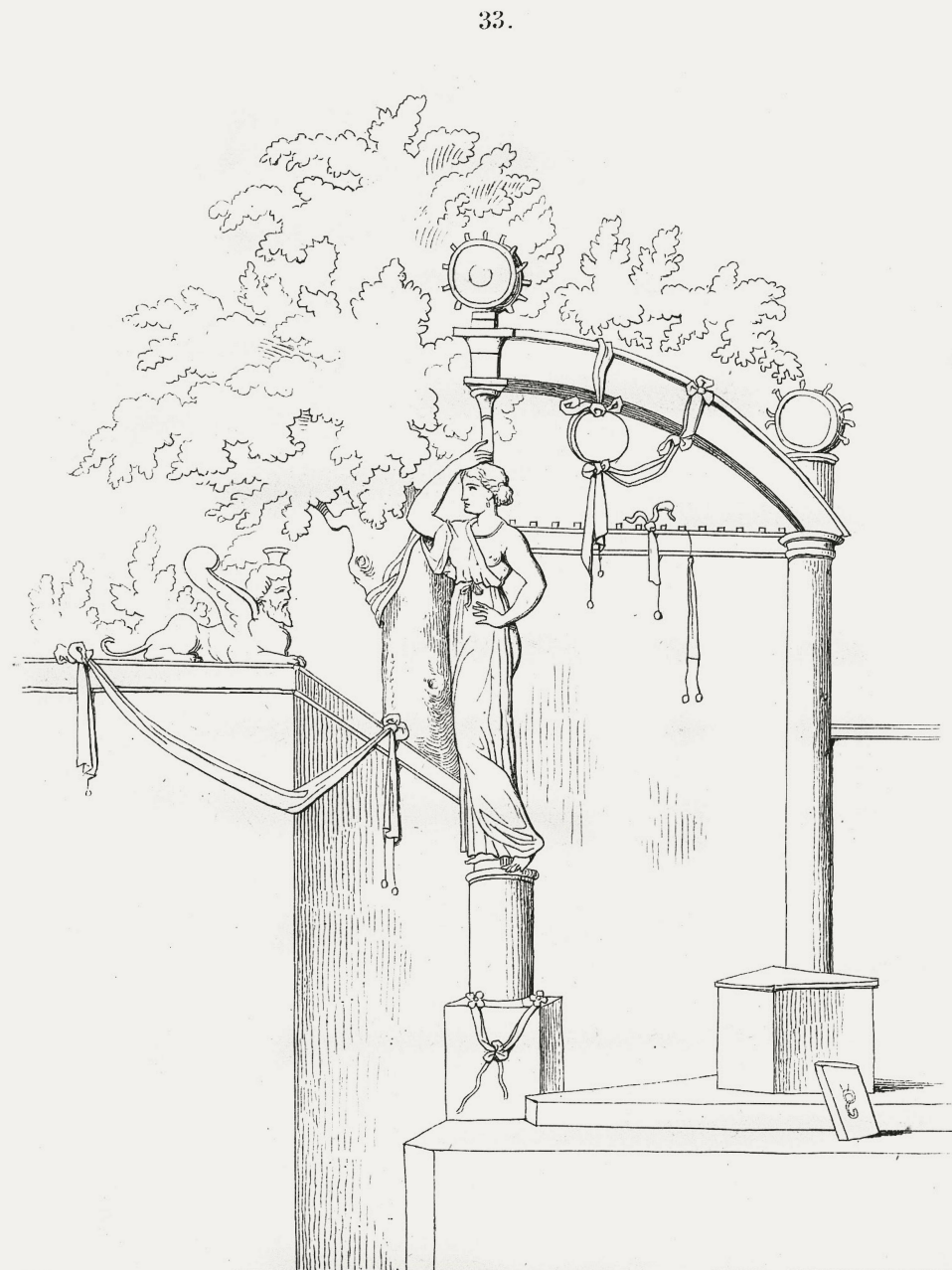
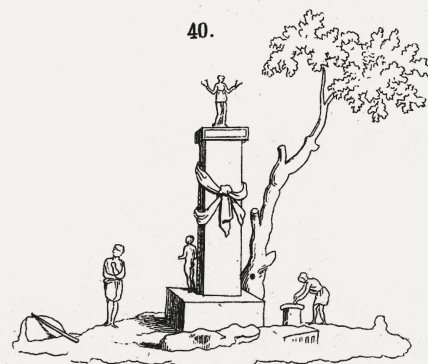
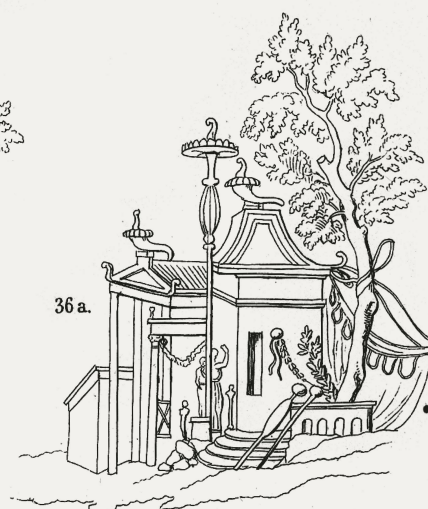
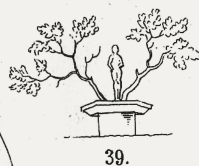
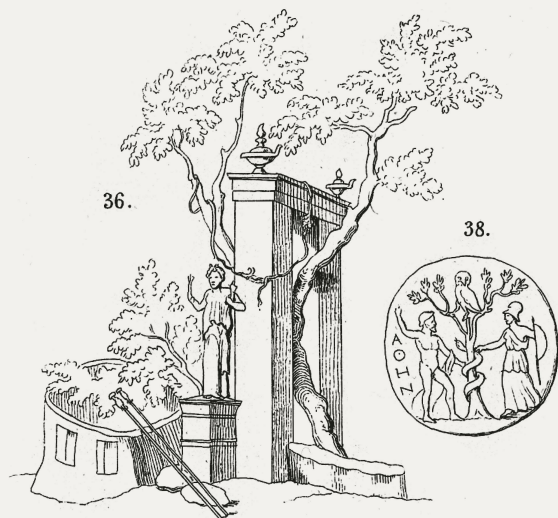
The dismantling of neoclassical origin theory in Semper's and Bötticher's writings entails some delicious paradoxes. These mid-nineteenth-century thinkers locate the origins of architecture not in Chambers' dumb and unadorned primitive hut but in highly complex, metamorphic origin motifs manifested not in stone or wood but in dance, festivals, and fluttering ribbons. In doing so, they turn the hierarchy of structure and ornament on

¹⁷ Semper, *prolegomena to Style* (see note 14), 82. The original German reads, "während es ihn schon erfreut das Gesetz der bildnerischen Natur, wie es in der Realität durch die Regelmässigkeit periodischer Raumes- und Zeitfolgen hindurchblickt, im Kranze, in der Perlen-schnur, im Schnörkel, im Reigentanz, in den rhythmischen Lauten womit der Reigentanz begleitet wird, im Takte des Ruders, u.s.w. wiederzufinden. Diesen Anfängen sind die *Musik* und die *Baukunst* entwachsen." Semper, *prolegomena to Stil* (see note 14), vol. 1, xxi–xxii.

¹⁸ Semper, *Style* (see note 14), §62, 247. The original German reads, "immer bleibt gewiss, dass die Anfänge des Bauens mit den Anfängen der Textur zusammenfallen." Semper, *Stil* (see note 14), vol. 1, §60, 227.

¹⁹ Semper, *Style* (see note 14), §62, 249. The original German reads, "indem ich hier vorläufig darauf hinweise, wie der Wille irgend einen feierlichen Akt, eine Religion ... kommemorativ zu verewigen noch immer die äussere Veranlassung zu monumentalen Unternehmungen gibt, und wie ... den ersten Begründern einer monumentalen Kunst ... der Gedanke daran durch ähnliche Festfeiern gekommen sei. Der Festapparat, das improvisierte Gerüst, mit allem Gepränge und Beiwerke welches den Anlass der Feier näher bezeichnet und die Verherrlichung des Festes erhöht geschmückt und ausgestattet, mit Teppichen verhängen, mit Reisern und Blumen bekleidet, mit Festons und Kränzen, flatternden Bändern und Tropäen geziert, diess ist das *Motiv des bleibenden Denkmals.*" Semper, *Stil* (see note 14), vol. 1, §62, 229–30.

²⁰ Semper, *Style* (see note 14), §1, 104.

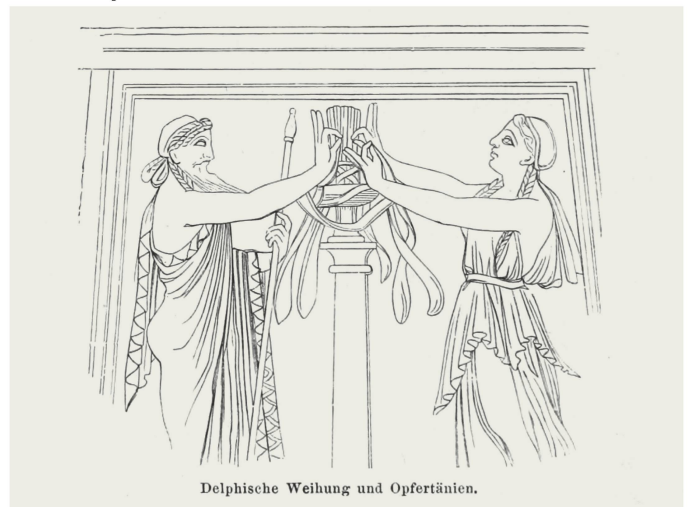


its head, proposing the wonderfully counterintuitive theses that the most flimsy decoration precedes the sturdiest wall and that ephemeral acts are more fundamental to architecture than any built structure. By locating the origin of architecture in movement, dance, and ritual action, they overturn the principle of autonomy underlying the Vitruvian hut and put forward a radically different foundation myth for architecture.

In his classic study *On Adam's House in Paradise*, Joseph Rykwert argues that foundation myths are mobilized whenever architecture is forced to defend or redefine its legitimacy. The radical reworking of architecture's origin narrative around the middle of the nineteenth century is no exception. With the authority of the classical tradition gradually waning, nineteenth-century thinkers were seeking new ways to legitimize architecture beyond the aesthetic autonomy of the Vitruvian model. A discipline that seemed to

figs. 4 a–b Plates from Gottfried Semper's *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten* (1860/63).

offer such a new point of departure was anthropology – roughly equivalent to the German *Ethnologie*, *Völkerkunde*, or even *Kulturgeschichte*. Both Semper and Bötticher were influenced by early nineteenth-century anthropologists and their studies of ritual practice;



Delphische Weihung und Opfertänzen.

²¹ See, for example, Harry Francis Mallgrave, "Gustav Klemm and Gottfried Semper: The Meeting of Ethnological and Architectural Theory," *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985): 68–79. See also Mari Hvattum, "Origins Redefined: A Tale of Pigs and Primitive Huts," in *Primitive: Original Matters in Architecture*, eds. Jo Odgers, Flora Samuel, and Adam Sharr (London: Routledge, 2006), 33–42.

²² Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 203–5. Van Eck uses the term in relation to Aby Warburg, but it seems equally fitting applied to Bötticher and Semper in the 1850s.

²³ Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur (gta), letter of invitation to the gta50 Founding Myths conference, February 28, 2017.

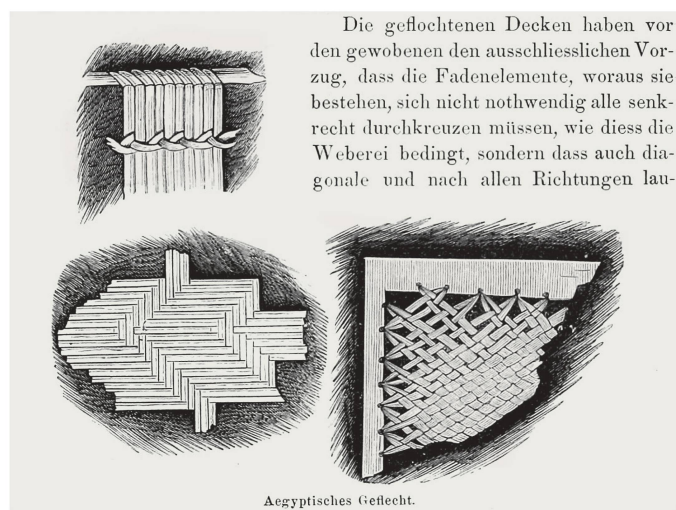
Semper's reliance on his Dresden colleague Gustav Klemm, for instance, is well known. ²¹ This "anthropological turn," as Caroline van Eck calls it, did not imply a diminished concern with aesthetics, however. ²² Semper and Bötticher were interested not in action as such but in the complex ways various forms of cultural practice (most notably, ritual) metamorphose into adornment, artifacts, and eventually into architecture. This new focus on ritual allowed them to turn the Vitruvian hierarchy on its head. Instead of essentializing the architectural structure as Chambers and other proponents of the Vitruvian tradition had done, Bötticher and Semper (though the latter more forcefully than the former) considered adornment to be architecture's essence and origin.

Rejection or Reformulation

Do origin stories still have a role to play, or are they obsolete narratives with historical interest only? ²³ The first thing to note is that foundation myths are rarely static or stable. Origin tales in architecture have always been subject to critique and deconstruction,

which is what has made them so important. And if foundation myths have, historically speaking, served as fruitful, critical tools, it is not least because they have been continually challenged, just like Bötticher reformulated the origin of the Greek temple and Semper that of architecture in general. Yet, the question remains: Do foundation myths have a mission in contemporary architectural discourse, or should we — like the French Academy of Sciences did in 1866 — give up discussions of origins altogether?

An example from the near past may start to address that question. For a generation of architects educated toward the end of the twentieth century — myself included — structural honesty was an unquestioned ideal. Structure should never be covered up; materials should never be made to look like other materials; a brick — heaven forbid! — should never be split. The essence of architecture resided in its structural core, of which the adornment



(if any were admitted) had to be a loyal representation. In the face of such a seemingly incontestable dogma, foundation myths have a radical potential. Semper and Bötticher's inverted origin story, then, provides a liberating antidote not only to the Vitruvian tradition but to the dogmatism of

late modernism. By overturning the hierarchy between structure and ornament, they open the possibility of overturning all kinds of other relationships: beginnings and ends, copies and originals, pasts and presents. Foundation myths — endlessly reformulated and deconstructed — provide ways of critically engaging with architecture, be it contemporary or historical. They offer a kind of resistance, a license to question unquestioned truths.

The notion of structural honesty is not the only concept to lend itself to Semperian deconstruction. The autonomy of architecture — another favorite preoccupation of the 1980s — is also a candidate. For those who followed Bernhard Tschumi's search for an architecture that "means nothing" or Peter Eisenman's celebration of architecture "as a representation of itself" with some skepticism, Semper and Bötticher's anthropologically founded theory of architecture provides a refreshing alternative. ²⁴ Architecture, they propose, is not a representation of itself. Rather, it is an attempt — however imperfect — at accommodating and representing human life and action in as rich a

²⁴ Bernhard Tschumi, "Parc de la Villette" (1981), in *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*, eds. Andreas Papadakis and Catherine Cook (London: Academy Editions, 1989), 175–84, here 181; Peter Eisenman, "The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End," *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 154–73, here 167.

25 "[D]en Menschen in allen seinen Verhältnissen und Beziehungen zur Aussenwelt." Gottfried Semper, "Ueber Baustile" (1869), in *Kleine Schriften von Gottfried Semper*, eds. Hans Semper and Manfred Semper (Berlin: Spemann, 1884), 397–426, here 403.

manner as possible. Semper knew that particularly well, and his origin theory brings it out lucidly. It was he, after all, who defined the subject matter of architecture as "humans, in all their relations and connections with the world."²⁵ His insight accords well with contemporary architectural concerns in which political action and ethical engagement have made a powerful comeback. And although this shift can hardly be attributed to Semper, he certainly offers a way of making sense of it.

The formulation of, dismantling of, and dispute over architecture's foundation myths produce narratives and counternarratives that are essential to the discipline. Such disputes allow one to think about things in different ways and to turn seemingly self-evident truths upside down. That is why, perhaps, Damiel's strange little run around the muddy circus site seems so relevant to the question of foundation myths in architecture. Like Semper's primordial weaver, Damiel recreates the world through rhythm and movement. He does not make the circus tent reappear, but by evoking the tent, with all its hustle and bustle, his run consoles him enough to carry on looking for Marion — just as we carry on looking for architecture.