

On the Nature of Architecture: An Ecocritical Approach to Vitruvius

Natura in Vitruvius serves as the primary basis for all good art, architecture, and engineering. *De Architectura* 3.1 gives the key passage for understanding the role of *Natura* in the *DA*. Here, Vitruvius famously explains the concept of symmetry (*symmetria*), which derives from proportion (*proportio*), which is shown to be the basis for all good architectural composition. Vitruvius notes that just as *Natura* created in the human body a perfect marriage of aesthetics and function through symmetry and proportion, so should the rules for architectural compositions be formed. But beyond determining the rules of architecture alone, Vitruvius insists that good art (*DA* 7.5), machinery (10.1.4), and even the constellations (9.1.3) imitate images and movements which occur in Nature. *Natura* also serves as the main divine force in much of the *De Architectura*, which notably lacks any significant presence of the gods as determiners of human life or the universe. In this paper, I will first establish the prevalence of *natura* in its many forms throughout Vitruvius' work. I will then show how a fuller understanding and appreciation of Nature's role in the text unifies the otherwise seemingly varied topics that Vitruvius covers into a cohesive *corpus* of architecture.

The state of Vitruvian studies is, in a word, divided. On the one hand, it remains true that the only consistent attention Vitruvius has received over the last century consists of inquiries by art historians and archaeologists, who have typically approached the *De Architectura* as a "simple" manual on architecture and mined it for references to a certain architectural style or element of interest to them. On the other hand, there has been an increasing trend in recent years in scholarship that recognizes and appreciates the literariness of Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. The monographs of McEwen (2003), Nichols (2017), and most recently Oksanish (2019), all of

which advocate for the literariness of the *De Architectura* in differing ways, stand as testament to this.

As a result of this inconsistent treatment by scholars, the state of Vitruvian studies is, at best, disjointed and filled with scholarship that has extremely differing opinions of and appreciation for Vitruvius. In the introduction to the 2016 *Arethusa* volume dedicated to Vitruvius, Formisano and Cuomo claim that “it is no longer necessary to assert [Vitruvius’] literariness” (Formisano and Cuomo 2016: 122). While I think this is getting closer to the truth, and while their volume of articles certainly stands in defense of that statement, there remains a divide in the scholarship. It was true for a long time that scholars tended to only treat seriously the technical aspects of Vitruvius, but many who now promote the literariness of Vitruvius do so at the expense of the technical basis of his work. Relatively few have been able to successfully highlight and treat both, though the field is, and should be, moving in that direction.

Vitruvius’ treatment of nature in the *De Architectura* has, I believe, been one victim of this divided scholarship. Despite its centrality to the work as a whole, little dedicated attention has been paid to the important role that nature (and Nature) plays throughout Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*. *Natura* serves as both the natural environment and the primary divinity of the *De Architectura*. However, while *Natura*, qua divinity, often appears in the prefaces to each book (i.e. the more “literary” portions of the text), *natura* and concerns related to the natural environment more often appear in the more technical portions of the work. When taken together, I argue that what emerges from the text is not only an almost constant obsession with how the built environment should interact with nature, but also a central theme that connects even the most seemingly disconnected aspects of the *De Architectura*: the built environment’s role in negotiating a healthy relationship between humankind and nature.

Bibliography

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