

Joseph Michael Gandy and the Drawing of the Unfinished Consols Transfer Office

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Abstract

In 1799, Joseph Michael Gandy made a drawing of a hall of the Bank of England, the Consols Transfer Office, which John Soane had designed between 1797 and 1799. In it, a watercolour, the hall appeared unfinished, without the final stucco, or the carpentry of the holes, or the lantern of the dome and without laying the paving slabs. It might initially look like one of the drawings that Soane used to commission his assistants to follow the progress of the works, although it had more of the look of a Roman antiquity like those Giovanni Battista Piranesi showed in his engravings. The drawing showed only a fragment of the hall, centred on the central space under the dome and the one that surrounds it. Its objective was not to show what the hall was like but the aesthetic qualities of its unfinished appearance, derived from the simple geometric design of the forms, the chromatic contrast between the materials, the graphic contrast of the surfaces and the mysterious lighting. An operation that Gandy carried out based on a theatrical approach that sought to emotionally involve the observer and motivate him to understand the final objective of the drawing, which this did not really show. The purpose of this article is to understand this drawing, the reason that justifies its condition and the way in which Gandy managed to transmit its content.

Keywords: Joseph Michael Gandy, John Soane, Consols Transfer Office, fragment, iluminación misteriosa.

Introduction

In the field of architecture, drawings have to be understood, since the architect uses them to think, know, project and, also, to represent his proposals, transmit the reasons that justify them or the ideas contained in them, to himself or to the others. This function turns this drawing into a language that, as such, is constructed with codes and conventions that, perfected in time by practice, guarantee that its content is transmitted and understood correctly. However, and for this reason, the communication capacity of these drawings is limited: it is effective when it conforms to these codes, but relative when it intends to solve problems not previously solved and, therefore, not codified. A building, no matter how complex it may be, can be formally described by means of plans, sections, elevations or another of

the usual representation conventions. But understand the reason that justifies the changes in the photomontages of the project for Friedrichstrasse, of Mies van der Rohe, and that of the final charcoal drawing is an uncertain operation, which requires an interpretation that will not be sure or complete. The same thing happens with other architects whose drawings we admire, such as Palladio or Otto Wagner. We admire them because, despite the difficulty of the effort, they make what they say is understood, although it seems that it is always possible to understand them better. They are drawings that require a certain effort from the reader and, therefore, must be able to attract their attention, so that he interpret that their apparent contradictions, ambiguities, unknowns or opacities are not errors or the



Fig. 1. J. M. Gandy, *The Consols Transfer Office unfinished* [Abramson 1999, p. 236].

result of incapacity, but a sign that there is a content to decipher. Understanding them requires knowing the subject they expose, the conditions in which it take place and its purpose, if possible. This ability has led to value the drawing as the most extraordinary means that the architect has had to communicate. One of these is the one that, in 1799, did Joseph Michael Gandy of the Consols Transfer Office of the Bank of England, designed by the architect John Soane [1] (fig. 1). The objective of this article is to analyse this drawing to understand its content, its intention and the way in which Gandy constructed it.

Joseph Michael Gandy (1771-1843) was an architect with an admirable graphic production, which still forces us to reflect on his drawings and to discover what they seem to hide. Brian Lukacher described him as a visionary architect in 2006 [Lukacher 2006] incorporating him into the wake of influence of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, with whom he shared an interest in an architecture of the fantastic that he did not intend to be built. He was an architect who combined the drama of Piranesi with the sensitivity of the landscape aesthetics of the English watercolourists [Lukacher 2006, p. 52]. John Summerson valued him as the “English Piranesi” and as an architect who represented the spirit of 19th century England, reflecting the poetics of William Wordsworth, Walter Scott or Samuel Taylor Coleridge [Summerson 1998, pp. 121, 134]. Gandy returned from his tour through Italy in 1797 and immediately began working in John Soane’s office as his chief perspectivist. He began in 1798 and left it in 1809, to establish himself on his own, but the professional relationship with Soane remained, as he continued to commission him drawings of his works, both to finish convincing the clients and for the annual exhibitions at the Royal Academy. Soane valued his graphic skills and Gandy knew how to give the image that Soane’s works needed. Possibly, it was the imagination that Gandy applied in his architectural fantasies that allowed him to see the hidden magic of Soane’s projects, which his technical ability knew how to transmit. It has even been suggested whether it was not Gandy’s vision influenced Soane’s ow. [Darley 1999, p. 146].

The drawing

Joseph Michael Gandy made this drawing in 1799, when he was working in Soane’s office. It shows the Consols Transfer Office unfinished, with the walls not covered



Fig. 2. S. J. Soane (office), *The Consols Transfer Office under construction* [Sir John Soane’s Museum, Ref. SM 63].

Fig. 3. J.M. Gandy, *The Consols Transfer Office finished* [Abramson 1999, p. 237].

with stucco, the pavement slabs without laying, nor the enclosures in the window openings, nor the oculus of the dome and without the decoration that it would finally have. With this aspect, it could be one of the drawings that Soane commissioned the students of his office to follow and document the development of the works. It was an activity that allowed students to know the processes, mechanisms and activity of construction, acquire facility and freedom in drawing and “discover many effects of light and shade which only a close observation [...] can give” and “observe and treasure up in his mind a variety of forms and ideas that the same buildings when finished would not convey” [2].

However, although it is evident that the work is not finished, it does not seem that it is under construction either. There are no evidences that suggest a construction activity in progress, as occurs in other drawings of this type, even of this same space [3] (fig. 2). Except for the lack of the pavement, which allows to shows the metal braces that join the bases of the pillars, and a ladder that is supported on the wall outside the hall, in the background, it lacks what does appear in the drawings of this type, such as scaffolding, centring, trestles or materials stockpiling. Drawings of the state that the hall would have once finished are preserved, one of them by Gandy himself [4] (fig. 3). By comparing them, it is possible to realise to what extent the drawing shows what the final decoration was going to hide. It was a different beauty derived from the simple geometric layout of the forms, from the chromatic contrast between the materials of the supporting structure, basically brick and stone, and from the graphic contrast derived from the distribution of the brick and the *terracotta* pieces [5].

As Soane would explain, the “forms and ideas that the same buildings when finished would not convey”, forms of which, only by drawing them with their effects of light, shade and colour, it was possible to preserve and transmit the combative capacity they contained.

The ambiguity of the drawing

The bare appearance of the hall and some non-casual clues in the drawing suggest the image of Roman antiquity from the Piranesi prints. On the one hand, the metal braces under the pavement and the hollow cones of the dome that, by showing them, emulate Piranesi when he

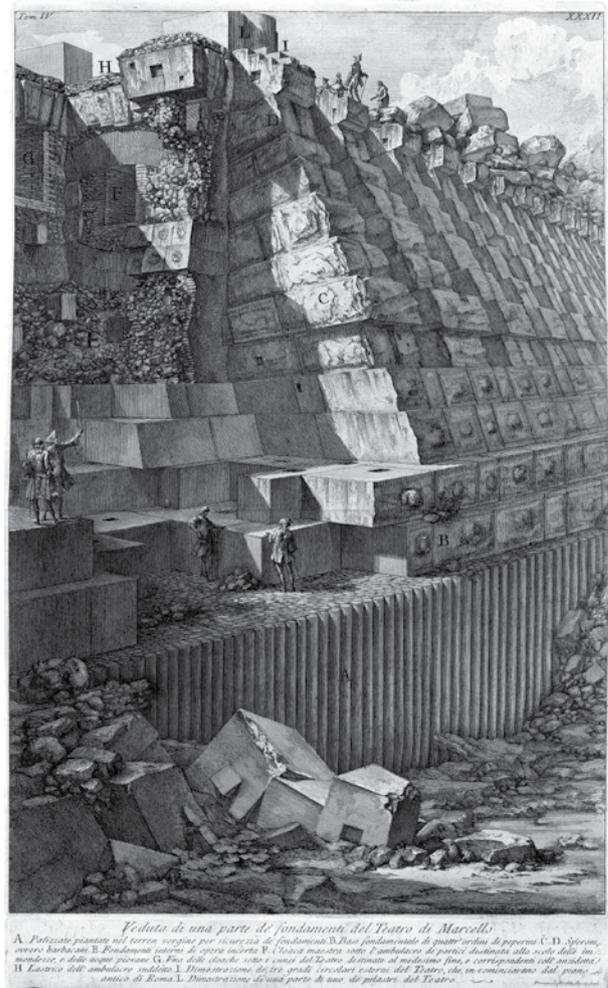


Fig. 3. J.M. Gandy, *The Consols Transfer Office finished* [Abramson 1999, p. 237].

highlighted the structural expertise of Roman buildings [6] (fig. 4). On the other, the staircase that is supported on the outer wall, recalls the one that Francesco Piranesi put inside the Pantheon [7] (fig. 5). Also recalls the ones used by the participants of the Grand Tour to climb the Roman monuments, to measure and draw them, which allows to deduce that this is a building with a category similar to those of Rome [8]. Finally, Eva Schumann-Bacia, in her book *John Soane and the Bank of England* [1991, p. 70], interprets that the gaps in the walls, together with the glassless window openings and the atmospheric incidence of light, create the image of an ancient ruin [9] (fig. 6). Perhaps the drawing does not really want to suggest the image of a ruin when compared to the one Gandy had made of the Rotunda a year earlier, in a perspective similar to those of the younger Piranesi [10] (fig. 7). This is a romantic image of the Rotunda in ruins, among rubble and partially invaded by vegetation that, in an imaginary future, had to be equated with buildings like those of Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli. Our image of the Consol Transfer Office is not of this type, but it shares its ambiguity and its mystery. It is not a ruin, nor a building under construction, but neither a *non finito* that its author could not or did not know how to finish. Rather it is a work stopped before finishing, suspended in time, in silence, in a process that inevitably will not be able to stop: an image that could also be interpreted as the "sublime frisson of temporal doom consoled by architectural immortality" [Abramson 1999, p. 231] [11].

On the other hand, the image shows the influence of the *Carceri* of Giovanni Battista Piranesi [Piranesi 1761, plate VI] (fig. 8). It is also the incomplete image of a space that exceeds the limits of drawing, a complex space that cannot be fully encompassed or understood. As in them, the dark sides frame the image and the light leads the reading towards the upper part of the drawing, towards the hollow of the dome that connects the interior with infinity. It is a perspective *per angolo*, with a theatrical conception whose objective is not that the shape of the space was understood but to convey its immeasurable, sublime and tragic character. But in addition, in its rudeness, the diversity of gaps, vaults and surfaces, the abruptness of transitions, and its ability to surprise and evoke, it shares the aesthetic of the picturesque that Uvedale Price defended [1796, p. 61] and perhaps that of Richard Payne Knight [12]. All these factors place the drawing within the cultural contemporaneity of Gandy.



Fig. 5. F. Piranesi, Interior del Pantheon [1768].



Fig. 6. Piranesi, Gallery of Statues at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli [1768].

The reason for the drawing

The decision to draw the hall in this state could be influenced by the disclosure of a defamatory pamphlet by an anonymous author, which circulated in London in 1796, was read in the Architects' Club and ended up being published in the *Observer*. It was a satirical poem that ridiculed the style of Soane used in the Stock Office of the same bank, built between 1791 and 1793. A style that the libel described as "barbarian" and "unnatural", for its abstraction and simplification of the classical orders, accusing him of having eliminated its figurative coherence and its tectonic logic. It was a style of free proportions, in which symbolic orders reduced to vertical strips and ornate bands replaced pilasters and entablatures (Summerson 1989, p. 85). A style of abstract ornaments, taut surfaces, dramatic lighting, and anti-classical fragmentation, which sought to overcome the eclectic choice of styles of the time [Abramson 2005, p. 193], opposed to the artisanal, imitative and predictable tradition of the construction field [Hanson 2003, p. 50].

The criticism was offensive to Soane, because the hall had been the result of an intense elaboration that completely defined his style, a work that would be key in his career and that was to influence his later projects [Summerson 1989, p. 87]. In 1799, Soane sued the editor of the *Observer* for the publication, but lost the trial [Abramson 1999, p. 218]. Days before the sentencing Gandy made this drawing [13], although it was not shown to the public until 1815, in the reading of Lecture XII that Soane gave at the Royal Academy. It was not the drawing of the Stock Office, which had received the injuries, but the one of the Consols that had just been built, but his motivation affected both. Soane had accepted to design the Consols with a more conventional and orthodox treatment of the orders and decoration [14], increasing the curvature of the arches and the height of the dome and making the Consols the most Roman of the bank's halls [Schumann-Bacia 1991, p. 73]. Following the process of abstraction in which Soane had simplified the design of the orders, reducing it to a simple graphic issue, in the drawing Gandy eliminated the decoration that had centred the object of criticism, to bring to light the classical qualities that the critics had been unable to recognize. The drawing does not seem to have had any other function than to illustrate this reasoning, nor another recipient than its authors, perhaps, as a personal reaction faced the foreseeable outcome.



Fig. 7. J.M. Gandy, *The Rotunda in ruins* [Abramson 1999, p. 231].

The Consols Transfer Office

The Consols Transfer Office continued a compact group of four halls built around the Rotunda, following the model of the first of them, the Bank Stock Office [15] (fig. 9). The model, with small differences in each case, was a rectangular plan with four central pillars that defined a square in which a dome was located and that extended to the perimeter walls, with barrel vaults, in the short sections, and groin vaults, in the lengths, allowing to open lighting holes in the perimeter [16]. Located outside this compact group, the composition axes of the Consols did not coincide with those of these halls, and its access, despite continuing the axis of the Four Per Cent Office, was made by a corner of the hall, in opposite position to the door that is seen on the left of the drawing, for an inconsequential place. An access that, by altering the regularity of the previous halls, prevented seeing the dome until it had passed one of the central pillars, surprising the user.

Point of view and framing

If the three previous drawings of the hall are compared (figs. 1-3), in the last two, the two opposite planes of the central hall can be seen, because the point of view has been located

within it. They are drawings that try to be understood how the hall is, and as usual, they orient the perspective perpendicularly to the background plane. On the other hand, in ours, Gandy only shows one of the sides of this hall, because he places the point of view outside the central nave, behind one of the pillars of the dome, which appears in shadow and limits the scene by the right. In reality, the perspective point of view is not as close to the pillar as it seems but further back, geometrically outside the hall [17] (fig. 10). From this point of view, the perspective could have been similar to the one Gandy had made a year earlier from the Stock Office [18] (fig. 11), which showed almost the entire hall. Initiated in the same way, Gandy renounced showing the entire hall and opted for a reduced framing that concentrated interest in the space under the dome, the vaulted extensions and the large openings that the structure allowed (fig. 12). By reducing the framing, increased the effect of the chromatic contrast of the stone pillars, achieved a better reproduction of the graphic contrasts of the ceramic. It also improved the effect of natural lighting: a light not "too bright" and with "uniform shadows" [19], from which the provenance is not seen and which could almost arise from the materials themselves. A light that the materials reflect and that, as William Hazlitt said, is the "light of poetry" that, while it shows us the object, throws a sparkling radiance on all around it that "reveals to us, as with a flash of lightning, the inmost recesses of thought, and penetrates our whole being" [20]. It was the "mysterious light" that Soane claimed in architecture to define character; as he defended in his Royal Academy lectures [21].

Gandy opted for a theatrical approach, which showed the image that an observer would have when entering the hall, overcoming the dark pillar and surprised by the light of the space under the dome. A theatricality that is common in other Gandy compositions: evident in the theatrical curtains that frame the perspectives of the Pitzhanger Manor breakfast room and library, the Cricket Lodge library or in the lighting and scenery of the watercolour in which Soane appears among his buildings built between 1780 and 1815 [22]. The drawing seems to convey the emotion at the discovery of something unexpected, something that was hidden, a mystery, as a resource to claim from the observer's imagination to complete what the drawing does not explicitly show [23]. Inevitably, the operation reduces the ability of the drawing to show what the hall is like, although only relatively, since it is the half of a symmetrical space and also it is shown the half of each arch. It shares with it the laconic form of the treatises



Fig. 8. G.B. Piranesi, *Carceri* [1750, Lam. VI].

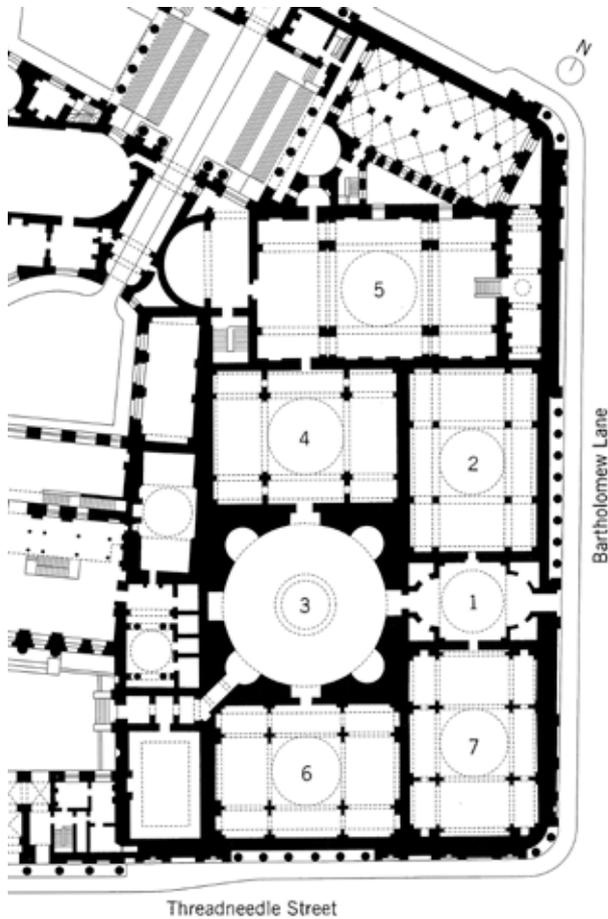


Fig. 9. Plan of the Bank of England, East fragment. Codes: 1, Bartholomew Lane Vestibule; 2, Bank Stock Office; 3, Rotunda; 4, Four Per Cent Office; 5, Consols Transfer Office; 6, Old Four Per Cent Office; 7, New Four Per Cent Office [Abramson 1999, p. 213, modified].

of Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola [24] or Andrea Palladio [25], also applied by the engravers of Roman architecture. It was the same reasoning that Gandy would go so far as to expose to Soane, in 1803, when he was drawing the interior of the Cricket Lodge library, that "pictures of Architecture may avoid the repetition of the parts of a uniform design, so that it informs the spectator of the Architect's whole intent" [26].

The persuasion of a fragment

In this approach, possibly Gandy shared what was stated by Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, in *Le Génie de l'Architecture*, about the importance of capturing the observer's attention from the first moment: "the first glimpse must hold us spellbound; the details, the masses of the decoration, the profiles, the play of light, all conduce to this same end" [Le Camus de Mézières 1780, p. 64] [27]. This here translates into the selection of a characteristic fragment capable of conditioning the perception of the observer, so that it orients his reasoning to come to identify the global idea: a meaning that the observer has to discover because the drawing only provides the means, but does not explicitly expose it.

In our case, the observer notices that the drawing shows the hall in a state that is not real or definitive, and this draws his attention. We know that it is a fragment of the Consols Transfer Office although, stripped of its final decoration, it is difficult to recognize and could be understood as a space without a name. It is an autonomous fragment, completely detached from whole of which it is part, but whose objective, paradoxically, is to represent it in order to understand it [28]. A fragment shows the hall converted into a Roman antiquity that, stripped of moral connotations, is perceived as an aesthetic experience that is timeless. The apparent autonomy of the fragment, its instability and the refusal to show the entire hall, allow it to generate its own context and its own reasoning: perhaps, the experimental proposal of a new aesthetic that does not consist of the arbitrary copy of decorative styles, but in the understanding of creative processes. A fragment that contains a polemical intention, an experience that, instead of suggesting nostalgia for an admirable but irretrievably lost past, becomes the proposal of a new aesthetic language, based on the purity of the form and qualities of the materials. Unlike Piranesi, Gandy's drawing does not start from nostalgia but from responsibility for an activity in the present and the discovery of a new language.

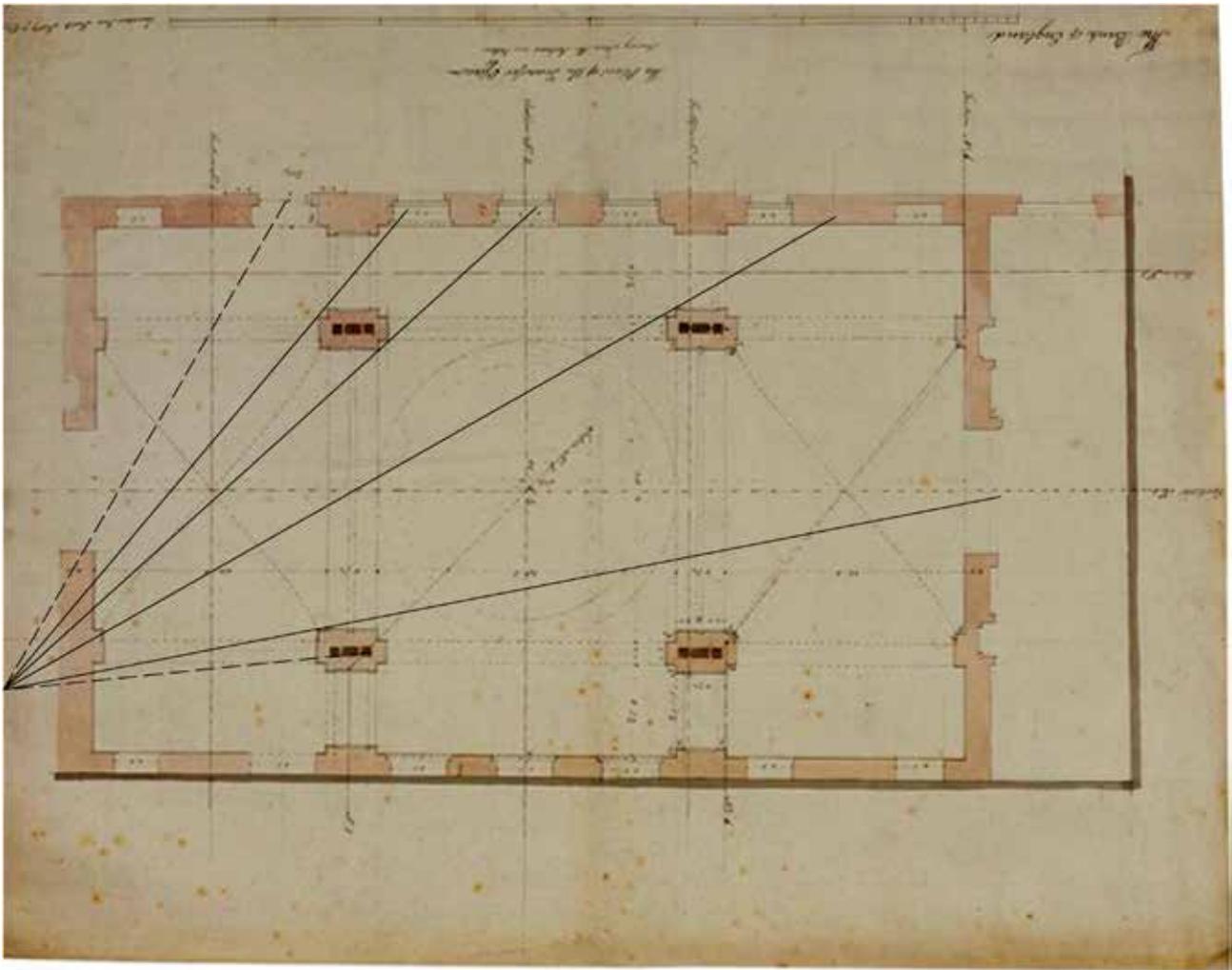


Fig. 10. Approximate restitution of the perspective point of view of the drawing, on the floor plan of the Consols Transfer Office [from: Sir John Soane's Museum, (9) volume 74/52].



Fig. 11. J.M. Gandy, *The Stock Office* [Abramson 1999, p. 227].

Fig. 12. J.M. Gandy, *The Stock Office*, central fragment [from: Abramson 1999, p. 227].

Conclusion

The communication ability of drawings is limited when dealing with non-coded subjects. For this reason, the draughtsman avoids reaching the end and chooses to suggest it, sharing resources of poetic language, in which the true meaning of the poem is the one that the poet omits [29]. A part that the draughtsman silences, either due to the inability of graphic language or due to the need for this poetic communication. This silence is the conclusion that the reader has to complete and that constitutes the true key to what John Dewey [1934] defined as the artistic experience. This indeterminacy relativizes the conclusion and maintains the drawing as a living organism that has not yet reached its end.

Gandy apparently uses the image of antiquity as a resource to activate a thought that goes beyond Soane's defence. Thus takes advantage of the suggestion ability of the ruins and the engravings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Regarding the ruins, said Thomas Whately [1777, pp. 130, 131] that the "imperfection and obscurity are their properties; and to carry the imagination to something greater than is seen, their effect. [...] All remains excite an enquiry into the former state of the edifice, and [...] suggest ideas which would not arise from the buildings, if entire". Gandy works with this ability of suggestion in his defense of Soane, who also shared the idea that the ruins "must tell their own story" and "it is by the association of ideas that excite the mind that we feel interested" [Watkin 1996, **Lecture X**, p. 626].

Regarding Piranesi's "strategy of fragments", said Dalibor Vesely [2006, p. 47] that "the ruins are seen as a source of inspiration for modern design". An idea similar to that proposed by Pierre Gross [2010, p. 25] about Palladio's interest in Roman architecture and its representation, that was to find again "the starting point of a reflection that should lead him [...] to rediscover the passage of the Ancients and to rebuild [...] the overall result they had reached".

In the drawing of the Consols Transfer Office, Gandy exposes a mystery that leaves unsolved, in an indeterminacy that constitutes its main attraction. The interpretation to which the reader arrives will be questionable, but it will allow to intuit the way in which the communication is produced and the true capacity of the graphic language. For us, perhaps, the interest of drawing is not so much the final understanding of the subject exposed as to come to understand the subtlety of its construction.

Notes

- [1] The drawing is kept in London, in the John Soane's Museum [Ref. SM 11/6/6], measures 720 x 1018 mm, is signed by Gandy, dated 4/29/1799, and has been published in Abramson 1999, p. 236. John Soane (1753-1837) was the architect of the Bank of England between 1788 and 1833, and designed the Consols Transfer Office between 1797 and 1799. The hall was demolished in 1915, along with other parts of the building.
- [2] John Soane, in Lecture XII, as a professor at the Royal Academy (12/3/1815, 21/3/1833, 12/2/1835) [Watkin, 1996, p. 657-658].
- [3] Drawing of this hall under construction, not signed by Gandy and dated October 1798, kept in London in the John Soane's Museum [Ref. SM 63], and published in Woodward, 1995, p. 10.
- [4] Drawing by J.M. Gandy, with figures by Antonio van Assen, from 1799, preserved in London, in the John Soane's Museum [Ref. SM 11/4/3], and published in Richardson-Stevens, 1999, p. 237.
- [5] Soane used terracotta hollow cones in the construction of the vaults and the cupola, which in the drawing are distinguished from brick by their larger size and their circular section.
- [6] An information that, in many cases, was difficult to verify. The image is the "Veduta di una parte de' fondamenti del Teatro di Marcello", [Piranesi 1756, vol. IV, pl. XXXII].
- [7] "Veduta interna del Panteon", signed by Caval. Piranesi F[rancesco]: Piranesi 1768.
- [8] Perhaps the staircase of the engraving and the rules that appear on both sides were also intended to point out the detailed study that Francesco Piranesi made of the building: Focillon 1918, p. 131.
- [9] "Rovine d'una Galleria di Statue nella Villa Adriana a Tivoli", Piranesi, *Vedute di Roma*, published in 1770.
- [10] Drawn in 1798 and exhibited in 1832, at the Royal Academy, under the title "Architectural Ruins, a vision." It is preserved in the Sir John Soane Museum, (29) P127, and has been published in Richardson and Stevens, 1999, cat. 133.
- [11] Daniel Abramson's expression really refers to the drawing of the Rotunda.
- [12] Richard Payne Knight, who, in 1777, valued the rudeness of the Paestum ruins as an artful negligence; Claudia Stumpf, ed., 1986. *Richard Payne Knight: Expedition into Sicily*, London: British Museum Press, p. 136.
- [13] The drawing was made on April 29 and the sentence is May 18 [Hyde, 2005, p. 160].
- [14] Sir John Soane's Museum, collections.soane.org/SCHEME643 1/3.
- [15] Modified fragment of the Bank of England plant, published in Abramson p. 213. Códigos: 1. Bartholomew Lane Vestibule; 2. Bank Stock Office (1791-1793); 3. Rotunda (1794-1795); 4. Four Per Cent Office (1793-1797); 5. Consols Transfer Office (1797-1799); 6. Old Four Per Cent Office (1798-1799); 7. New Four Per Cent Office (1818-1823).
- [16] The structure of this hall is often related to that of the Massenzio basilica, due to the similarity of its plan. As for the situation of the dome in the center of the hall, Soane was also able to take into account the structure of the church of San Carlo ai Catinari, in Rome, which he was able to know and which was published in de Rossi, D. (ed.). (1721). *Studio d'Architettura Civile*. Roma: D. Rossi, vol.III, 24, of which Soane owned a copy.
- [17] Approximate deduction of the point of view situation as of the plan of the project of the hall that is conserved in London, Sir John Soane's Museum, Ref. SM (9) vol. 74/52.
- [18] The drawing is preserved in London, in the John Soane's Museum (Ref. SM 11/4/1), is signed by Gandy, dated 7/6/1798, and has been published in Abramson, 1999, p. 227.
- [19] As advised Le Camus de Mézières [1780, p. 67].
- [20] William Hazlitt, *On Poetry in General*; tal como aparece en Zeitlin 1913 [p. 82].
- [21] Lecture VI, in 1832 [Watkin, 1996, p. 598].
- [22] Watercolour of Michael Gandy, *Selection of public and private buildings of Sir John Soane*, which was exhibited in 1818 at the Royal Academy.
- [23] On the subject of theatricality in Gandy's drawings it is worth consulting the article by Furjan, H. (1983). Sir John Soane's Spectacular Theatre. In *AA files*, 47, pp. 12-22.
- [24] In the introduction "A i lettori", to his Regola [1562], Vignola warned readers that he was not going to repeat the concepts or the names of the parts: "i membri quali sono comuni à più ordini, doppo che saranno notati una volta sola nel primo ordine che occorrerà, non se ne farà più mentione nelli altri". This moderation was also applied in the elevation of some orders, of which he only showed half, or in their plants, in which he managed to condense different levels into a single projection.
- [25] Palladio's case is perhaps more evident, since many of the plates in the *Quarto libro* only show half an elevation or a section.
- [26] Letter from Gandy to Soane, January 29, 1803, published in Bolton 1927, p. 124.
- [27] Le Camus's reasoning refers to architecture, although it could also be applied to drawing.
- [28] In fact, the architect's drawing is always a separate image of the building in order to represent it, eliminating the confusion that the experience contains.
- [29] According to Heidegger's idea that the true meaning of a poem remains unspoken and must be understood; what finally cannot be said is the hidden meaning of the poet's work [Harries 1976, p. 497].

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