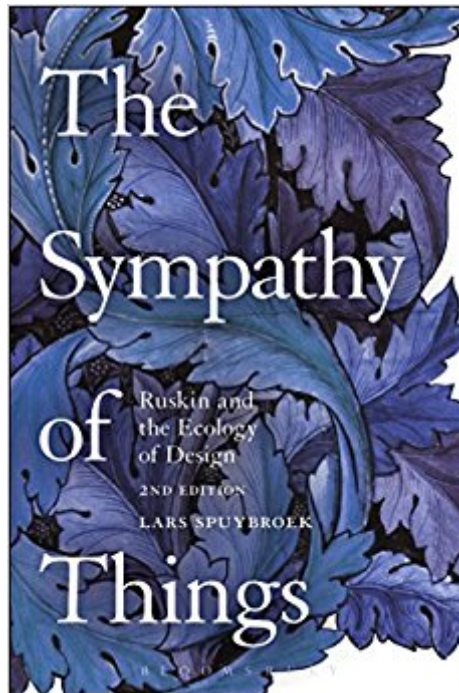




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# The Sympathy Of Things: Ruskin And The Ecology Of Design



## Synopsis

'If there is one thing we can learn from John Ruskin, it is that each age must find its own way to beauty' writes Lars Spuybroek in *The Sympathy of Things*, his ground-breaking work which proposes a radical new aesthetics for the digital era. Spuybroek argues that we must 'undo' the twentieth century and learn to understand the aesthetic insights of the nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin, from which he distils pointers for the contemporary age. Linking philosophy, design, and the digital, with art history, architecture, and craft, Spuybroek explores the romantic notion of 'sympathy', a core concept in Ruskin's aesthetics, re-evaluating it as the driving force of the twenty-first century aesthetic experience. For Ruskin, beauty always comprises variation, imperfection and fragility, three concepts that wholly disappeared from our mindsets during the twentieth century, but which Spuybroek argues to be central to contemporary aesthetics and design. Revised throughout, and a new foreword by philosopher Brian Massumi, this is a new edition of a seminal work which has drawn praise from fields as diverse as digital architecture and speculative realism, and will continue to be influential as it wrests Ruskin's ideas out of the Victorian era and reconstructs them for the modern age.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In this remarkable study, Spuybroek treats us to an astonishingly fresh upgrade of John Ruskin, who ends up no longer inhabiting an antique past but talks to us directly. Spuybroek shows how Ruskin's aesthetic actually works, cutting through clouds of vagueness to get at a wonderfully algorithmic, procedural tactics with limpid clarity. But there's much more: something like a

distinctive ontology emerges when we study Ruskin this way. This ontology radically decenters the human from its meaning-making position in the cosmos, allowing all kinds of other entities to show up without the usual visas and interrogations. What results is truly an ecology of things, making Ruskin sharply relevant for our age." -- Tim Morton, Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English, Rice University

John Ruskin did not like machines. He thought that mechanical machines make everything look the same. Lars Spuybroek, a protagonist of the digital turn in architecture, and a scholar, shows that today's digital tools vindicate John Ruskin's plea for the animation of artisan making. This book offers an anticipation of our technological future, as well as an understanding of our pre-mechanical past." -- Mario Carpo, Reyner Banham Professor of Architectural History and Theory, The Bartlett, UCL

"The Sympathy of Things is an astonishing and visionary work. I have never before come across a book so brimming with insight, written with such feeling, and so keenly in touch with life. Ostensibly a meditation on the oeuvre of John Ruskin, what Lars Spuybroek offers us is an intoxicating meditation on art, architecture and design that soars above the ponderous deadweight of thing-theory to luxuriate in the unruly and exuberant proliferation of the things themselves." -- Tim Ingold, Professor and Chair of Social Anthropology, University of Aberdeen

"Spuybroek offers us a fascinating exploration of the sympathetic forces traversing, infusing, composing, and affecting us and other bodies. This wondrous book will change the way you experience the world and shake up established notions of causality, agency, and 'life.'" -- Jane Bennett, Professor of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University

"A must for digitized Ruskinites everywhere" -- Bruce Sterling, WIRED Magazine

"We are living through a change in paradigm, in the age of the flexible machine, where the concepts of matter, spirituality and design are under renegotiation and we need such fearless thought to jolt complacency. If Spuybroek, like Ruskin, does not shake your design and aesthetic concepts, you haven't understood him." -- Charles Jencks, author of *The New Paradigm in Architecture* and *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe*

"The Sympathy of Things is a stirring call to action; an amazing reconstruction of the ideas of the Victorian sage John Ruskin; and, above all, a visionary look at the inner life of things. Lars Spuybroek makes the case that aesthetics is first philosophy, and proposes a radical new aesthetics for the digital age." -- Steven Shavero, DeRoy Professor of English at Wayne State University, and author of *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics*

"... the term 'brilliant' is often misused in reviews, but the opening chapter on 'the digital nature of gothic' is truly scintillating ..."

Architectural Research Quarterly

"This is a dazzling, provocative, baffling, and sometimes vexing manifesto. The Sympathy of Things is an unforgettable book."

Carlyle Studies Annual

"...

hundreds of threads that make an astonishingly rich tapestry ... Ruskin has at last found an interpreter with the breadth of learning and a poetic imagination to make his perceptions relevant to our own day. *Architectural Review* "... exhilarating to watch elements of Ruskin's thought being taken on ... The Sympathy of Things is energetic, well written and full of examples. *Times Literary Supplement*

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Every line text of this book is a door opening to the architectural world, the digital machinery, the gothic era and its legacy. Great book!

Lars Spuybroek has written a highly theoretical book aimed at helping us trace our way back to a sympathy with "the beautiful," an ideal championed by John Ruskin (1819-1900). Spuybroek claims that we've lost our connection to beauty because of a "hundred-year obsession with fracture and fragment." His main target is Modernism, the so-called style to end all styles. The author is extremely well-read, bold in thought, and confident in expression, qualities which serve him well in tackling such a formidable subject. Many of his statements in the book are provocative. For example, in order to find our way back to beauty "We must resort to a radical solution: a full return to decoration. Artists have no way to structure their sympathy anymore" (p. 97); "In the Gothic, work, activity, and craft were taking place at the design stage, rather than only at the stage of execution" (p. 22). He suggests that we need to re-engage with a particular epoch: "In the Gothic, ornament acts like structure and structure acts like ornament" (p. 27). He attempts to bring Ruskin's insights about the

Gothic (and subsequently many other theorists) insights about many other things) forward. As for how these insights from the age of stone cathedrals can be applied in the age of iPhones, he suggests an unusual agent: "A computer is handicraft taking place at the level of drawing and design" (p. 34). The book is jammed with thoughts, many of them fresh and convincing. His recursive style guarantees that ideas we miss the first time around will show up again. He mixes much philosophy into his historical account of design and architecture. He's rigorous about presenting the ideas of Ruskin, Darwin, William James, and William Morris in context. He then mixes and matches these ideas with his own while indicating what needs to happen next.

Reservations: one, I have an uneasy feeling that this book is over my head. Much of the time the text reads like a conversation between Mr. Spuybroek and his sources. This reader found it difficult to keep up. The second reservation is that I'm not convinced he gives enough credit to the reasons for design and decoration - in other words, to human satisfaction and delight. Perhaps this lack of empathy is inevitable in a theoretical book. But, the book seems vague as to what this tsunami of theory is supposed to accomplish. He gives a lot of weight to "things". Indeed, as Brian Massumi notes in his Foreword, "An essential part of Spuybroek's proposition is that things do design work among themselves, just as we work design directly in their midst. To be is to be in the movement of design. This move toward an eventful flat ontology that is ecological through and through strikes a chord with what has come to be known as the 'nonhuman turn' of the last ten years. Do "things" do design work among themselves? The cracks in mud or the structure of snowflakes, so attractive, protean, recurrent and ultimately, mysterious, might qualify as design work in some sense. Yet it's hard to see how this insight connects to the built environment, in this or in any other age. Spuybroek has written a fascinating account of how we got to where we are, design-wise, in decoration and architecture. His book is valuable in that it unearths and explains what the Gothic consists of and why, as it unfolded, it was so different from other art-historical movements that came before and after. By reminding us of the centrality of "movement" and "changefulness" in design, he achieves his goal of suggesting how we can once again connect to the concerns of Ruskin and Morris as they saw the machine age approaching. Yet, at some point in their progress, most design ideas come to rest. They resolve into objects and projects, serving as the basis for an artifact that was then put to use in the home of a human being (or, in the case of architecture, put to use as the home of a human being). This realization of design was no less necessary in the Gothic age as in the ages before or after. Spuybroek is eloquent about the material, efficient, and formal causes of design. To the extent that

his book downplays the final cause of design (helping human beings live well) he seems to have somewhat missed the mark.

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