The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/20862 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Reitz, Bettina  
**Title:** Building in words: representations of the process of construction in Latin literature  
**Issue Date:** 2013-05-08
Introduction

Laying the Foundations

1. The Impact of Construction

Building is an extremely conspicuous activity. A building site is full of movement; it looks different every day, causes noise, dirt and disruption. Most people would not describe a building site as beautiful. And yet, the disruptive nature of construction forces us to respond to it: construction is impressive and highly visible – a spectacle of creation. During a visit to New York City in the summer of 2010, I walked by the building site of Ground Zero: a huge area of activity, at least 20 cranes of different heights and sizes, and a few structures of steel and concrete, as yet of modest height.
These nascent structures did not look at all impressive yet, but the huge, bustling building site itself very much did. Of course, this particular building site is not an average example of construction. The activity at Ground Zero has a specific emotional effect on anyone who experienced or knows about the destructive event that preceded this new construction, which is why it offers an especially good example of the powerful impact that the construction process can have. The activity at the building site, in its awe-inspiring dimensions as well as its mundane details, has the power to speak to the viewer about the resilience of the American people and about their ‘constructive’ response to a senseless attack (fig. 1).¹

There is every reason to suppose that ancient Roman building sites were no less annoying, noisy, impressive or emotive. The impact of the building site of the new World Trade Center may in some ways be compared to that of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline. This most sacred of Roman temples had been destroyed in the course of fighting between the supporters of Vitellius and Vespasian in AD 69.² The trauma of this destruction is famously analysed in Tacitus’ *Histories.*³ The beginning of the rebuilding seems to have been impressively staged, with the emperor Vespasian himself carrying away the first bucket of rubble on his head (Suet. *Vesp.* 8.5, Dio Cass. 65.10.2). Reconstruction work continued all the way through the reign of Vespasian, and, after another destruction by fire in AD 80, through the reigns of Titus and Domitian.⁴ The emotional impact of the construction activity, highly visible on top of the Capitoline, must have been considerable, offering (like Ground Zero) tangible, physical assurance of repair and new creation to accompany emotional healing.

---

¹ The viewer’s interpretation is further influenced by the American flags flying from the top of every crane, a sight often seen at building sites in the US.
⁴ Darwall-Smith (1996), 43-5. After the fire in AD 80 Titus yet again began reconstruction works (Scheithauer (2000), 128, esp. n. 14), but since Domitian completed them, ancient authors are conspicuously silent about these activities.
2. Representing Construction

While it is perfectly possible and even necessary occasionally to speculate (as I just did) about the impression that the process of construction produced on Roman viewers, this study takes a different approach. The question I seek to answer is not what construction looked like in ancient Rome, nor how ancient Romans responded to it, but rather how the process of building and construction was represented in ancient Rome and why.\(^5\) I focus on literary representations of the process of building, although I also include some epigraphic and visual material, especially where it is in dialogue with literary texts. I scrutinise descriptions of construction in order to identify their representational strategies and I aim to understand these strategies by considering the contexts (architectural, historical, intellectual, literary) of the representation. I consider the making of structures that had some kind of real existence outside the text (for example the construction of a road), of mythical structures (such as the walls of Thebes built by Amphion), and of purely imaginary ones (like the poetic temple in Vergil’s *Georgics*). Sometimes it can be fruitful to consider only one category at a time, but more often, as will become apparent, these categories are not clearly distinguishable. A literary version of a ‘real’ building is always a tendentious version of it, a reconstruction designed to fit the requirements of the text, while a fictional structure is never devoid of any connection with buildings that really did exist.

3. Preparing the Ground

Roman builders have left a mark still very much visible today in the city of Rome, in Italy, and in much of the vast Roman empire. Roman architecture has always been keenly studied in terms of its techniques and aesthetics, especially since the Renaissance and the ‘rediscovery’ of Vitruvius.\(^6\) In recent decades Roman building has also increasingly been interpreted as embodying and communicating complex ideologies,\(^7\) and much attention has also been paid to the manipulations of urban

---

\(^5\) Technically, my own description of my visit to Ground Zero is an, albeit extremely unambitious, representation of the process of construction (I leave the detection of my modest representational strategies to the attentive reader).

\(^6\) See Payne (1999) on the role of Vitruvius in the reception of Roman architecture.

spaces and their effect on those who moved within them.\textsuperscript{8} However, many of these studies tend to pay little attention to the fact that the ideologically potent new structures they investigate did not simply appear, complete with sophisticated and meaningful decorative programmes, but that in the first instance viewers walked past loud, busy building sites for years, were inconvenienced by the transportation of building materials, and only slowly saw the walls of the new structure rise.\textsuperscript{9}

Just how ‘big’ building really was in ancient Rome has become more tangible in recent years thanks to research into the technical and logistical side of Roman construction. Between the 1\textsuperscript{st} century BC and the 1\textsuperscript{st} century AD, the change in political circumstances as well as a number of huge technical innovations very significantly altered the way construction worked and looked. The responsibility for managing public building was increasingly centralised and put into the hands of a permanent bureaucracy;\textsuperscript{10} marble quarries were opened in Italy and the transport of marble from abroad streamlined under imperial control;\textsuperscript{11} brick production was...
expanded, while technical advances in vaulting and the use of concrete allowed for ever-larger structures and ever-faster construction. Quantitative analyses now allow us to imagine something of the manpower, cost and organisation connected with the very largest imperial building sites. For example, according to DeLaine’s calculations, the building site of the Baths of Caracalla was manned by around 10,000 workmen at a time. In order to drag the very largest blocks of stone that were used in construction through the city to the building site, 300 pairs of oxen were needed. Such figures give us an impression of the visibility and the spectacular nature of large-scale imperial construction. Ambitious building projects were always in progress somewhere in Rome, and often carried out at astounding speed. They often involved huge workforces, impressive feats of transportation and lifting, and radical re-configurations of urban landscapes, providing spectacular displays of control over manpower, resources and nature. In the provinces, too, large-scale building programmes temporarily turned entire cities into building sites.

Unsurprisingly, given this physical environment, Roman literature contains a wealth of diverse literary (re-)creations of architecture. Mentions of finished or planned individual buildings, complexes, and engineering projects have, especially in conjunction with material evidence, been investigated for what they can reveal about the structures themselves as well as their social and political significance. Importantly, however, literary texts not only ‘respond’ to what is there but also actively participate in giving meaning to monuments and to the built environment.

13 See Torelli (1995); on the so-called ‘concrete revolution’ see Lancaster (2005) and Lancaster (2008), 260-6 for an overview with bibliography.
14 DeLaine (1997) calculates that a work force of at least 7,200 men would have been employed on the building site of the baths of Caracalla at any one time during the four years of construction, with up to 13,100 during peak periods (193).
15 DeLaine (1997), 100-1: ‘The supply of marble … was designed as a display of imperial power’. Carts were not allowed into the city of Rome for 10 hours after sunrise, with the sole exception of carts supplying public building sites or demolition works, thus focussing the attention of the population during this time exclusively on the constant and sometimes spectacular transportation of building materials (see Robinson (1992), 73-6). On the logistics of heavy transport, see also van Tilburg (2007), 81-3.
17 Scheithauer (2000) collects all literary testimonies for imperial building projects in Rome, with the main object of assessing ancient reactions to them (11).
The dynamics of the interaction between texts and monuments have (predictably) been explored in most detail with regard to the city of Rome, a city entirely ‘crowded with meanings and associations’ stemming partly from the endless literary engagement with it.\(^{18}\)

Extended descriptions of architecture hold another special interest for Roman writers. They can serve, like descriptions of art works, as a means of reflecting figuratively, within the text, on the author’s own literary artifice.\(^{19}\) Describing a finished work of architecture in a literary text (what is conventionally called ‘ecphrasis’) allows the author to stage the effect of it on the fictional viewers (possibly directing or problematising the readers’ response to his own text), or to stress certain aesthetic or ideological features or implications of his own work.\(^{20}\) Investigations into the theoretical framework underpinning the working of ecphrasis have underlined the potential of an approach that recognises the interaction of the verbal and the visual.\(^{21}\) However, all these different approaches to literary representations of architecture have (understandably) tended to focus on finished buildings rather than the process of creating them. I propose further to enhance our understanding of the dialogue between architecture and literature by analysing the representation of architectural processes (construction and, at the end of this study, destruction).

4. Structure

To the overarching question of this investigation (how and why are processes of construction represented in literary texts), this study provides a twofold answer, and my thesis is accordingly divided into two main parts.

\(^{18}\) Edwards (1996), 1. Apart from Edwards’ seminal investigation of the ‘literary resonances in the city and also the city’s resonance in literature’ (2), there are countless more narrowly focussed studies of different authors, genres, or monuments, among them Jaeger (1997), Boyle (2003), Welch (2005), Larmour/Spencer (2007), Rea (2007), Rimell (2008), Roche (2011b).

\(^{19}\) On this phenomenon, sometimes called ‘mise en abyme’, see Dällenbach (1977).

\(^{20}\) This applies especially to descriptions of architecture with artistic decoration, such as the temple of Juno in Vergil’s \textit{Aeneid}. A concise introduction to the literary possibilities of ecphrases in Latin literature, drawing on the temple of Juno as an example, is Elsner (2005), 312-17.

In chapters 1 and 2, I argue that telling the story of the construction of a building that is already complete is a means of altering the reader’s impression of that building. A building may look impressive, large, or harmoniously proportioned, but providing a version of its making (however much manipulated) encourages the reader to imagine or envisage the process of construction and in doing so influences his appreciation of that monument.

In chapter 1, I analyse this effect of the representation of construction on a viewer or reader through the concept of ‘memory’. My use of this term will bear some clarification. I contend that representations of construction in three different media (epigraphic, visual, literary) create a ‘memory’ of construction. They encourage a viewer to visualise or to re-enact mentally the construction process that led to the creation of the structure itself. From the unique interaction of the viewer’s own predispositions, knowledge and earlier recollections on the one hand and the representation of construction on the other hand, a mental image of construction is either created or (if the viewer already has a recollection or impression of the process) manipulated in the viewer’s mind. No epigraphic, visual or literary representation of construction simply is able to call forth a historically accurate recollection of the construction process. Rather, the viewer’s memory of the construction process is actively formed, for particular purposes and using particular strategies. The strategies used by the three different media in creating such memories are investigated in chapter 1.

Throughout this thesis, I use ‘he’ as a short form for a viewer or reader of either sex. However, it cannot be denied that the recipient whom ancient artists or authors had in mind was probably more often male than female.

Experiments have shown the extent to which an individual’s memory of a certain event is really a construction on which language and an external, tendentious representation of events have a very considerable influence: see the experiment of Loftus and Palmer (1974). Students of collective or cultural memory have also long seen memory as ‘formed’, as they would have it, by cultural processes of canon-forming within social groups over time (see e.g. Assmann (1999), 56, on ‘Geformtheit’ as a characteristic feature of cultural memory). The development of this field and the discipline of social memory studies is charted by Olick/Robbins (1998). In my investigation, the focus primarily lies on memory formation as a consequence of the interaction between medium and individual viewer/reader rather than on larger cultural processes, although I do not in any way attempt to deny that these are also taking place.
In chapter 2, I explore the moral dimension of representations of construction. Since the tower of Babel, stories about constructions have often been about humans getting close, or too close, to the limits imposed on them by nature, god(s), or their own humanity. In Rome, representations of construction, and especially of large-scale interventions in nature, have to position themselves within a fierce contemporary debate about the permissibility of human manipulations of natural boundaries. The strategies which authors use in negotiating this minefield of (un)ethical engineering are the subject of chapter 2.

Part II

In chapters 3 to 5, I argue that describing the process of (architectural) construction within a literary text can also be a way of encouraging the reader to consider the (literary) construction of the text itself. This literary self-referentiality of representations of construction is the central subject of the second part of my thesis. There is a broad spectrum of ways in which architectural construction in the text can be linked to literary composition.

In chapter 3, I mark out this spectrum by analysing one architectural image for text production (the building of a city) as used by three different authors (Manilius, Propertius, Vergil) in three different ways: as an elaborate simile whereby the meaningful correspondences are made explicit, as an intricate metaphor, the limits of which remain suggestively vague, and finally as an analogy that the text only implicitly makes possible.

The coexistence and interplay of memory and metaphor in the text of Statius’ Silvae is the subject of chapter 4. The necessary but artificial division between the two parts of this thesis is there partly suspended in order to analyse how mechanisms of memory-making similar to those traced in chapters 1 and 2 are in the Silvae combined with an extended and sophisticated poetological metaphor of construction. Statius develops a poetics of construction which draws on and in turn feeds the panegyric representations of construction in Domitianic Rome and Italy.

In chapter 5, I analyse a mythical version of the construction metaphor. The Greek hero Amphion sang a song which bewitched stones to form themselves into the
walls of Thebes. Literary representations of this myth are used to illustrate the power of poetry, but also, conversely, its powerlessness. Representing one’s text as the result of construction has a problematic aspect: what has been built can also be destroyed. The destruction of the walls of Thebes is a means of confronting the instability of literary edifices. The interplay between representations of construction and destruction is also further developed in the conclusion, where I analyse a scene of physical and literary destruction in Pliny’s *Panegyricus*.

5. **Boundaries**

Technically, this thesis is concerned with representations of construction from the late 1st century to the early 2nd century AD. It is a plausible (though unprovable) supposition that it was the huge technical advances and logistical changes in construction during this period that put the process of building on the map as a literary theme and encouraged authors to engage with it creatively. Nevertheless, I take the liberty of stepping outside these temporal limits where suitable material is unavailable within my chosen period. I venture into later times when there are interesting developments to be pursued, and earlier material is regularly introduced where I am concerned with models or predecessors. As a result, both Homer and Ammianus Marcellinus make an appearance in this thesis.

I also adopt a flexible approach as far as my definition of construction is concerned. Apart from actual building, I also consider descriptions of engineering, and I even include the erection of statues or obelisks. I am broadly concerned with human processes of creation which involve patrons, architects, contractors or workmen and feature the transport and use of raw material, hard physical work, heavy lifting, or the use of tools.

On the other hand, the aim of this thesis is not to be a compendium of all passages in Roman literature that mention construction. Rather, my chapters serve as different windows onto a literary theme in Roman literature. In each chapter I develop an argument about the functions of descriptions of construction in literary texts, asking a specific question and selecting texts most suited to answering this question. This means that I cannot claim that the conclusions reached in one chapter about one set of texts are universally applicable. However, I do claim that
this way of reading literary representations of construction, demonstrated by means of a particular case-study, could fruitfully be applied to many more.

I hope that my work will not only be of interest to classicists but also to archaeologists and architectural historians interested in the social meanings of architecture in ancient Rome. Studies of Roman architecture have often, and justifiably, looked to Vitruvius’ treatise *De Architectura* as their main literary source of information. There is, however, a whole range of other texts, from epic to historiography, from love elegy to didactic poetry, which may not at first glance seem to be particularly concerned with architecture, but in fact do aim to configure perceptions of architecture, for example by representing its creation. I aim to show how such texts actively engage in the attribution of meaning to architecture and in the debates surrounding built structures.

---

24 Cf. the important study of Wilson Jones (2000). Recently, Senseney (2011) has ‘examine[d] the importance of Greek building and thought for the creation of *architecture as Vitruvius understood it* in a Roman context’ (xi, my italics). Taylor (2003), in his investigation of ‘architectural process’, is critical of this emphasis (4-5).

25 One reason for Vitruvius’ not playing a major role in this study is that *De Architectura* is much less concerned with describing the process of creating buildings than with the desired result of construction. Taylor (2003) argues that ‘Vitruvius shows minimal interest in the sequential logic of design and construction …’ and that ‘his book is a series of descriptive or prescriptive snapshots … without much attention to architecture as a process’ (4). Another is that his work was written just before the major developments in construction technology really began to transform building in Rome (Taylor (2003), 7).