The use and abuse of European architectural history in a post-colonial South Africa

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Abstract

In this article the problems of teaching and studying the history of European architecture in a post-colonial South Africa are addressed. Approaches to the history of European architecture that encourage admiration and respect are criticised as being based on a slanted set of criteria that determine a biased view of the past. Oppressive attitudes are sustained by such approaches to the history of architecture, because they serve to legitimise existing social differences and entrenched class hierarchies.

It is argued that because of the reality of South Africa's colonial past, the history of European architecture cannot be ignored. Another reason why European architectural history should be taught is that it forms part of the cultural backgrounds of many South African students, academics and institutions. Hence it is recommended that both European and African architectural histories should be taught.

To develop a variety of interpretations of architectural histories, historians can experiment with various methods. They include the techniques of historical reconstruction, rational reconstruction, the history of ideas, and cultural history. In this article it is proposed that historians should play these methods of writing architectural histories off against each other with the aim of ameliorating architectural practices in South Africa.

Samevatting

In hierdie artikel word die probleem van die bestudering en dosering van Europese argitektuurgeskiedenis ondersoek. Wat gekritiseer word, is benaderings tot die geskiedenis van Europese argitektuur waarvolgens 'n bewondering en respek daarvoor bevorder word wat gebaseer is op verwronge maatstawwe wat 'n eensydige beeld van die verlede tot gevolg het. Onderdrukkende houdings word gehandhaaf deur sulke benaderings tot die geskiedenis van argitektuur, omdat hulle dien om bestaande sosiale verskille en verskansde klashiërargie te beskerm.

Daar word geargumenteer dat die realiteit van Suid-Afrika se koloniale verlede erken moet word, en daarom kan die geskiedenis van Europese argitektuur nie geïgnoreer word nie. Nog 'n rede hoekom Europese argitektuurgeskiedenis gedoseer behoort te word, is dat dit deel vorm van baie Suid-Afrikaanse studente, dosente en instansies se kulturele agtergronde. Daarom word voorgestel dat onderrig gegee moet word in beide Europa en Afrika se argitektuurgeskiedenisse.

Historici kan eksperimenteer met 'n verskeidenheid van metodes om interpretasies van argitektuurgeskiedenisse te ontwikkel. Dit sluit die volgende in: historiese rekonstruksie, rasionele rekonstruksie, die geskidenis van idees en kulturele geskidenis. In die artikel word voorgestel dat historici hierdie metodes om argitektuurgeskiedenis te skryf teen mekaar moet afspeel met die doel om Suid-Afrikaanse argitektuurpraktyke te verbeter.

The questions that are addressed in this essay are: why and how the history of European architecture should be studied and taught in a post-colonial South Africa. In the Department of Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand it was decided to teach the history of architecture from an African point of view. The first year of this new course, called Architectural Discourse, has started in 2000.

This article is not about the teaching of Architectural Discourse. It is used to formulate an approach to the teaching of the history of European architecture in the course History of Architecture that is being phased out at present, to be replaced by Architectural Discourse. Until 1999 Anne Fitchett presented a course on the history of African Architecture to the first year students. In the second and third years of study a course on the history of European architecture is presented, for which the author has been responsible since 1999. It is this aspect of History of Architecture that is being grappled with in this essay. In the second semester of the third year course there is a module on the history of non-European and non-African architectures. The fourth and final year of the History of Architecture syllabus comprises of the history of twentieth-century architecture. Melinda Silverman

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teaches it.

From the African perspective that is adopted in the new Architectural Discourse programme the history of European architecture is viewed with suspicion, scepticism, and irony. In order to develop an approach to studying and teaching European architectural history while History of Architecture is being phased out the pragmatist philosophies of Richard Rorty (1998a; 1998b) and Richard Shusterman (1992) have been used. The author favours their philosophies because they concentrate on the use-value of theories, instead of on their truth. Their pragmatist approach seems apt in the academic situation in South Africa, in which questions are being asked about the usefulness of the history of European architecture.

The misuse of the history of European architecture

Specific objections can be raised against the practices of studying and teaching the history of European architecture in the subject History of Architecture[1]. The history of European architecture seems to be far removed from the interests and concerns of ordinary South Africans. It is often taught in ways that promote a pious respect for historical European architectures. Historical European architectures are sometimes presented to students in such a way that they inspire humble admiration.

Rorty (1998a: 260-6) uses the term "doxography" to describe an approach to history in which the aim is to inspire admiration and respect. The literal meaning of doxography is "a form of writing that utters praise". This attitude is often based on the assumption that there is a continuous list of topics that must be addressed in the history of architecture. An example of doxography in architectural history may be Norberg-Schulz's *Meaning in Western achitecture* (1975). Norberg-Schulz treats the whole of Western architecture under continuous headings such as "Landscape and Settlement", "Building", "Articulation", "Space Conception and Development", and "Meaning and Architecture". That these headings exist in the book might be an indication that Norberg-Schulz regards them as essential aspects of architecture, which remain constant for different historical times and places.
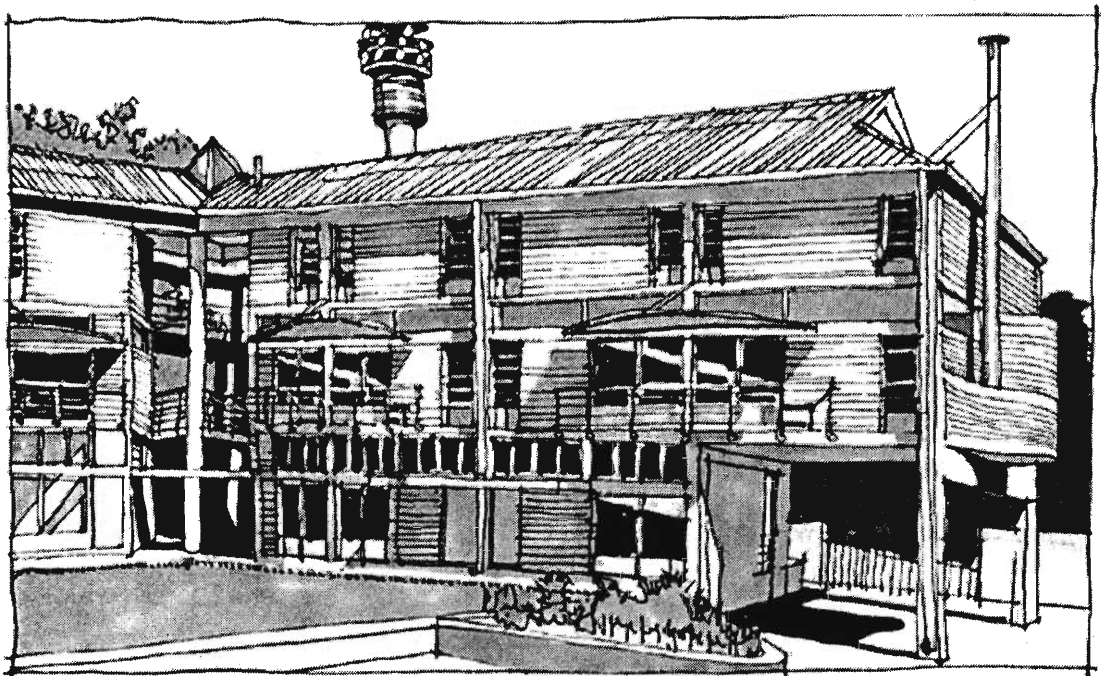

Figure 1. Jo Noero Architects. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Centre.* Parktown, Johannesburg, 1995. Drawing by Anton Coetzee.

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Rorty's (1998a: 261) criticisms of doxography include that it inspires "boredom and despair". It assumes that the topics, categories, and issues in a discipline such as architecture remain constant and that they are eternally available for historians and architects to choose from. Doxography is based on the misunderstanding that architecture is a natural kind. If architecture is a natural kind it means that architectural historians simply have to discover its essences that already exist. In this view architecture is not viewed as contingent human creations that are products of human beliefs and aspirations that change over time and from place to place. Doxography forecloses experiment with new ways to narrate the history of architecture. The practice of a careful selection of themes based on a slanted set of criteria, which determines a particular version of the past, is disguised by doxography.

Historicist architectural historians recognise that architecture is a human artefact, and that what architects and historians find interesting depends on present theoretical interests. Hence architectural data do not remain the same over time. Historicist thinkers debunk the idea that there are deep, fundamental questions in architecture that have to be addressed by historians. Therefore they believe that historians are bound to fail if they seek unifying themes underlying the history of architecture over long periods of time.

Shusterman's (1992: 141) objections to doxography include that it supports an oppressive conservative attitude, according to which existing class privileges and domination are sustained. Those who teach that entrenched ideas about architecture are necessary and ideal can change their beliefs by comparing the historical architecture of one culture with the architectures of other places and cultures. The beliefs and aspirations that motivated historical African architectures are often irrecon-cilable with European principles, for example. An inquiry into African architecture is likely to make the researcher sceptical about claims that architecture is based on universal and timeless principles that are somehow inherent in European architecture.

When South African corporations and their architects use styles that mimic historical European architectures when they design new office buildings, their strategy can be interpreted as a manifestation of class privileges that exclude the majority of South Africans. It may be a manifestation of a will to claim the corporation's and the architect's sociocultural superiority by associating themselves with European architecture's illustrious tradition. This tradition may be said to be unfamiliar and inaccessible to the majority of South Africans. Those who appeal to European traditions in order to assert their cultural superiority assume that those who are unable to appreciate manifestations of those traditions are inferior, and that they lack taste and cultural sensitivity. When the different groups comprising the South African population generally accept the assumption that they are uneducated regarding architectural taste, it serves to legitimate and naturalise existing social differences and entrenched class hierarchies.

Following Shusterman's (1992: 146) argument, one can postulate that the traditional conception of the history of European architecture is a type of doxography that supports iniquitous social realities. A mechanism that is used to privilege the interests of the socioculturally advantaged group is to provide a narrative of a happy life and beautiful world that exist in Europe, which serves constantly to frustrate them who have to live their lives in South Africa. This ideal European world may not exist in reality, as can be attested by South African travellers with a sceptical stance. They often report that conditions in particular places in Europe are miserable in terms of poverty and the quality of life of the inhabitants. Historians often report on the conditions of slavery and poverty experienced by those who built the architecture that is currently admired respectfully by those who have been educated according to the presumptions of a doxography of European architecture.

It may be fair to assert that the idea of European architecture is largely a

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fabrication of the tourism industry. European countries have a vested interest in the depiction of their architecture as something inherently valuable, which has to be experienced first-hand. As long as tourists and architectural students feel compelled to visit European cities in order to view the architecture, the local economies continue to benefit financially from the escapist illusions that these buildings are precious, and that they are products of an essentially desirable form of life. It might be advisable for travellers to be sensitive to signs of daily struggles for existence in order to develop a more ironic view of the worth of European culture.

The utility of European architectural history

In the light of all the objections to the praise of European architectural history, historians in South Africa might choose to avoid teaching the history of European architecture altogether. It is certainly a possibility. Peter Rich's article "The Bantwane Settlement at Kwarriela agte" (1982) is an example of a historical study of African architecture in which few references are made to European architectural concepts. There seems to be few compelling reasons to take the history of European architecture seriously in a post-colonial South Africa.

A reason why architectural history is studied is to provide accounts of how present-day architectural interests have developed over time. Such interpretations of the backgrounds to architectural beliefs can, but need not necessarily, provide justifications for current architectural practices. Some architectural practices might be objectionable. An example of offensive architectural practices has been mentioned above, namely to design corporate buildings in styles derived from the history European architecture in order to claim sociocultural hegemony. Historians who desire to correct such aberrations might wish to narrate a history in which the inequities of the past are highlighted, in order to make their readers and students aware of past injustices and of alternative strategies to avoid and eradicate unfair and unjust practices.

A way in which architectural practices can be tempered is to experiment with different conceptions of architectural history. The aim of this approach is to undermine the conventional assumptions regarding European architectural history, and to expand one's repertoire of alternative architectural strategies.

When South African architectural historians try to provide accounts of the development of current architectural beliefs and practices, it is not possible to avoid the colonial phase in the country's history. To ignore the influence of historical European architectures on South African architecture would be a misinterpretation. The fact of European colonialism is part of South Africa's history and experiences. Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that the history of European architecture will be taught in South African institutions to some extent.

In this section of the essay an attempt is made to explain why architectural historians and institutions in South Africa are justified when they include the history of European architecture in their research interests and syllabuses. One cannot assume that there is a unified approach to the teaching of the history of architecture in any institution or in the country. Various architectural historians and institutions are doing disparate things for various idiosyncratic reasons.[2]

If one's humanity is defined partly by the history of how the beliefs of one's community have changed and developed over time, it seems to be inhuman for South African architectural historians to ignore links between local architectural traditions and the history of colonisation. Yet they are unlikely to take the history of European architecture too seriously because of historical attempts to impose Western values on South Africa and to denigrate local beliefs and practices.

Most architectural historians who are active in South Africa have a background of being educated in the history of European architecture. Many of them also appreciate various aspects of European culture such as its art, music, and literature. A reason why many South African architectural historians find it difficult to simply walk away from Brunelleschi and Alberti is that they conceive of European architectural history

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as their medium and as part of the material that they use in their profession.

The perceptions of architectural historians in South Africa regarding the history of European architecture can be interpreted by referring to Kundera's observations in *The art of the novel* (1988: 164-5). Even from a remote vantage point such as South Africa, European culture is perceived to be a treasure chest of precious elements that are products of a fascinating imaginative realm. The metaphor of the treasure chest seems to be appropriate in the South African context. The contention in this essay is that one need not belong to a culture in order to make use of its products with the aim of improving the lives of people belonging to one's own community. One also need not have complete or accurate knowledge of a culture in order to make fortuitous use of it. Misinterpretations of the history of European architecture are acceptable if they lead to improved architectural practices in South Africa, or if they serve the purposes of social amelioration. Eco (1999: 53) makes a similar point when he writes that misunderstandings between different cultures can lead to new, interesting and useful results through serendipity.

From the premises that various architectural historians are doing disparate things for various idiosyncratic reasons, and that one cannot escape the Western intellectual tradition without losing one's sense of who one is in a post-colonial South Africa, one can infer that one's approach to the history of architecture should be viewed in terms of one's own and one's institution's biographies. Hence the stance adopted in this essay is that an architectural historian's approach to the history of architecture is related to contingent and idiosyncratic cultural influences on his or her upbringing and background. Accord-ing to this essay's pragmatist theoretical perspective, one cannot deduce an attitude to the history of architecture from the nature of architecture. This is because what architecture is perceived to be is derived from the beliefs and practices existing in specific cultural and regional contexts, and not from a presumed essence of architecture.

The recommendation that is made in this essay is that South African architectural historians should exploit the coincidence of, on the one hand, their unique situation in this country with, on the other hand, their autobiographical interests caused by being exposed to European culture through their upbringing and education. It seems advisable not to choose between Africa and Europe, but to allow one's interests in the one to be contaminated by one's interests in the other. Hence what is recommended is an impure and pluralistic stance of keeping different things together.

Various strategies according to which South African architectural historians may experiment with the histories of architecture can be gleaned from Rorty's essay *The historiography of philosophy: four genres* (1998a). These strategies involve playing off different conceptions of history against each other. Rorty's idea is that these methods will be used in conjunction, and not in isolation. The aim of his strategies as applied in this essay is to undermine conventional assumptions regarding the Western tradition in architectural history, and to develop a variety of unusual interpretations of historical architectures that may be useful for South Africans.

Historical reconstruction

The genre of historical recon-struction involves the description of past authors and architects in their own terms. It is an attempt to recreate the intellectual scene in which authors and architects lived and interacted with their contemporaries. It includes interpretations of architects' work within the context of ideas available in their times. In the process of interpreting the work and beliefs of architects in the context of ideas available in their times, some of them may be placed in unfamiliar contexts that can bring out unexpected resemblances between them and other architects or intellectuals. The procedure of seeking affiliations between architects and between them and contemporary intellectuals is related to free play, and not to rigour and methodology (Rorty 1998b: 338). The process is motivated by the assumption that there are no pre-existing relations between historical architects,

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and that there was no consensus among them about what they wanted to achieve.

The method of historical reconstruction is constrained by the maxim that an acceptable account of a past figure's beliefs and behaviour cannot appeal to criteria of description and classification not available to that person. It is conceived that historians can come close to reaching consensus about historical reconstructions.

An example of a historical reconstruction is Peter Smithson's *Reflections on Hunstanton* (1997). It is an account of Alison and Peter Smithson's *School at Hunstanton* of 1954. The design of the building is interpreted in the context of Peter Smithson's experiences in the British Army's Engineering Corps from 1942 to 1945, his training as an architect, and the influences of Gunnar Asplund and Mies van der Rohe on him and Alison. Their concerns with simplicity and directness of construction are explained. They were also interested in the concepts of appropriateness and fitness, which are interpreted within the context of food rationing, shortages of building materials, and the limitations on foreign travel that existed in the late 1940s. The design of the school was related to English functionalism and its dependence on "pseudo-science". Peter Smithson recounts that the fact that they won the competition for the school was partly a result of the chance concurrence of the architects' ideological design interests and the likelihood that the assessor saw a new school plan that was published at the time. Peter and Alison Smithson's architectural ideal of compact and economical plans fortuitously coincided with the compact plan of a school that was published in *Architectural Forum* in 1949, which was probably seen by the assessor Dennis Clark Hall.

Rational reconstruction

The second genre of historiography is rational reconstruction, which is the anachronistic practice of re-describing historical texts in the light of present-day interests. The historian imposes current problems on authors and architects of the past. Therefore current theoretical views dictate the terms in which past authors and architects are described. Because current theoretical convictions vary, rational reconstructions are unlikely to converge.

Robert Venturi's *Complexity and contradiction in architecture* ([1966] 1977) is an instance of rational reconstruction. He redescribed the history of Western architecture to substantiate his criticism of modernist architecture and to promote an architecture that was complex and ambiguous. "This book deals with the present, and with the past in relation to the present" (Venturi [1966] 1977: 14).

The history of ideas

Rorty's third category of historiography is *Geistesgeschichte* or the history of ideas. These histories are big sweeping stories in which historians justify their attitudes towards the present by selecting who was great in the history of architecture. Hegel's account of the world-historical march of ideas is an example of this genre. It involves a process of canon formation, according to which one affiliates one's ideas about architecture to that of great dead architects in order to justify one's own theoretical interests.

An example of *Geistesgeschichte* in architectural history is to re-describe the history of architecture in order to account for present-day interests. In post-modern architectural theories the content of architecture is emphasised in order to restore the equilibrium that was disturbed by the attention called to clarity of form by modernist architects. The history of architecture can be rewritten to favour a post-modern conception of architecture by making use of the nineteenth-century writings of Pugin and Ruskin, who were concerned about the spiritual meaning of architecture (Coetzee 1997). Their theories can then be compared with post-modern theories of the late twentieth century in which architecture is interpreted as products of human beliefs, in order to justify a conception of architecture in which meaning is emphasised rather than clarity of form.

Cultural history

Rorty's last category of historiography can be called "cultural history". It is a nominalistic and materialistic account of the interaction between architects and

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their society, politics, and economy in a particular spatiotemporal region. In cultural histories the distinctions between important and unimportant architects become blurred. In the context of detailed accounts of the interactions of architects in institutional and disciplinary contexts unknown figures often emerge as significant, which may lead to a healthy scepticism about the canon of architects presently regarded as important.

An example of a cultural history of architecture is Silverman's (1998) interpretation of Volkskas Bank buildings as products of Afrikaner nationalism. She argues convincingly that the building programme of Volkskas Bank from the nineteen thirties was part of an Afrikaner strategy of nation-building and economic empowerment. In the process of writing her history Silverman studies architects and buildings that are rarely recognised in the history of South African architecture. These unfamiliar architects and buildings emerge in her history because Volkskas Bank often employed Afrikaner architects to design banks that were often located in small rural towns to serve farming communities.

Conclusion

A viable strategy for historians in a post-colonial South Africa seems to be a process of repeated redescriptions of aspects of Western architectural history. By shuttling back and forth between different descriptions of history, it is anticipated that architectural historians may develop coherent and critical interpretations of the history of architecture derived from a variety of acquired perspectives. In South Africa this strategy will be informed by the context of local interests and beliefs. According to the perspective adopted in this article, European architectural history will be used to serve local needs. The history of European architecture will be interpreted to facilitate the use thereof locally in pragmatic ways. This means that European architectural history will be treated with scepticism, and that it will be exploited to promote the amelioration of South African architectural practices.

As an example of the pragmatic use of the history of European architecture by a South African architect one can advance Jo Noero's *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Centre* in Parktown, Jo-hannesburg (1995) (Figure 1). The building has an L-shaped plan, and each of the elevations facing the courtyard has a simple block form. Noero made an attempt to relate the building to its context. It has corrugated iron pitched roofs similar to those of houses in the vicinity. The construction methods and materials are those commonly used by contemporary builders in Johannesburg, namely a reinforced concrete frame structure with brick infill walls and steel frame windows. Shading devices in the form of reinforced concrete canopies on the ground floor and steel canopies on the second floor were provided to limit solar heat gain.

The two elevations facing the courtyard can be interpreted as being derived from principles found in Renaissance palace designs. While employing materials, construction methods and craftsmanship currently and locally available, Noero adopted the block form of Renaissance palaces. He used the division of the building into three storeys that is found in the historical palaces. He also used the principle that each storey is different which is found in *Palazzo Farnese* in Rome (1515-59), for example. The storeys are differentiated by varying the sizes, design and distribution of the windows, shading devices and handrails from floor to floor. Similar to Renaissance palaces, each of the elevations in Noero's building has an implied symmetry. The architect managed to give the building coherent, dignified and varied elevations by making use of principles found in the history of European architecture, while also taking local traditions, climate, materials, construction methods and craftsmanship into account.

Notes

[1.] Parts of this section were derived from the theory of Shusterman (1992: 140-7).

[2.] Ideas for this discussion have been appropriated from Rorty (1998b: 334-49).

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