

Editorial

The Expertise of Architecture and its History

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Many historical architectural constructions have been recorded and studied, but not all have been theorised. There seems to be a disconnection at several levels between the discourses of architectural history and the history of architectural ideas. The assumption that empirical description of implicit acts of design automatically results in theory also neglects the formative and contextualising role played by ideas, knowledge and interpretation in creative acts of architectural embodiment. Further, both Architectural History and the history of Architectural Ideas seem to be disconnected in the present given the dual dominance of the scientific and the moral–ecological paradigms. This split condition results in the view that theory can only be induced into architectural history from the present, thereby overlooking adjacent histories of ideas and intellectual currents available at the time of making. As temporal displacement and the theoretical reinvention of history increasingly overrule continuity, tradition and translation, architectural knowledge loses sight of its intrinsic transformations. This special edition of SAJAH examines the dialogue between architectural history and the history of architectural ideas.

Key words: Architectural history, History of Ideas

In the profession of architecture, the architect is surrounded by experts who invariably know more about structures, materials, construction techniques, finance, real-estate, landscape, lighting, plumbing, electrical fittings, mechanical plants, sociology, history, politics and so on; and on whose expertise the architect consults. The Architect's singular claim to a distinctive un-borrowed expertise, *sui generis*, is the ability to order space through design, roping in these various talents to realise a vision of ordered space. Some might argue that the interior designer also orders space. We argue that the interior designer, as with the landscape architect or urban designer, offer parts of the same expertise, though somewhat delimited in scope by the declaration of their bounded specialised territories. The generic architect typically exceeds these limitations by dealing with all forms of spatial ordering, the paucity of positive exemplars or the proliferation of negative exemplars in the architectural profession notwithstanding. The independence of this ability raises the question of the possibility of Architecture's autonomy as a discipline, and this has been a subject of some considerable debate in the late twentieth century.¹ Indeed, Architecture has had a difficult position as a form of intellection, rising from its sub-classification amongst medieval *armatura* to its awkward struggles of fit within the modern University.

Unlike the other professions of Law and Medicine, Architecture schools often find themselves as subsets of a Faculty of Engineering, Social Sciences, the Fine Arts, Construction Management or Real Estate. Routinely every few years the same polemic content is recast by a different author in the Higher Education press, revisiting the argument that 'Architecture should not be a University offering'. The heavy demands for institutional infrastructure, especial pedagogical arrangements, atypical teaching methods, high student workloads, and unscientific assessment criteria are common in architectural education and certainly contribute to the discipline's awkwardness within the traditional academic institution. This is further compounded by the nature of the discipline as a form of knowledge. As an academic discipline Architecture

has an uneasy relationship with research; which it has been forced to engage with at the tail end of the twentieth century without having clear terms of reference as to what, how and why the activity of Architecture, the discourse of Architecture, or the profession, are researchable, can be researchable, are even possibly open to research, relative these three different states of the discipline.

In the Renaissance two senses of nature were crystallised from earlier medieval modulations of ideas thought to have Greek origins: *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*.² The passive sense of *natura naturata* refers to created nature, and *natura naturans*, the activity of nature. These distinctions are immensely useful for understanding Architecture as forms of knowledge. In so far as these states of nature are concerned, the activity of nature as creating nature is similar to the activity of architecture - architectural design creates, and in the process creates new knowledge and new nature. The passive sense of Architecture's ballast, its *natura naturata*, is undeniably its history, as a form of knowledge. These are the two states of interest within this paper – the profession might be characterised as a tertiary state: a rendering of services from the activity of Architectural Design, deriving from Architecture's *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*.

In the sense of architecture as active nature, all designs create anew, and the syllogism follows therefore, that all architectural design is research. To isolate Architectural design activity as academically rewardable research would seem somewhat futile, as the core activity is always already 'research' - new design is inherently the generation of something novel, a new way of ordering or a new ordering. This differs markedly from the search for new knowledge in medical sciences, for example in the search for a new cure. In medical science there is always a clear higher goal to which new knowledge in traditional academic circles is always in subservience; whereas in architecture as *activity*, as *natura naturans*, the process and the consequences leads to the generation of new knowledge as an end in itself – *natura naturans* has created new nature, new architecture is generated as new knowledge or ideas. The activity in this sense is ontological development, whether experimental, speculative or conservative, as opposed to *re*-search as epistemological understanding. The activity of design in itself depends on a search for information to support that activity, and to this end seeking this information serves design as the consequence.

On the other hand, research in architecture as *natura naturata*, operates in similar ways to traditional academic exploration: there is a base core of created nature as ballast, from which new knowledge can be purposeful via research, as epistemology. Architecture's 'stuff', its nature comprises of its unique body of knowledge, and that is architectural history. Again, one might argue that construction knowledge or the science of materials might belong in this territory; it is equally effective to argue that architecture and architects has little expert claim over the scientific development of materials or the science that comes with it. In the activity of design, the architect may find new ways to use a material, e.g. glass, but the architect certainly did not invent glass, nor does the science of glass manufacture belong to Architecture. In these times we might note that the drafting of computer code is really the skill of the Information Technologist and despite the present proliferation of digital *aided* design, the architect is the applicator or the operator of that technology, and not its generator. This is not the case with Architectural History. This body of knowledge belongs exclusively to Architecture, and is distinct to Art History, political history or social history. Within Architectural history, there is the history of Architecture, and the history of Architectural ideas. The activity of generating anew continually feeds into historical record, and historical distance gives the architectural act either elevated active significance or consignment to the far reaches of archival memory. Potential dislocations between the two have already been observed, where architectural history and the history of

its ideas have been confronted by the unravelling of historiography.³ Architectural History's activating potential is seen in the fulcrum that divides history and theory, a knife edge between past and future that seems to have a unique potency and existence in design discourse, and which would be paradoxical in many other disciplines. We will distinguish in this text, three different usages of the term *Historicism*, which are defined as follows:

Historicism₁ This is the taxonomical tendency to surmise the past as a series of temporal bands, as relative epochs, each with an equally relative zeitgeist.

Historicism₂ This is the tendency to be stirred by reverence or nostalgia for the past, and results in the practical mimicry of historical precedent as a consequence.

Historicism₃ This form sees historically determined patterns as models for future predictions, especially in the social sciences. Karl Popper in his book *The Poverty of Historicism* offered a critique of Historicism₃. In a sense, Architectural Theory is a form of historicism₃, particularly architectural theory fuelled by critical social theory, carrying with it with all of Popperian impoverishment, as it speculates on the future from prior patterns.⁴

Alan Colquhoun made similar distinctions of three notions of historicism,⁵ although he separated nostalgia and historical mimicry, whilst we argue herewith that nostalgia and mimicry are motivation and action of the same idea of historicism₂ and is distinct from the other two senses. Whilst we are familiar with post-modern historicism₂, all design architects engage with some manner of precedent and invariably historicism₃ is inevitable as a contributory study to the activity of architectural design.⁶ Even in the extreme instance where history is decried, it has to be firstly present and accounted for to be dismissed, for example by Peter Eisenman.⁷ Ironically, Eisenman's mentor Colin Rowe, was part of a teaching crew with Bernard Hoesli that claimed to have liberated historical precedent from the shackles of the Beaux Arts method and transformed precedent to an active agent in the process of design knowledge, via the processes of diagramming 'history'.⁸ It has been argued that modern Swiss Architecture, e.g. that of Herzog and DeMeuron, is a product of this teaching,⁹ though one must counter this rather narrow and romantic view with conspicuous the oversight of the now historically distanced post-modern episode, which seemed to privilege the study of historical precedent in quite different ways, and which graced the rest of the world with their pastel coloured existence. One of the issues that had arisen in the post-modern era of the late twentieth century is that of tradition, and its confusion with history.

Regardless of the lack of homage that the present might care to acknowledge both history and tradition invariably influence the present. As forms of knowledge they are not limited to reference of what is known, but how that past actively informs the crafting of new ideas. The distinction between history and tradition can be clarified from the observation of vernacular craft. In vernacular craft continuity is assured through the unselfconscious propagation of a limited set of constraints that preserves authentic unity and meaning, and which we refer to as 'tradition'. Unlike 'history', knowledge in the traditional sense is present only in the immediate past, and is made available to subsequent generations. Truth is self-evident and meaningful creative craft is organically stable with incremental and gradual change. Tradition is linear whilst History operates as an open ended selective matrix. Fischer von Erlach offered a History of Architectural examples in his *Entwurf einer historischen architectur* published in 1725.¹⁰ His Karlskirche in Vienna demonstrated this rupture with linear time as the eclectic references have no traditional continuity but show rather how historically open the matrix could be. Stanford Anderson argued that the adoption of historical reconstructions from such a disconnected matrix ironically creates

a distance from the past as opposed to the adjacency offered via traditional linearity.¹¹

W.A. Eden defined the process of architectural tradition as an act of transmitting or handing down involving at least two parties and scrupulously commented that the transaction may be hampered by inadequacies of thorough receipt or complete transmission.¹² At the height of postmodernity in the late twentieth century, John Hancock addressed this dilemma directly with a theory of precedent. In his theory, he set out to limit historical diversity such that there would be convincing limits, returning to the traditional approach of classical rhetoric *pace* the reliance on the modern rationality. Hancock argued that architecture could be durable without being timeless, valuable without being absolute, and justifiable without being wholly and utterly true.¹³ Hancock's theory was influenced by his analysis of the similarities and differences between the architectural and the legal professional and the scientific tradition. He noted that architecture differs inherently in its processes of dealing with historical precedent; architecture cannot supersede precedent like a dead law or a disproved hypothesis but accumulates in a referential repository called history, as its created nature, *natura naturata*, with re-usable exemplars. As exemplars, there is firstly historical precedent by accumulation, 'where prior work constitutes the necessary background in a line of continuing development and to which new work is in proximity; secondly, precedent by analogy, 'where prior work reveals the previous solutions for similar problems, which new work resembles in overall organisation; and finally, precedent by application, 'where prior work is the durable embodiment of the appropriate effectiveness of rules, techniques, or ideas, from which new work adapts or reuses precepts in new situations.'¹⁴

Certainly in practice, tertiary education and in scholarship, architectural history and the history of architectural ideas have not always been as closely connected as has been assumed. Many historical architectural constructions have been recorded and studied, but not all have been theorised. The position of precedent in either historical or traditional sense is seldom outlined when brought to bear on a new work of architecture. In historiographical argument, precedent might take an evidentiary role, but in practice, evidence has no quarter in the activity of design. A little-known book arising from a conference published several articles of varying scholarship, position and perspectives that have mused on the relationship of Architectural history and the design studio.¹⁵ In one article David Dunster calls *Theory* 'the trade union' of ideas.¹⁶ There seems to be a disconnection at several levels between the discourses of architectural history and the history of architectural ideas. Several others in the same title, published at a time when French Literary Theory was perspiring and reaching its exhaustion in fashionable Architectural thought, have also noted this view. The assumption that empirical description of implicit acts of design automatically results in theory also neglects the formative and contextualising role played by ideas, knowledge and interpretation in creative acts of architectural embodiment. British architectural history from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for instance is well known, but has seldom been understood in a strong theoretical framework on its own terms. Inigo Jones and Lord Burlington never propagated architectural ideas in their own names but in the name of Palladio, and Eduard Sekler was at pains in his attempt to re-inscribe Wren into continental European discourse.¹⁷

Habermas has famously argued the case of the increasing rational social conditions of modernity,¹⁸ and further to the rationalisation of architectural culture, both Architectural History and the History of Architectural Ideas seem to be disconnected in the present given the dual dominance of the scientific and the moral-ecological paradigms, the latter creating a fervent religiosity around its ideology that seems to have affected architectural thought and practice unproductively, resulting in the systematic policing of new building designs to meet bureaucratic standards of risk aversion, and which have not demonstrated significant, if any, reduction of

those environmental risks. There is crass commercial greed in every quarter of life, building development included – at the heart of this is the fact that new building development is artificial at its core, and is at odds with natural ecology. Has architecture not always been about the mediation of inhabitation on territorial environment? C.P. Snow has already famously noted the absence of a genuine dialogue between the sciences and the humanities,¹⁹ and perhaps Snow’s accusation of luddites rings true once more: it is not clear if the environmental lobby has realised how much of its discourse is not fundamentally ecological but reflects the desired prolongation of artificial interests and habitats with prescribed abstinences in a rather luddite manner than seems to have no optimism in new technological or creative solutions in the fear for the future.

The erosion of historical thought as an activator is also prominent in the current interest in parametrically controlled generation of emergent shapes as possible morphological variations fit for human inhabitation. Space, and the ordering of it now seem all but secondary in much of current architectural production. The profession is vulnerable once again to its actual purpose and place in society. The expertise of the architect is currently exposed to colonisation, and it is with caution that one embarks on its defence. It would seem opportune then in this volume to return to this question of the dialogue between ideas and history, to return to the stuff of architecture and examine its dialogue with its activity of design.

In his essay *Von eine arman recihen manne* published in 1900 (Loos, 1921), translated as “The Poor little Rich Man”,²⁰ Adolf Loos discuss the limits of the activity of design through the parable of the architect’s intrusion into the life of a client - the “rich man”. Loos does not concretely outline the limits in legislative declaration, but rather communicates a resonant lesson through the form of a parable. In so doing he understood that architectural knowledge could be profoundly communicated symbolically or poetically, in a manner that would be corrupted or limited if it were not. Had he declared finite limits of architectural design, the lesson of design limits could not have been communicated with the same profundity. Not requiring precise knowledge of limits, the reader of the story nevertheless understands a moral sense of limits tacitly. The understanding of architectural space as a phenomenal entity is similar, we cannot be precise about spatial boundaries but we can recognise it and understand it: we never admit to having an insufficient numerical measure of space, but we will declare insufficiency as ‘not enough’. Nikolaus-Ion Terzoglou’s essay traces detailed ideas of space from Newton to Boullée to uncover the ‘mental space’ so as to locate the conceptual ground of architecture. Arguing for a theoretical resolution between form and function, John Hendrix presents a survey of what he calls contradiction, and offers a case in demonstration of a proposed resolution. Estelle Maré’s study of Leonardo’s thought experiments in this volume examines his creative process and the influence of themes of concatenation and linkages. Discussing the precision of knowledge, and validating our example of Loos’ parable of tacit understanding in architectural knowledge, Maré observes: “His (ed. Leonardo da Vinci’s) scientific enquiry into anatomy by means of dissection was expressed in precise terms in anatomical drawings, while his architectural sketches of churches may be interpreted as works of fiction in which he expresses their mediating function between human beings and an infinite cosmos that in his era could only be symbolically understood.” Gerald Steyn’s examines Le Corbusier’s town planning ideas and reveals historical sources, and offers a view that challenges conventional notions that Le Corbusier’s modernist work ruptured with historical knowledge. Steyn Diez-Pastor’s notion of *Architectology* supports the idea that the commonality of architectural knowledge is generated by the specificity of the discipline. Tzonis and Lefavre’s paper, updated and republished here for its cogency on the subject, and argue for a revitalised sense of historical understanding, as they quote Wölfflin (1888): “We still have to find the path that leads from the cell of the scholar to the mason’s yard.” Indeed.

Notes

- 1 See e.g. Tzonis, Alexander & Lefaivre, Leanne. (1984)
- 2 Bialostocki, Jan. (1963: 19-30)
- 3 Jarzombek, M. (1999: 488–493) & Jarzombek, M (1999: 197–206). These papers share the same ethos and to some extent content and argument.
- 4 Popper, Karl R. (1986). Also see: F Meinecke, (1972). Latterly, historicism² and historicism³, have become the subjects of Van Pelt & Westfall (1991)
- 5 Colquhoun, Alan. (1991: 3–31)
- 6 The study of precedents is often called ‘research’ and this adds to the confusion of academic research.
- 7 Eisenman, P. (1984: 155–173)
- 8 Caragonne, Alexander. (1995) See also: Jansen, Jürg (1989)
- 9 Hanisch, R., & Spier, S. (2012: 655–686)
- 10 Fischer von Erlach, J. B. (1725) For an English version see: Fischer von Erlach, J. B. (1737)
- 11 Anderson, Stanford. (1982: 109-118)
- 12 Eden, W A. (1942)
- 13 Hancock, John. (1986: 65-77)
- 14 Hancock, John (1986: 66-68)
- 15 Hardy, Adam, and Necdet Teymur. (1996).
- 16 Dunster, David. (1996: 130)
- 17 Sekler, Eduard F. (1956)
- 18 Habermas, J., & Ben-Habib, S. (1981: 3–14)
- 19 Snow, C. P. (1964)
- 20 The essay was written as a veiled attack on J.M. Olbrich and was originally published in *Neus Wiener Tagblatt* on 26 April 1900.

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