

Architecture, historicism and historiography

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This paper considers the legacy of historicism and debates within modern/post-modern historiography – especially in the work of Keith Jenkins, Michael Podro and Hayden White – and discusses how these crucial perspectives have influenced the field of architectural studies and design. A leading question of the paper concerns the use of history in design, as well as the relation of architecture to tradition, modernity and post-modernity.

Key words: architecture, historicism, postmodern historiography

Argitektuur, historisisme en historiografie

Hierdie artikel beskou die nalatenskap van historisisme en debate in modern/postmoderne historiografie – veral in die werk van Keith Jenkins, Michael Podro en Hayden White – en bespreek hoe hierdie kritieke perspektiewe die veld van argitektuur en ontwerp beïnvloed het. 'n Leidende vraag in die artikel hou verband met die gebruik van geskiedenis in ontwerp, asook die verwantskap tussen argitektuur tot tradisie, moderniteit en postmodernisme.

Sleutelwoorde: argitektuur, historisisme, postmoderne historiografie

This paper considers questions of historiography as applied to architecture, and contemporary debates over historicism. The paper opens with a discussion of the literary nature of historical study before moving to consider, and criticise, various ways in which narrative forms and concepts – in particular the concepts of the origin, of the emergence and of plurality – have contributed to our understanding of architectural history.

At the start, it is necessary to consider the following three words: 'history', 'historicism' and 'historiography'. First, for the purpose of this paper, a distinction should be made between the past – namely that which happened – and the historical account, be it oral or written, what attempts to capture, preserve and/or to criticise that self-same past. From this it may be observed that *history* is a representation of the past and not the past per se; that various forms of historical representation are possible; and broadly speaking it is possible to distinguish between grand historical narratives (i.e. 'H'istory, with a capital 'H') that aim to capture the large picture from a singular perspective, versus more situated or micro histories (i.e. 'h'istory, with a lower case 'h') that are rather more focused and less sweeping in their scope – a distinction to which the paper will return. Second, the term *historicism* is commonly used to designate the academic study of the past, a study that hopes to know the past without bias – to know it the way it was.¹ Third, the word *historiography* refers to the methods that inform historical study as well as the corpus of historical narratives – texts that often differ according to their methods, perspective and/or literary approach.

With these definitions in mind, it may be observed that historicism, in its modern guise has been an attempt to establish a correct representation of the past, but is this really possible? Can the historian/critic, metaphorically speaking, 'travel' back in time, via academic study, to retrieve the past and thereby represent it, without bias, in a manner that is intelligible for our time? Keith Jenkins' book *The Postmodern History Reader* (1997) provides an excellent collection of readings that introduce contemporary debate over the tradition of historicism – debate that is largely hinged upon a 'modern' defense of the claims of historicism versus a

postmodern skepticism toward the same. An excellent feature of this book is the way Jenkins has compiled essays from leading thinkers in the field, and various sides of the debate are richly represented. Indeed an encounter with this book will likely change one's understanding of history, irrespective of which side of the debate one wishes to support.

In a nutshell, the postmodern position, as championed by Jenkins himself, thinks that a truly objective history is not possible: that historical study always was and always will be aligned to some form of ideological bias, and that such invariably issues from the embedded, present centered interests of the author, his/her ideological perspective. Returning to the former definition of the word history, Jenkins distinguishes between the past as a set of actual occurrences, preserved via evidence, and the historical narrative – or literary structure – that is used to tell the story of what happened (Jenkins 1991: 5-8). This distinction is important because the existence of evidence does not necessarily mean that there is a story line that connects and explains the so-called 'facts'. A leading point that Jenkins makes in the introduction to his *Reader* (1997) is that historians have tended to conflate *empiricism* with *realism* – where empiricism is concerned with establishing the facts, and where realism is concerned with an account of what really happened. Paraphrasing McLennan, Jenkins states:

empiricism is not entailed by realism. It only appears as if empiricism is a property of realism rather than just being contingently connected on occasion. Therefore from the acceptance of the ontological actuality of the past no epistemology or method of any kind whatsoever necessarily follows ... [and later he adds] ... empiricism as a method, just cannot account for the significance it gives to the selection, distribution and weighting of "the facts" in finished narratives. The facts cannot themselves indicate their significance as though it were inherent in them, (Jenkins 1997: 10).

In other words, it's through empirical study that historians establish the so-called 'facts' of the case. But it is through narrative, or story telling, that the facts are connected and the assumption of a 'realism' is achieved. Realism is the construal of language, and does not issue, directly, from the collecting of historical information. As Hayden White explains,

[t]here is an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena. The relativity of the representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding. (Ibid: 392)

The conflation of empiricism with realism is convenient, because it precisely obscures the narrative structure and interpretive devices of the historical account. Without doubt, history is a narrative, and narrative relies upon language to tell its story, the implications of which, however, have not always been well considered. In what way, then, does narrative affect the portrayal of history? There are three leading points that are worth considering in this regard, namely: selecting and combining; the status of evidence; and interpretation, perspective and theory.

Selecting and combining

It's simply not possible to write an account of everything that ever happened, which is due to what might be called the near infinite density of human life, the web of thought, imagination and deed. The only reliable way to 'capture it all' would be to hit rewind and replay the entire saga all over again – and, of course, as much is not possible. Yet – and this is the really important point – even if a replay were possible, it would not, in any case, produce a comprehensible, digestible understanding of the past. The blunt truth of the matter is that the past, in order to be rendered comprehensible, must be represented through a history that simplifies and domesticates the very thing it claims to capture.

The historian must gather as much information as she can find – and there will always be evidence that is missing – the historian must select the ‘facts’ that she wants to report on and finally she must construct a narrative that connects them. Two levels of interpretation are already at stake here. To select a piece of evidence is already to judge the status of its significance, and this significance is further qualified by the way the narrative connects it with other significant bits of evidence. As a consequence it may be noted, that the import of the ‘evidence’ is really the sense that the narrative brings to bear upon it – because the narrative is, precisely, the act of selecting and combining.

This realisation leads to an interesting question as to what constitutes a historic event. For sure things happen, indeed many things happen all the time. But, when it comes to the narrating of history, some occurrences are deemed to be more important than others, and thereby acquire the status of an event. Events are marked by dates, and get concretised through images and a verbal description that naturalise them. Yet it’s often possible to tell the ‘same’ story – or, more or less so – through a different selection of events. Indeed it’s even possible, broadly speaking, to share the same ideological commitment whilst telling the story in a different way. From this it may be concluded that it’s the historians’ narrative that confers the status of an event upon what happened, and not the other way round. And, this is not to say that history is mere fiction. To be sure, the literary construal features in historical narratives, but this is not the same as saying that a historian is free to lie about the evidence that is available to him – the invention of lies exists in another category, entirely.

The status of evidence

Regarding ‘facts’ and of evidence, there can be no doubt that there is a historical substance in the form of archaeology, photographs, eye witness accounts, diaries, documents and texts of various kinds. And one might argue that the ‘facts’ at least are given, and that it is merely the interpretative properties of the historian’s narrative that allows for bias – and this is hardly an unusual view. Yet this assumption is not entirely clear. In many cases the most reliable, or at least the most informative forms of evidence, exist in written form. Let’s say that one wishes to reconstruct the plans of a ruined building. Archaeological remains are ‘definite’ but fragmentary and therefore somewhat indeterminate – reconstruction would most likely require a fair degree of guesswork. A written description of the building, by someone who saw it in its entirety before its ruin might be more informative. But the hitch here is that the written description already takes the form of a narrative, and thus is already affected in terms of what was observed regarding the linguistic structure of selecting and combining. In poststructural terms, it may be argued that there are no ‘pre-discursive’ facts, because what might be call evidence is already constituted within a discursive field of deemed significance, and therefore of prior interpretation. Once again this does not mean to say that a historian may invent his own evidence, and one would expect good academic histories to be the kind that are open to the unforeseen, narratives that are deeply empirical in their attention to the fine details of all known forms of evidence.²

Interpretation, perspective and theory

These considerations help to demonstrate that histories are truly interpretive, and by the same token, histories are also projective of a certain way of thinking, of a certain perspective on things. To illustrate this point, one may consider the ‘official history’ of the bridge that was built across a valley– a triumph for the nation, and a paradigm of ‘humanistic’ ingenuity. But

conveniently ignored in this official account is the misery of the builders who risked their lives to build the bridge – indeed many of whom died in the process, died to build a bridge whose primary purpose is to carry the goods that have made those with wealth all the more wealthy still. If told from the perspective of the builders/the workers, the narrative is likely to change. And the point here is not merely that the one view is right and the other wrong – as if we could ever finally know – but rather that the social is plural, and often times is conflicted to the core, such that in many cases the social field cannot be represented through the motions of a singular narrative. Histories are written from different vantage points and with the intention to achieve different forms of understanding such that a leading question that must be asked is “a history for whom”? It is here that the big questions of gender, of race and of class become relevant. Histories are positioned just as they are positioning, and naturally, one should aim to open one’s mind and become more attentive to the historical perspectives that issue from others. Historical perspectives are also informed by theory – that is the methods and kind of approach that are used to inform a particular view. As Jenkins so aptly puts it, “In the end history is theory and theory is ideology and ideology just is material interests” (Jenkins 1991: 19).

Common emplotments of art ‘H’istory

If histories are constructed through narrative, then the question emerges as to what kinds of plot – emplotments – are used by histories of architecture and of art? Admittedly this question – as to the emplotment – seems, intuitively somewhat abstract and removed from the reality of history. And yet, oddly, the study of emplotments allows for more fidelity than is the case with the substance of history. This is so because the emplotment is the feature of the historical text that is, quite literally speaking, present to hand, whereas the substance of the historical narrative is precisely what has been lost to the past. And, it clearly is the case that certain styles of emplotment have had a profound influence upon the historiography of art. In this respect, this paper shall now consider the well-known concepts of *period style* and of *movement*.³

What might be called ‘traditional’ histories of art – following the lead of early art historiography, for example the work of Winckelmann or Hegel – are mostly histories of style. A period, which is delimited by clearly established dates, is said to possess a style. And, there is a relation between the more individual style of an artist and the period style that he or she exemplifies. Indeed, in many cases, individual styles are deemed to be a variance of the period style. And a correlate to this is that the aesthetic definition of the period style may be used to distinguish artistic genius – because as it turns out, not all artists are equally representative of the period style. This narrative makes for sensational reading, and it’s not the author’s intention to say that this approach is without merit. But is this description adequate, or entirely true?

An artistic period is also, often deemed to have an inner motion, a certain compulsion toward a perfection and a fall. The cycle normally goes like this: an early stage, a mature stage, a late stage and finally a decadent stage which give impetus to a new style, and the entire cycle repeats once again. In much art and architectural history it appears that artistic expression is pre-determined to follow this cycle, or some version of it. An important aspect of the cycle is to define the high point – an event marked by a date and an aesthetic character – the point of greatest genius up to which each successive work slowly aspires, and after which everything slowly declines. Once again this makes for a sensational read and it’s not the authors’ intention to say that this approach is without merit. But again, is this description adequate, or entirely true?

Jenkins notes:

Even the most empirical chronicler has to invent narrative structures to give shape to time and space ... And because stories emphasize linkages and play down the role of breaks, of rupture, then, concludes Lowenthal, histories as known to us appear more comprehensive than we have any reason to believe the past was, (Jenkins 1991: 13).

And here lies the leading problem with interpretations of period style and of movement, namely the blind spots that are exorcised out of the narrative framework. Why must a building that arrives prior to the high point be appreciated purely in terms of what it supposedly led up too, rather than being appreciated in terms of some inner merit, or upon some other terms entirely? Furthermore, the narrative of ‘good’ style tends to ignore works that contradict the assumed motion of history, and the resulting account is all too often prone to a censoring moralism.⁴ And so here lies the big question: how much of the historical narrative corresponds to the actuality of the past, and how much of the narrative is a construct of the historians’ perspective, his present centered interests and ideologies?

History, criticism and design

Having sketched, in broad terms, the argument for the narrative properties of historical study, it is prudent to consider what is perhaps a more fundamental question: namely why historical studies are relevant for architectural design, and in doing so, this opens a discussion of history in the upper and lower case – i.e. ‘H’istory versus ‘h’istory.



Figure 1

Albrecht Dürer, *A man drawing a recumbent woman*, 1538, woodcut (source: Kurth 1936: plate 340).

The study and criticism of history is important for architectural studies because histories are written to explicate or to vindicate a certain mode of practice. Histories both inform design and lend authority to the practice of design, such that these three history/theory/practice are thoroughly intertwined. Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut of 1538, ‘A man drawing a recumbent woman’, depicts an artist who draws from a model, with the aid of a grid – i.e. a scientific/descriptive device (see figure 1). This work, obviously, may be interpreted in various ways. For the purpose of this paper, however, this work is selected to illustrate an architects’ investment in the past. Now there are at least two important ways in which history may serve as an artistic/

productive model for architecture. Firstly, in many cases new designs are derived, or are informed by deviations and transformations of past designs. History is a model, and architects draw from the model that is history – history is on the couch. Secondly, the valences, techniques and forms of knowledge – including historical knowledge and judgment – that enable practice are, themselves, derived or transformed in relation to the past. With respect to Dürer’s woodcut, the describing grid is a projection from the present, one that is already informed by former projections that have occurred in the past – i.e. an architect draws with instruments that are themselves drawn from the history-as-model of the past. Historical construction is also on the couch.

History is almost like architecture’s ‘science’ in that it provides the techniques and forms of knowledge that are required for design, as well as the substance of aesthetic re-imagination. And since imagination is deeply embedded in the flux of time, the so-called ‘critical’ and ‘self-anointed’ practice of architectural criticism is more like one giant group psycho-therapy session with history on the couch. Architecture has always involved itself in a conversation with the past – to repeat or to deviate from historical precedent. And for which reason it is helpful to consider two limit conditions that have profoundly influenced architectural historiography, conditions that are tied to constructions of ‘H’istory with a capital ‘H’ – these being histories of the sweeping and aggrandising kinds. Hence the paper now moves to consider the assumed authority of the ‘origin’ which issues from the past, and the assumed authority of ‘progress’ which projects into the future

An assumed authority of ‘origin’

It is well known that western classicism was modeled upon Roman copies of Greek architecture, and for which reason the writings of Vitruvius – *The Ten Books of Architecture* – were deemed to be a primary influence, and an originary form of evidence. The genius of Renaissance architecture was modeled on Greek origins – and the assumed authority of the origin is a theme that is well known to architectural history. Once more, in the 18th century, the so called Age of Enlightenment, Marc-Antoine Laugier’s mythical account (Laugier 1955) of the ‘little rustic hut’ (see figure 2), spoke of the primitive origin of architecture, in an attempt to ground a contemporary architectural theory on the premise of reason and of nature. Laugier’s rationalism of the ‘origin’ is one that would have far reaching effect, in a line of flight that connects 18th century rationalist classicism (for example Claude Perrault’s East façade of the Louvre, 1667-74), to the rationalist functionalism of the Modern Movement (for example the Farnsworth House, by Mies van der Rohe, 1945-51), and is one that has had a profound bearing upon our recent past.⁵ The authority of an historical origin is here, firmly ‘on the couch’.

In the authors’ estimation, there is nothing inherently ‘wrong’ with an artistic imagination derived from a concept of the origin. But, a call to an exclusive and exclusionary authority of the origin, one that is invariably linked to the pejorative grand theses of Progress, of Nation and/or of Kin, is deeply disturbing. In his essay, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Michel Foucault presets a far-reaching critique of the historiography of the origin. Foucault notes three discursive traits – or ideological features – of the origin, namely: one, its ‘attempt to capture the exact essence of things’(and in Laugier we have the assumption of an ‘inherent’ rationality of architecture, which of course is also to exclude other equally important qualities); two, the origin precedes the fall (again, in Laugier, we must note his worry over the caprice of 18th century design, and his attempt to ground a rational theory that may answer to this troubled condition), three, and

linked to the other two is the notion of the origin as ‘the site of truth’ (lastly, in Laugier, the rustic hut is the singular, paradigm of architectural purity and of truth).



Figure 2
Marc Antoine Laugier, frontispiece to *Essai Sur l'Architecture*, 1755, illustrated by Charles-Dominique-Joseph Eisen (source: Laugier 1979: IV).

Foucault uses Nietzsche to untie the knot of this discursive trinity, hence regarding the first point, the essence of the origin, Foucault writes:

if the genealogist ... listens to history, he finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence ... What is found at the historical beginning is not the inviolable identity of the origin; it is the dissension of things. It is disparity. History also teaches to laugh at the solemnities of the origin (Rabinow 1984: 78 – 79).

Regarding the second point, the origin that precedes the fall, Foucault writes, “... historical beginnings are lowly, not in the sense of modest or discrete like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation.” (Ibid. 79) And finally, regarding the third point, the origin as ‘the site of truth’, “[f]rom the vantage of an absolute distance ... the origin makes possible a field of knowledge whose function is to recover it, but always in a false recognition due to the excesses of its own speech. The origin lies at a place of inevitable loss ...” (Ibid. 79).

In other words the selection of an origin – one that is arbitrarily lifted from the flux of time – sets out the logic for the history that will discover it. The logic of the origin is circular. And so finally from Foucault, “[t]he genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin, somewhat in the manner of the pious philosopher who needs a doctor to exorcise the shadow of his soul.” (Ibid. 80)

An assumed authority of ‘progress’

A further limit condition is that of a flight into the future, and its incumbent denial of the past. In *Towards a New Architecture*, Le Corbusier proclaims the necessity of a new architecture for a new era, one that requires a fundamental break from the past. As Le Corbusier puts it:

A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit. Industry, overwhelming us like a flood which rolls on toward its destined ends, has furnished us with new tools adapted to this new epoch, animated by the new spirit ... If this new fact be set against the past, then you have a revolution (Le Corbusier 1931: 6-7).

With Le Corbusier ‘the machine’ is proposed as the model for architectural aesthetics – the machine, rather than history, is now on the couch (see figure 3). Architectural modernism in its so-called ‘Heroic Phase’ may appear to reject history, but the modernist project was in fact steeped in historicist assumptions. To be modern is to reject tradition, and to do so requires, precisely, a theoretical conception of historical process, a conception of progress. Modernism requires antiquity, just as rationality requires myth and just as modern man requires the so-called ‘savage’ with whom he may choose to do battle as his ‘other’.



Figure 3
Le Corbusier, photograph of an airplane from *Towards a New Architecture*
(source: Le Corbusier 1931:105).

In his recent book, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, Anthony Vidler (Vidler 2008) provides an illuminating discussion of the historiography that would, eventually, be enlisted in support of the modern movement. He notes that the intended break with the past required a historical narration of the before and the after. It is one that required at least three lines of thought, namely: first, that modernist history/theory had to demonstrate the fundamental antiquity of the past; second, that modernist history/theory had to construct narratives of the pre-history of modernism to show how it had emerged from its past; and third, according to Vidler, modernist history/theory had to redraw a notion of progress via a repertoire of formal and spatial motifs (Ibid.). Vidler also notes at least two stages in the historiography of the modern movement. An early stage from about 1930 – 40, represented by Pevsner, Hitchcock, Johnson and Gideon, where the leading notions of a fundamental break with the past were developed. And a later generation, post 1950, represented by Kaufmann, Rowe, Banham and Tafuri – the subject of his book – historians who followed a more self-consciously critical history of the modern, one that pushed back in time linking modernity with its various pre-figurations in the past. In so doing history was effectively re-cooperated for modernism – a history presented as the authoring *telos* of modern progress (Ibid.).

It is helpful to return to Foucault – in *Nietzsche, Genealogy and History* – who locates the assumed promise and authority of progress in the principle of “emergence, the moment of arising ... Emergence is thus the entry of forces; it is their eruption, the leap from the wings to center stage, each in its youthful strength” (Ibid. 83 – 84). And then he follows with an insightful critique of the progressive posturing’s of the emergence, “... no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it already occurs in the interstice. In a sense, only a single drama is ever staged in this ‘non-place’, the endlessly repeated play of dominations” (Ibid. 85). Hence for Foucault, progress, ironically involves a repeating of the same, the renewal of a traumatic drama. Indeed these words from Foucault, and our recent past bares this out. I think we know full well about the failed and conflicted utopias of the modernists, and of the postmodernists.

So, in summary, there is this pair of ‘limit’ conditions – limits of the origin and of progress – both of which have forcefully impressed themselves upon architectural ‘H’istory, transforming the flux of time into a fully determined *telos* of events. Although potentially innocent within themselves, these notions of origin and of progress have, inevitable twined with grander theses that result in a disturbing form of blindness, and an inflexible law of force. At first glance it might be assumed that the authority of the origin and of progress are opposed, for where the former pushes back into the past, the latter projects forward into the future. Yet this is not so, for on the contrary we may observe that the value of the origin, and the flight of progress support each other. This is so because the projection of progress requires a break from the past, and that break is invariably captured through the determinate logic of the origin. And in which case ‘H’istories (spelt with a capital ‘H’) of the origin and of progress are nothing but the circularity of narcissism, whose real interest is to preserve the perspectives of the present.

Approaching history in the lower case

To recapitulate, history is a constructed body of knowledge about the past. History doesn’t happen, it gets written, and it should be noted that the narratives, methods and convictions that produce history have changed through time – hence the opportunity to study a history of history, which has been considered here through discussing the limits of the origin and of progress. That said, this paper now considers the recent turn to ‘h’istory in the lower case – this being more

focused, detailed histories, the kind that attempt to answer to the censoring circularity of upper case history.

Michael Podro's fascinating three-stage account of the development of German Art historicism, from his celebrated book *The Critical Historians of Art* (Podro 1982), is insightful for approaching this topic. The line of Podro's enquiry in his book extends over roughly a century of European art, from 1827 – 1927, and in doing so he presents a convincing case, one that makes for a fascinating build up to the position that informs much criticism today. In the first chapter of his book Podro ventures his suggestion of a three-stage development of art history, which he develops as follow. The first stage, says Podro, "accommodated alien art only as a deviant or as a precursor of the writers own norm" (Ibid: 4), with Winckelmann being illustrative of this stage. In other words a normative commitment in the present was used, somewhat inflexibly, to judge the art of the past. Building upon this, one might argue that the commitment to an aesthetic 'tradition', one that is deemed to result from the seamless continuity of a norm, is a variant of this approach. It is one that results in a present re-enactment of the past-ness of the past, rather than a fully-fledged critical conversation with that past.

The second stage, which issues from Hegel, occurs where historians become more aware as to the differences that issue from the past – i.e. that the present is not the past, indeed that there are a variety of different pasts. A realisation that requires one to consider "different criteria and ... [therefore] different norms" (Ibid.) in the appreciation of art. For Podro, this realization brings to question the key motivating issue of the critical historians of art: given that the present way of thinking and appreciating art differ from that of the past, how is the art of the past knowable today? How does history retrieve and appreciate a range of historically embedded norms that differ from those of the present? In attempting to answer this problem, the critical historians had tended to ask what aspect of art might belong to art itself, and in so doing might transcend time, rendering art knowable. Finally, according to Podro, a third stage was to follow, where "a general conception of art was constructed, of which particular arts were seen as modes of manifestation" (Ibid.), and for which Panofsky may serve as an example. In other words art history now serves to demonstrate particular aspects of a super-theorised conception of art.

Reflecting on Podro's three stages, one may note a general movement toward an increasingly philosophical conception of art, one that seeks to accommodate the relativising of aesthetic values. Podro is also painfully aware as to the problems that emerge from this trajectory, namely the impossibility to think with any certainty beyond the horizon of an embedded historicity – that present-centeredness obscures appreciation of the past. And as conclusion to his book Podro ventures the notion of a "Multiplicity of Viewpoints" (Ibid. 213) to answer the problem of an embedded historicity, in an attempt to retain a semblance of the critical tradition. And, arguably, this is precisely the position that informs much criticism today.

In recent years art/architectural criticism has entered a new stage, that of an aesthetic nominalism – or a 'partial' nominalism. The position today is one of an aesthetic nominalism in that, it is possible to enjoy the Beatles whilst shopping at the mall, to relish a radio broadcast of Mozart on the way back home and pour over a book on Baroque architecture whilst sitting in a Miesian minimalist interior as the Sex Pistols blast, delightfully from the stereo. This may be accomplished, because in our time, we are witness to a near total emancipation of the aesthetic domain, the effects of which is almost impossible to resist or to escape. The position of an aesthetic nominalism comes in, precisely, with an attempt to theorise art – and human creation of various kinds – in its entirety, for aesthetic theory now needs to run the full gambit from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to Duchamp's Urinal, from Albinoni to Zappa, from Alberti to

Zaha Hadid, and quite frankly there is little that may, assuredly, be said in an attempt to capture the deepest meaning of it all. Universalising assumptions as to the ‘essence’ of art appear to retreat from us, and in exchange we soon discover that particular aesthetic theories and formulations are better suited to the qualities of specific works. Hence aesthetic ideals proliferate to match the equal proliferation of artistic imaginations, which is to say that aesthetic theory has been rendered partial and open-ended, for most today.

This aesthetic nominalism – or if one prefers, the context of an expanding plurality of differing aesthetic values – parallels the new historiography of art, namely the trend, wide-spread today to replace art and architectural ‘H’istory conceived as a separate and autonomous field, with more culturally staged ‘h’istories set within and around the production of art/architecture, and to do so through focused studies that are richly layered and are attentive to peculiar qualities of uniqueness and difference. Because, in truth, everything about the architect, her life, her work, her patrons and clients as well as the reception of her work, everything of importance here also belong to cultural history, and to society at large; which is not to say that there is no room left for aesthetic theory. To the contrary, aesthetic and interpretive theory is as important as ever, only now interpretation accepts the sway of plurality, theory is pragmatically aligned to the specificity of the case that is to hand, and a critic is free to adopt different theoretical postures for different occasions.

The turn toward more culturally specific, micro and detailed histories of architecture and of art, results, in part, from what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has called an “incredulity to metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). And indeed, most do approach the old school grand narratives of art/architectural history – for instance a sweeping progress from the Greeks to Modernity – with a solid dose of skepticism. However, and here’s the catch, just how long is a piece of string? When do micro-narratives cease being implicated in macro-narratives? Where’s the illusive cut-off point between the micro and macro, where is the threshold between? Actually, this profound question cannot be answered. And so, Keith Jenkins is correct where he argues that the critique of historical construction – which is how this paper began, namely the disassociation of empiricism and realism – applies to ‘h’istory in the lower case every bit as much as it does to ‘H’istory in the upper case. And from this vantage, although lower case ‘h’istory allows for an increased attention to the fine grain of empirical detail, the question of narrative construction remains. In other words, lower case history is every bit as interpretive – and if you will, ideological – as its upper case companion.

So the argument is back to where it started, namely with the prospect of a present centered, past-based, future-oriented and ideologically steeped history. As Jenkins eloquently maintains:

For to argue as, as lower case practitioners do, that the study of the past should not have anything to do with being present/future oriented is, of course, exactly as present and future oriented as the argument that it should. Upper case historiography is generally quite explicit that it is using the past for, say, a trajectory into a different future. The fact that the bourgeoisie doesn’t want a different future [...] means that it doesn’t any longer need a past-based future-oriented fabrication. Thus at this point, the point where the links between the past, present and future are broken because the present is everything, the past can be neutralized and studied not for our various sakes but for ‘its own sake’. For this is exactly what is currently required, a history that is finished now that it has led right up to us. Thus to ‘pretend’ not to be present-oriented is precisely what constitutes the present-centeredness of the lower case, (Jenkins 1997: 15-16).

Conclusion

And so, in closing this paper, it may be observed that the situation today is both challenging and exhilarating, for it is one that settles the score between a so called critical history (one that is championed by architectural critics and historians) versus the creative practice of doing innovative architecture – that is, history and design are mutually on the couch. The balance is restored because both history and design are, in fact, equally embedded in the flux of time, such that the thematic content, the material substance and the desires that require expression – be it through text or image/design – are produced in the sense that they are momentarily and pragmatically combined. Architecture is modeled on the content that issues from our present-past, made known through a conversation with history, but equally so, and as counter-motion, that history is modeled on the double artifice of architecture – once in the forming of its art, twice in the writing of its history.

Notes

- 1 For a helpful discussion on architectural historicism and historiography, see Alan Colquhoun ‘Three Kinds of Historicism’ (Colquhoun 1989: 3 – 19).
- 2 It is at this point that we may introduce a distinction between different genres of narrative, for example history versus fiction versus myth – for instance see Hayden White’s elegant discussion of Paul Ricoeur (Wood 1991: 141).
- 3 Ernst Gombrich’s discussion of ‘movements and periods’ is exemplary in this regard, see (Gombrich 1969: 35 – 45).
- 4 For example, the highly evolved late classicism of Edwin Lutyens was largely ignored by modernist historiography
- 5 Laugier’s influential essay on architecture of 1755, argues that the origin of architecture in the ‘little rustic hut’, demonstrates the true essence of architectural design (Laugier 1979). It is a logic that delineates the essential components of architecture – the column, entablature and pediment. For Laugier, architecture requires a purified and rationalised expression, one that results from the re-composition of it’s essential components. In arguing this, Laugier’s interest was to support the Rationalist Classicism of his day, yet in doing so he also represents a turning point toward the future of rationalist and functionalist discourses in design.

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