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# Historicism as an aspect of a pragmatist theory of architecture

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## Abstract

4 In this essay an attempt is made to validate the historicist theories that architectural practices change over time and that architecture can be interpreted as manifestations of the beliefs existing in particular communities at a specific time. To support these theses comparisons are made between the philosophy of Hegel and the architectural theories of Pugin and Ruskin. The aspect of Hegel's philosophy that is studied is his conviction that arbitrary and contingent aspects of a particular historical existence influenced human beliefs. Pugin postulated that the beliefs and customs of the communities that architectural designers worked for influenced their designs. Ruskin also theorised that architecture was informed by local beliefs of a particular time. The results of the comparisons between the theories of Hegel, Pugin and Ruskin are used in the essay to formulate guidelines for present-day architectural practices and for interpretations of current architecture. It is suggested that designers and

interpreters of architecture should value regional and cultural differences. It is observed that the beliefs and habits of life at a particular time and place inform architects and that architecture could be interpreted as the products of regional and temporal interests. Lastly the ideas are advanced that interpretations of architectural practices vary according to the purposes of various communities and that the aims of architectural practitioners are conditioned by the goals of the communities that they work for.

## Abstrak

In hierdie artikel word 'n poging aangewend om die historistiese teorie te ondersteun dat argitektuurpraktyke verander met tyd en dat argitektuur geïnterpreteer kan word as manifestasies van dit waarin bepaalde gemeenskappe glo op 'n sekere tyd. Om hierdie stellings te ondersteun word die filosofie van Hegel vergelyk met die argitektuurteorie van Pugin en Ruskin. Die

bepaalde aspek van Hegel se filosofie wat bestudeer word is sy oortuiging dat arbitrêre en voorwaardelike aspekte van 'n spesifieke historiese bestaan menslike oortuiginge beïnvloed. Pugin het gepostuleer dat die oortuiginge en gewoontes van die gemeenskappe waarvoor argitektuurpraktisyns werk 'n invloed uitoefen op hulle ontwerpe. Ruskin het ook geskryf dat plaaslike sienings wat bestaan gedurende 'n spesifieke tyd 'n invloed het op argitektuur. Die resultate van die vergelykings tussen die teorie van Hegel, Pugin en Ruskin word gebruik in die artikel om riglyne te formuleer vir hedendaagse argitektuurpraktyke en vir interpretasies van teenwoordige argitektuur. Die voorstel word gemaak dat ontwerpers en interpreteerders van geboue die verskille wat bestaan tussen streke en kulture moet waardeer. Die opmerking word gemaak dat die menings en die lewensgewoontes wat deel is van 'n spesifieke plek en tyd argitektuurpraktisyns inlig en dat argitektuur geïnterpreteer kan word as die produkte van belangstellings wat hoort by 'n streek en 'n tyd. Die laaste idees wat voorgehou word in die artikel is dat interpretasies van argitektuurpraktyke verskil na aanleiding van die doelwitte van verskillende gemeenskappe en dat die mikpunte van argitektuurpraktisyns beïnvloed word deur die oogmerke van die gemeenskappe vir wie hulle werk.

## Curriculum vitae of the author

Anton Coetzee obtained a Bachelor's degree in Architecture with distinction from the University of Pretoria in 1981. In 1987 he obtained a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the University of South Africa. He obtained a Master's Degree in Architecture from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1989. The title of his dissertation was Postmodern aesthetic theory with reference to South African architecture. In 1998 he was awarded the degree Doctor of Philosophy (in Architecture) by the Department of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of Pretoria, for the thesis A pragmatist theory of current architecture using Rorty's perspective on Hegel.

## Historicism as an aspect of a pragmatist theory of architecture

The aim of writing this essay is to seek support for the historicist theory that architectural practices are temporal and not timeless. Historicist theories are in contrast with theories in which immutable principles are sought for architecture. This essay is part of an attempt to develop a pragmatist architectural theory in which archi-

ecture is conceived of as constituted through human concepts that are developed historically and within a particular social context.

The pragmatist theme for this essay has been provided by the opposition sketched by Rorty (1991: 55-6) between a realist view of science - as theoretical convictions guided by how things really are - and a pragmatist view of science - as an account of how beliefs and desires succeeded one another and interacted in the course of time. In Rorty's pragmatist view scientific explanations depend more on intellectual history than on "nonperspectival", objective terms.

The term "historicism" is problematic because it seems to have diametrically opposite meanings. The sense in which it is used by pragmatist architectural theorists is the view that phenomena such as architecture are manifestations of the beliefs of a particular community at a specific time.

The term "historicism" refers to the theory that social phenomena such as architecture are interpreted against the background of local beliefs and customs.

Another sense of "historicism" is the belief in the necessity of historical processes, or the belief

that such processes are governed by laws. Those subscribing to this belief think that history is immune from human agency and choice. Such a historicist view is sometimes ascribed to Hegel (Rorty 1980: 391n.29), because he believed that history developed out of necessity towards the fulfilment of the destiny of Spirit. Hegel's deterministic views are suppressed by pragmatists. Interpretations of human beliefs as temporal are also found in Hegel, and this aspect is emphasised by pragmatists. Rorty (1982: xli), for instance, is interested in Hegel primarily because of his "temporalization of rationality", in the sense that he showed how conceptual frameworks became outdated and were replaced by other new "vocabularies" as time went by (see also Hall 1994: 120).

The contents of this essay are narrated according to a historicist method, in which comparisons are made between theories of historical figures. The aim of the comparisons between historical theories is not to describe some inevitable or necessary historical progress of ideas. It is to compare past theories in a playful and experimental way, thereby acknowledging the transparency of the reconstructed historical narrative. A function of the process is to select aspects of theories that are useful to formulate a pragmatist theory of architecture. Hegel has been cho-

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sen as a character for the essay because Rorty (1980: 136-209) uses him in his description of historical changes in philosophy. The aim of Rorty's historicist narrative is to show how ideas about theoretical foundations for philosophy have been undermined in various historical examples. In this essay Hegel's philosophy will be compared with the architectural theories of Pugin and Ruskin to substantiate the thesis that architecture is not based on some essential principles, but that architectural theories and practices are historically determined.

## 1. Spirit of the age: Hegel

The idea that will be investigated in this section is found in Rorty's (1991: 120) philosophy, namely that human beliefs and desires are temporal, instead of being based on permanent principles. An aspect of this historicist thesis is found in Hegel's philosophy, namely that different historical cultures - such as Greeks and Christians - have different beliefs and aspirations that should be interpreted according to their particular objectives.

The historicist conception of architectural practices that pragmatist theorists of architecture have, is similar to Hegel's ([1807] 1977: 23) dis-

cussion of historical truths in his "Preface: on scientific cognition" in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to him, historical truths were concerned with contingent and arbitrary aspects of a particular existence. Such truths were not static, but were interpretations derived from comparisons between histories of different historical communities.

The activities of particular individuals were partly determined by the "skill and customary practice" of "a particular people or nation", according to Hegel ([1807] 1977: 213). His theory was that communal customs were particularised in individual actions and consciousness. One aspect of social actions was architectural practices, which Hegel ([1835] 1975, 2: 640) believed could not be based on *a priori* principles, because they were derived from accidental and contingent "actual historical views of life and religious pictorial ideas".

According to Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 30, 603-5) art was informed by artists' positions in frameworks of ideas, and their artistic practices were based on their understanding of humanity's place in "the scheme of things" (see also Crowther 1990: 66). His thesis was that there was a framework of ideas accepted by people making up a historical culture or epoch, and that

such a framework depended on the conception that those people had about the Divine. This framework of ideas possessed by an epoch or culture was called the "substantial spirit of peoples and ages" by Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 603; see also Gelernter 1995: 200).

It was recommended by Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 14) that scholars of art researched the historical context in which a particular work of art was placed. He believed that "every work of art belongs to its own time, its own people, its own environment, and depends on particular historical and other ideas and purposes". Hence he did not think that there was a single, universal, and unchanging ideal in art.

In the chapter on the dissolution of the Romantic form of art in his *Aesthetics*, Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 603) expressed his thesis of a spirit of the times clearly: "every man is a child of his time in every activity, whether political, religious, or scientific". He believed that each age had its own "necessary form" and "essential content" in art, and that it was the vocation of artists to express them. Therefore he did not believe that artistic form and content were based on caprice, but that art had an essential nature and higher purpose: it was "bound up with the most universal views of life and the reli-

gious interests of whole epochs and peoples" (Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 30). For an artist to be able to express the spirit of his or her age in art, he or she had to identify with the prevailing world-view and be in close contact with it, according to Hegel. He was critical of the art of his time, because he did not observe any connection between it and the prevailing spirit of the time, a phenomenon that Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 605) ascribed to the alienation of artists from their world-view. He thought that contemporary artists were indifferent to the content of their art, and that they acted on a whim in their art making.

An example of artistic practices that Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 597-9) approved of was Dutch genre painting, because it was influenced by the nationality, circumstances, locality, and activities of the artists. He thought that the depiction of prosaic aspects of everyday life was linked to the artists' Protestantism: they displayed a "pride in a cheerful daily life" (Hegel [1835] 1975, 1: 598).

Specific recommendations were made by Hegel to architects. These guidelines are taken seriously by pragmatist architects, who desire to design buildings that are particular to their context and climate:

The good sense and genius of the architect has to show itself in the complete fulfilment of a general task, namely to make his building fit the circumstances, to have regard to climate, position, the environing natural landscape, and, while attending to all these points and keeping the purpose of the building in view, to produce at the same time a freely co-ordinated and unified whole (Hegel [1835] 1975, 2: 661).

Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 76-81, 300-611) divided the history of art into three epochs, namely the Symbolic, the Classical, and the Romantic, and these different historical cultures were regarded as embodiments of the development of Spirit by him (see also Taylor 1979: 96). He thought that there were different forms of art corresponding to these three stages. The development of art was linked with the sequence of spiritual conceptions of the world by Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1: 72). As such he considered history as a movement towards some necessary purpose.

Current philosophers, such as Rorty (1989: 16, 29), no longer believe that philosophical developments or scientific advancements are getting closer to some intrinsic nature of things; they often regard present-day culture as the result of historical contingencies. Crowther (1990: 70), another present-day philosopher, agrees with

Hegel's idea that human experience grows through interaction with the "historical contents" of one's culture, but he rejects the Hegelian thought that this process follows a necessary course determined by the Absolute Spirit's striving for self-consciousness.

## **2. Architecture is a manifestation of existing opinions and circumstances: Pugin**

There are correspondences between Hegelian ideas regarding a "spirit of the age" and Pugin's *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* (1843). "The history of architecture is the history of the world" was a statement by Pugin (1843: 4) similar to the Hegelian idea that philosophy is its time grasped in thought. Pugin (1843: 45) believed that architects' designs were shaped by the manners, beliefs, religion and customs of the community in which they lived or for whom they designed, as well as by climatic conditions in the region where the building was located. He wrote that Gothic architecture was "the only correct expression of the faith, wants, and climate of our country" and that Gothic "edifices embody the principles and worship of their builders" (Pugin 1843: 4).

For Pugin (1843: 5) the architecture of his time was a "confused jumble of styles and symbols borrowed from all nations and periods"; it did not indicate "the system under which it was erected"; and it was not "the expression of existing opinions and circumstances". In contrast "the works of our great ancestors" - namely the builders of Gothic architecture - were deemed more appropriate to modern English values and hence he promoted its revival (Pugin 1843: 5).

For architectural theorists the idea that principles and conceptual frameworks are relative to a place and time indicates a denial of the possibility or desirability of an "international style". The idea that architecture can be the same all over the world derives from a belief in some ahistorical architectural essence. Such a doctrine is sometimes ascribed to architectural theory of the Enlightenment tradition. Laugier ([1753] 1977: 11), for example, believed that architecture was based on simple, natural principles, which he thought were found in a primitive state of culture. He did not distinguish between different cultural origins, and he did not think that the basic principles of architecture changed over time.

Pugin was opposed to such notions of universal

and ahistorical architectural essences. He was concerned that architecture should be suited to a particular place and its architectural character (Pugin [1841] 1973: 76). According to him architectural character was largely determined by the customs, climatic conditions, and available building materials of a particular place (Pugin 1843: 4, 37; Pugin [1836] 1973: 2; see also Clark [1928] 1974: 141-2). In his suggestions for the improvement of architectural education Pugin (1843: 20-1) wrote that students should study local architecture rather than measuring ancient Greek and Roman buildings, and that much could be learnt from native vernacular architecture.

### **3. Architecture is a manifestation of its time in stone: Ruskin**

Ruskin's theories contained much the same kind of nominalist ideas as those found in Pugin's thinking. In *The Stones of Venice* he postulated that architecture was informed by people's beliefs at a particular time. Ruskin ([1851-3] 1921, 1: 13) wrote that "Roman Christian architecture" (more commonly known as Early Christian architecture) was an "exact expression of the Christianity of the time". This statement indicates that he subscribed to historicist ideas -

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similar to those of Hegel and Pugin - that architecture was a manifestation of its time in stone. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* Ruskin stated that the value of architecture was as historical record, which should be conserved: it is well to have, not only what men have thought and felt, but what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought, and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life (Ruskin [1849] 1963: 182).

Ruskin assumed that there were links between architecture, religion, and morality during a historical epoch. This is evident in the following extract where he discussed the Renaissance:

This corruption of all architecture, especially ecclesiastical, corresponded with, and marked the state of religion over all Europe, - the peculiar degradation of the Romanist superstition, and of public morality in consequence, which brought about the Reformation (Ruskin [1851-3] 1921, 1: 21).

He thought that architecture was a material realisation of a nation's political system, life, history, and religious faith (Ruskin [1849] 1963: 203). He also wrote that "good architecture should be expressive of some great truths commonly belonging to the whole race" (Ruskin [1851-3] 1921, 2: 165).

Ruskin ([1851-3] 1921, 2: 186) believed that the "feelings and habits" of medieval workers and craftsmen had an influence on the appearance of Gothic architecture. An example of this relationship used by him was that northern medieval workers (including Englishmen, Frenchmen, Danes, and Germans) worked hard and rapidly because of the coldness of the climate (and the short summer building period), as opposed to the "languor of the Southern tribes" (Ruskin [1851-3] 1921, 2: 186-7).

Ruskin ([1851-3] 1921, 2: 187-8) interpreted architecture as products of human practices and aspirations. He saw a correlation between the "rigid lines, vigorous and various masses, and daringly projecting and independent structure of the Northern Gothic ornament" on the one hand, and a supposed northerly medieval personality characterised by a strong will, independent character, sense of purpose, and the tendency to set individual reason against authority on the other hand. He also tried to interpret architectural forms as physical manifestations of the religious faith of historical communities. A possible criticism against Ruskin's theory is that the products of human practices cannot be limited to one form, such as Gothic architecture. Both Greek revival and Gothic architecture can be interpreted as products of a particular human



practice, for example the practice of setting individual reason against authority and convention. Greek revival architecture can be interpreted as an attempt to overcome the authority of Renaissance conventions by using the supposedly correct and authentic data generated by architectural archaeologists working in Greece since the eighteenth century.

When he discussed the use of vegetative forms in Gothic architecture Ruskin ([1851-3] 1921, 2: 183) assumed explicit links between the social conditions in which architects worked and the forms they produced. For example he thought that plant forms indicated that architects lived in an agrarian society with its typically "rural and thoughtful life":

The affectionate observation of the grace and outward character of vegetation is the sure sign of a more tranquil and gentle existence, sustained by the gifts, and gladdened by the splendour, of the earth (Ruskin [1851-3] 1921, 2: 183).

Ruskin's ([1851-3] 1921, 2: 183) observation that "the new direction of mental interests marks an infinite change in the means and the habits of life" was similar to Hegel's temporal and regional understanding of social practices as

contingent on time and chance.

Hegel, Pugin and Ruskin were critical of contemporary cultural practices. They thought that artists and architects had to take local conditions and customs into account, instead of trying to discover universal and ahistorical essences. To reinvigorate cultural practices they recommended that artists and architects should study traditional art and architecture in order to meet local human needs and aspirations.

Up to this point of the essay the activity of investigating a historicist theory of architecture was limited to discussions of historicist theories that existed during the first half of the nineteenth century. In Rorty's (1998: 257) terminology, comparisons were made between great dead theorists in order to persuade the reader that a historicist theory of architecture is plausible.

In the next part of the essay the theories of Hegel, Pugin and Ruskin will be used to address present-day architectural problems in South Africa. Such a procedure is described by Rorty (1998: 254, 261) as an anachronistic theoretical inquiry in which current interests and concerns are used to select aspects and to guide interpretations of great dead theorists' work. The aspect of the Romantic views of Hegel, Pugin, and

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Ruskin that pragmatists are interested in is the idea that philosophy and architecture are products of their times.

## 4. The historicism of a pragmatist theory of architecture

To conclude this essay pragmatist rules of action for architectural practitioners and guidelines for architectural interpretations will be sought from the theories of Hegel, Pugin, and Ruskin. Three tenets have been derived from the inquiries conducted in the first three parts of this essay. Below the interpretation of the theories of Hegel, Pugin, and Ruskin will be elaborated by using current debates on similar topics. Rorty's theories will be used for this purpose as well as the work of other authors who are sympathetic to a pragmatist stance. The tenets that will be discussed are:

- 4.1 that regional identities are desired for current architectures;
- 4.2 that architectural practices are interpreted in temporal and regional contexts; and
- 4.3 that architectural needs are specific to particular communities.

### 4.1 Regional architectural identities

In contrast with a conception of an "international style" in architecture, attempts by Hegel, Pugin, and Ruskin have been described in this essay to promote cultural activities that were true to their time and that took national differences into account. They recognised that architecture was influenced by the beliefs, customs, and climates of specific cultures and regions, and advocated that local vernacular and traditional forms of architecture should be studied.

Pragmatist theorists promote a similar regionalism in architecture. In South Africa there have recently been discussions about local architectural identities. It is feasible to approach the question of a national identity by encouraging an appreciation for differences between South African cultures and between South Africa and the cultures of other nations. These differences, and the cultural diversity in South Africa, make this country unique, and give it a recognisable identity.

An appreciation of differences requires a cultivation of cultural tolerance. Guidelines are found in the writings of Rorty about how the appreciation of differences may promote tolerance and sympathy for others. In his essay "Postmodernist

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bourgeois liberalism" Rorty (1991: 197-202) denies the existence of a "supercommunity" that all humans have to identify with. His theory is that human dignity is a derivative of some specific community. According to Rorty, the interpretation of human identity as the interests of a historically conditioned community has been derived from Hegel, and he explains that a sense of identity is something that is constantly changing, adapting, and "reweaving" itself. One identifies with a group for political and moral purposes, and Rorty describes identity as the distinctive feature of a social group that is defined in contrast with other groups. A sense of identity is achieved by comparing one's own community with others, and the practices and institutions of a group are justified by the historical narratives that members of the group have of how their practices and institutions have developed. Rorty writes about the challenge of pluralistic societies, in which greater tensions exist between groups, and greater tolerance is required. South Africa is such a pluralistic society that comprises of many different cultural groups.

Jo Noero's (1988: 11-3) Alexandra Township Community Housing project is an example of an architecture in which cultural differences were appreciated. The areas of the houses ranged from a mere 17,2 square metres to 61,7 square

metres. The architect recognised that the external spaces of the houses would often be used for living and social activities, because the rooms inside were so small. In rural settlements outside areas are often surrounded by built-in seats along the courtyard walls and along the walls of the houses. The temperate and sunny climate of South Africa allows for such outdoor living. In sympathy with this cultural practice, Noero designed seating built into the house walls facing the external spaces, so that the occupants could live there in a dignified way.

In "On ethnocentrism: A reply to Clifford Geertz" Rorty (1991: 203-10) holds that tolerance for diversity is a virtue of liberal democratic societies. He points out that modernist beliefs in a common human nature and human rights were a Western cultural bias, and that the belief in human equality is a Western eccentricity. Therefore the promotion of liberal tolerance by pragmatists is also "case specific" and biased, and no rational criteria exist to defend it. Yet Rorty justifies liberal tolerance from his own ethnocentric position as a contingent strategy, and he allows that such strategies change continuously to suit changing circumstances and purposes.

Pragmatists declare their affiliations with

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sociopolitical groups and strategies to be contingent and "spatiotemporal". Even ideals such as procedural justice and human equality are local and culture-bound. Therefore Rorty recognises that pragmatists cannot recommend a philosophical outlook to other cultures. They can merely point out the advantages for different individuals and cultures to get along with each other.

For the purpose of dealing with cultural diversity Rorty thinks that it is necessary to cultivate tolerance for a multiplicity of doctrines and a plurality of conflicting conceptual frameworks. Rorty's metaphor for an ideal world-order is a bazaar surrounded by private clubs, where the bazaar is the mingling place of different cultures, and the clubs are the private retreats where different cultural groups can practise their cultural traditions. Yet both the bazaar and the private club may have unique identities, either in its diversity, or in its exclusivity.

A concrete architectural example of Rorty's metaphor of the bazaar surrounded by private clubs is the Market Theatre precinct in the city centre of Johannesburg. The area is used by a lively cosmopolitan mix of cultures, and has historically been a place where people from different areas in and around Johannesburg meet. The

theatres, art galleries, restaurants, bars, and market draw people to the area, which is centrally placed in the metropolis. Yet on the fringes of the precinct there are culturally specific places such as muti shops and the prestigious 11 Diagonal Street, a corporate headquarters building designed by Murphy Jahn in association with Louis Karol Architects (1986).

#### **4.2 Architectural practices interpreted in temporal and regional context**

Pragmatists hold the theory that architectural practices are not based on some immutable and universal principle, but that they change over time and from place to place. Therefore they agree with the stipulations of Hegel, Pugin, and Ruskin that architects should take local sociopolitical circumstances, climate, beliefs, and geography into account when designing buildings.

Above it has been discussed that Ruskin and Hegel interpreted social practices in their temporal and regional contexts. Using the idea of a "spirit of the age" Pugin and Ruskin conceived of architecture as a product of existing opinions and social circumstances. They believed that architects were informed by the beliefs and habits of life at a particular time and in a specific place.

For Rorty (1982: xl-xli, 173-4; 1989: 55) the concept of a "spirit of the age" indicates a belief he shares with Hegel that "philosophy is its time grasped in thought". He uses the term "lonely provincialism" to denote the "admission that we are just the historical moment that we are, not the representatives of something ahistorical" (Rorty 1991: 30).

The pragmatist thesis of the temporality of architectural practices is derived from the premise that different historical cultures have different beliefs and aspirations. Yet, as Hall (1994: 48-51) points out, it is a daunting task in the twentieth century to encompass the complexity of culture in a single narrative. Because no consensus can be reached on an interpretation of present-day cultures, Hall thinks that Rorty's mosaicist approach to interpreting his time is justified. Rorty does not claim that his historicist narrative is unified, which is an acknowledgement of the pluralistic character of present-day cultures. He thinks that any description of a local culture has a limited time span, and that it is relative to a historically conditioned situation (Rorty 1989: 103). Hall interprets Rorty's nominalism and criticism of consensus as an acceptance of cultural fragmentation.

In present-day theories the possibility or desir-

ability of a single ruling discourse and the plausibility of a uniform society - such as Ruskin's ([1851-3] 1921, 2: 165) advancement of a "great truth" applicable to "the whole race" - are questioned. Bové (1986: 9) and Vattimo (1990: 76), for example, conceptualise "community" and "society" to be discontinuous and to consist of various competing groups. Carrier (1991: 197-8) also questions the Hegelian idea that a historical culture must possess a unity; he thinks that a culture at a given time, or a work of art, can be "temporally polysemous", which means that it can have several meanings at one time.

A belief in a spirit of the age means that knowledge is determined relative to a particular community at a specific historical time, and that knowledge is presumed to be temporal and not ahistorical. In Rorty's (1991: 211) vocabulary, intellectual tools remain useful only in certain sociocultural environments, and when those circumstances change, the usefulness of the conceptual instruments lapses.

What is learnt from Rorty's pragmatist theory, according to Prado (1987: 153-4), is that philosophy cannot be free of time and history, and that all philosophical problems are embedded in history. There is no such thing as objective neu-

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trality in philosophy, and pragmatists' theories are products of local cultural and historical conditions. According to Rorty (1985: 6-7) truth and knowledge do not have intrinsic natures; he regards philosophical inquiry as a "sociohistorical account of how various people have tried to reach agreement on what to believe". Rorty (1980: 362-3) thinks that if the notion of "essence" is given up philosophies are relative to time periods, traditions, and historical accidents.

Shusterman's (1992: 61) pragmatist aesthetics is historicist because he does not accept that theory is an attempt to find necessary principles and final justifications for practices; instead he sees "our practices (and our theories) as contingent products whose encounter with changing situations has necessitated continual adjustment, clarification, justification, and improvement". Shusterman (1992: ix, 61) describes pragmatist aesthetics as an endeavour in which theorists do not confine themselves to traditional academic problems, but concern themselves with present cultural issues and new aesthetic forms, which makes his theory temporal and regional. According to him, pragmatist aestheticians take into account the "conflictual variety" of human practices.

Pragmatist theories can be charged with being

conservative, because they are derived from existing public opinion, which prevents changes to improve existing practices. Shusterman (1992: 61) allays fears that a pragmatist theory is imprisoned by the horizon of human practices and that it is devoid of the capacity to transform practices, because it is conceived in relation to the existing practices of a particular historical community. Although theories are constrained by existing practices, changing circumstances and comparisons with practices of other communities can provide stimulation for other, new practices and theories.

For architectural theorists conventional theoretical problems include what the origins of architectural forms are, and whether there are unchanging principles for architecture.

Pragmatist architectural theorists find such questions relatively uninteresting, because answers to them seem to be of limited use to those designing buildings at present. They are more interested in the concept that architecture is a reflection of its age, which they restate as the ambition of architects to be fully of their time. A consequence of their historicism is that they anticipate that architectural theories and principles will change continuously, because of changes in the circumstances in which buildings

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are built. Useful architectural examples of this phenomenon are provided by the campuses of Rand Afrikaans University, Pretoria University, and the University of the Witwatersrand: the variety of building styles found on them is evidence of the changes of interests, aspirations, and technological skills during the histories of the building processes.

### 4.3 Local and culture-bound purposes

In this section the consequences of the historicist thesis, that architectural practices are specific to particular communities, will be explored further. The specific theses that will be investigated are that the interpretation of architectural practices varies according to perceived objectives of various communities, and that the aims of architectural practitioners are conditioned by the goals of those communities.

Hegel's historicist notions imply that alternative conceptual frameworks exist, and that there are people living in different ages or places who shape their perceptions in different ways and may thus be conscious of different "worlds" (Rorty 1982: 3, 149). People approve of different things relative to their different worlds, places, or communities; hence, what is perceived to be

"good" for one particular community is not necessarily good for another.

Le Corbusier, in his design of housing in Chandigarh (1950-6), the capital of the Punjab in India, failed to take cultural differences into account (Brolin 1976: 100-1). He designed conventional Western kitchens, for example, instead of taking into consideration that the occupants cooked on the floor and not on counter tops. He also provided generous windows for light and ventilation, which were papered over by the inhabitants because of their culturally conditioned need for privacy. Jo Noero's (1988: 11-3) design of outdoor built-in seating in his Alexandra Township Community Housing project, discussed above, is an example of a project in which cultural differences were recognised.

Pragmatists such as Rorty (1989: 177) are ironic about their own conceptual frameworks, because they do not believe that there is a common human nature. In the essay "Solidarity" Rorty (1989: 189-98) rejects the belief in a common, essential humanity, or common human essence, in favour of the stance that beliefs are caused by contingent historical and cultural circumstances. Pragmatists believe that human beliefs and desires are results of socialisation and historical contingencies. They are curious about

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other people's conceptual frameworks, and they exchange beliefs and desires with other people and cultural groups in attempts to improve their own ways of life.

This pragmatist attitude of cultural curiosity is confirmed by the architectural practices of Pancho Guedes (Ostler 1982: 16-7). He first practised in Mozambique, and then in South Africa. European influences played a role in his designs, namely the Renaissance, Art Nouveau, and Surrealism. Twentieth-century architects who influenced him were Le Corbusier, Gaudi, Wright, Goff, and Kahn. Because of their interest in local and regional architectures, pragmatists value Guedes's use of colonial architecture as inspiration. He was fascinated by inaccurate attempts by colonialists to evoke memories of their places of origin in their architecture. Guedes was also interested in local African architecture, for example Swazi and Zimbabwean architecture and Ndebele wall paintings of the Transvaal. All of these influences were used in his architecture, and he varied his building styles according to location, function, and his own and his clients' preferences. He is an example of an architect who exchanged ideas with other people and cultural groups in an attempt to improve his own practices and the ways of life of his clients.

Hegel ([1807] 1977: 455-6) wrote about the consequences of historicism and nominalism, namely that the art of cultures and periods other than one's own became inaccessible for reliable interpretations, because of the incommensurability of one's own conceptual framework and the others. How serious one perceives this problem to be, depends on one's purposes. Those who want to determine the truth about the art of other cultures have problems when trying to translate the meaning of art works from a foreign conceptual framework to their own. Pragmatists such as Rorty (1991: 191), however, avoid such problems of intertranslatability by suppressing the desire for universal agreement, and by their commitment to the free exchange of views. In the pragmatist view people do not have a common ahistorical nature, and their opinions have been determined by their particular historical circumstances. People coming from different sociohistoric circumstances may have little in common. Rorty (1991: 193-6) thinks that because of such differences, and because of the pluralism of the present-day world, tolerance has become an important virtue. Such tolerance consists of the ability to leave other people alone, but Rorty also insists on the freedom to work out the salvation of one's own community. He thinks that the balance between freedom and tolerance will be worked out through exper-



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iments in co-operation.

Pragmatist theorists do not aim for correct interpretations of art works and architecture, although they value the cultural productions of other cultures. Cultural differences are appreciated by pragmatists, but they cannot see the point of trying to understand the art of people from other cultures and places in the same way as those people understand it themselves, if indeed any community can have such secure knowledge of their own cultural products. Pragmatists, such as Rorty (1991: 212-3), do not believe that it is possible to "leap outside our Western social democratic skins when we encounter another culture, and we should not try. All we should try to do is to get inside the inhabitants of that culture long enough to get some idea of how we look at them, and whether they have any ideas we can use". A method used by pragmatists, for example Noero, Guedes, and Rorty (1982: xl-xli), is to compare their own cultural practices with those of other cultures or historical periods. They do this to enlarge the range of possibilities to choose from, and with a greater number of choices the opportunities increase to improve the lives of people in their own communities. Rorty (1991: 208) calls himself "ethnocentric", and he works from within his own (North American liberal democra-

tic) community to improve both their lives and the lives of other communities with different beliefs. Pragmatists do not try to adopt the ideas of other cultures in a wholesale fashion, but, following Noero, Guedes, and Rorty (1991: 38), they test the ideas of other cultures by weaving them together with their own existing ideas by trial and error.

When they have to design buildings for other cultural groups, pragmatist architects cannot escape the horizons of their own cultural beliefs, but they can solicit the participation of those "others" for whom they design, and they can try to empower them to design and build for themselves. Architects are required to share their power and responsibilities with the people they work for in order to facilitate the achievement of communal aspirations and to fulfil communal needs. This requirement was spelled out by Ishmael Mkhabela, acting coordinator for the Witwatersrand Network for the Homeless and director of the Urban Community Organisations Division, when asked in an interview what the involvement of architects could be in low-cost housing:

We value people with know-how, and we want to continue to draw on the expertise of any professionals. But people also need to understand

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that we don't want solutions that are simply technocratic, or that are imposed on us without consultation. We want to keep our power and influence, too, in the relationship, and we think it is very important that we don't become guests in our own house. We think there is a danger that we could end up, by default, surrendering these issues that are important to us, over to other constituencies and other groups. We seek to work participatively with experts and with the homeless, in consultation together (G. Noero 1988: 20).

Pragmatists do not believe that it is possible to know the beliefs or conceptual frameworks of those they serve entirely, according to Rorty (1991: 204-7), but they cultivate sympathy with the suffering of others, and they are guardians of diversity. Yet even the belief in liberal tolerance is a contingent cultural bias that is specific to "postmodern bourgeois liberals" (Rorty 1991: 208), and there is no rational justification for such a stance. Rorty (1991: 213) acknowledges that "this expectation of tolerant reciprocity is a provincially Western one" with no universal and neutral necessity. According to Rorty (1991: 197) pragmatists can only feel responsible for their own communities, or for the communities they are serving, and the merits of their services are relative to the various communities that are

meant to profit from their actions. Their actions cannot serve the whole of humanity, because human needs are derived from specific communities.

This essay is an example of how historical theories are utilised by pragmatists to formulate guidelines for their actions. In this case the theories of Hegel, Pugin, and Ruskin were used in an attempt to validate the pragmatist stance that architecture can be interpreted as a manifestation of the skills and customary practices of particular historical cultures. Support was also sought for the pragmatist theory that architectural practices are influenced by the beliefs and aspirations of a particular community at a specific time<sup>4</sup>.

- 1 I claim to be a member of a group called "pragmatist theorists of architecture". This group is largely my invention, similar to Nietzsche's ([1878] 1984: 5) fabrication of the "free spirit" to create the illusion of kinship and shared values. Theorists invent such kinships in attempts to claim authority for their preferred views.
- 2 Many authors belonging to different disciplines are currently writing about concepts that can be related to pragmatist theories. These con-

cepts include historicist ideas, theories about the social construction of meaning, and ideas about the constantly changing and adapting nature of phenomena. I cannot address the theories of all these authors. The authors used in this essay are some of those who are writing about Hegel and pragmatism in ways that can be reconciled with Rorty's concerns.

- 3 My understanding of the term "culture" is that it is a form of life peculiar to a specific human community existing at a particular time. I acknowledge that such communities comprise of competing groups with conflicting values, needs and desires.
- 4 I am grateful to Roger Fisher, Johan Snyman and an anonymous referee for their guidance and comments.

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