

From Chamber to Transformer: Epistemological Challenges and Tendencies in the Intersection of Architectural Histories and Critical Theories

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[taken from the introductory essay to Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds.), InterSections: Architectural History and Critical Theory, (London: Routledge, 2000)]

In the summer of 1985, I lay on a beach on Crete, struggling to read a text whose pages and words seemed to me to be wholly resistant to offering up their meaning. The book, Raymond Williams' Marxism and Literature,¹ had been 'suggested reading' for a course in architectural history that I was about to start in London the following September. And I struggled with it for a number of reasons. Firstly, and perhaps understandably, it was my first real introduction to marxist thought, and for anyone's initial forays into that conceptual schema, any book, no matter how well written (and Williams' script is a model of reasoned clarity), was always going to be hard work. Second, and though I barely knew it, this was also my first real introduction to the realm of critical theory in general. Up to that juncture, my education had been in history of various kinds – architecture, art, ancient world – but none of it held much truck with ideas beyond the world of its own objects of study, still less with general cultural abstractions of this ilk. Third, therefore, was a growing unease not just with the difficulty of the text, but with its very relevance to the course on which I was about to embark. "Base and Superstructure," Hegemony," "Typification and Homology," "Ideology," "From Reflection to Mediation" – of what possible relevance were these chapters for the historical study of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Ebenezer Howard? Why the hell, my sun-soaked brain demanded, was I reading this?

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In the autumn of 1985, a first year student of architectural design, I entered a world of seductive forms (glass boxes, white villas), and earnest politics (ugly housing). Although drawn to the latter, the social issues seemingly only got in the aesthetic way. The two bore a strange and uneasy relation. Later and deeper into the world of architectural education, this relationship was torn entirely asunder. I was told that because I liked thinking about theory I would never have any architectural idea. For, as the Master carefully explained to me, those who were interested in thinking theoretically could never be architects. Then came my entry

into history, into historiography, into, therefore, a place where one could think – that is think “architecturally” as something at once ideational and material. Here arose the central question: through exploring the workings of architectural history in terms of both epistemology and methodology, how would it be possible for my politics to inform theoretically creative practices?

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In any historical or critical field –whether concerning the interpretation of architecture, planning history, social events, art, medicine and so forth – there is a danger that the methodology of the investigating author will conflate or conspire with the ostensible objects of study. Rather than taking an independent critical line, the interpretation consequently takes the form of an excavation that can repeat only what it unearths, say only what it is allowed to say.

Nowhere, perhaps, has this process been more readily apparent in the field of historical and critical studies of the built environment –architecture, urbanism, landscape, planningⁱ¹ – where the perpetual trend among historians has been to conduct their lines of enquiry less upon their own theoretical or political agendas and more on the internal concerns of the spatial professions and the intricacies of their procedural practices. The discourse around architecture is particularly redolent of this kind of approach, where very often architecture is understood simply to be “what the architect does.”

This much is, perhaps, not in itself a bad thing, for the recording and explanation of the practices of urban professionals according to their own concerns is certainly of some historical worth: what architects think, what they have done (or what they think they have done), and what they themselves have considered to be the most important ideas and influences on their operations are all things which deserve to be recorded, assessed and communicated. And, of course, many architectural historians have concentrated on exactly this kind of study, typified by the work of those such as Kenneth Frampton, who, for example, notes in his Modern Architecture: a Critical History, that in this text, and despite a professed “affinity for the critical theory of the Frankfurt School,” he has tried “whenever possible to let the protagonists speak for themselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ

One other point worth making here is that many of these architectural historians have also either trained as, and/or continue to work as, architects in their own right. Their concerns are, therefore, necessarily and perhaps rightly directed at the operative functions of the architectural practitioner. Nonetheless, as all of the chapters in this book in some way demonstrate – including many by those who are both historians and design practitioners – it is not only the internal matters of architecture with which the architect/historian need be concerned.

The machinations of the drawing board are not the only things that ought to be addressed. There is life outside of the studio, the building site and the private library, and, of course, architects and everyone involved in architecture (which is, in fact, simply everyone) is absolutely implicated in this wider world of architecture – inescapably, everyday, we all live in and through architecture.

The problem, however, is that resisting the gravitational pull of the object is particularly difficult in the case of histories concerned with the built environment. Firstly, there is the perplexing nature of the object, that is of the material character of the city and its multifarious buildings. A more complex, dynamic and opaque entity than the (post)modern metropolis would be hard to imagine. Second, there is the problem of the inextricably implicated relation that architecture (as with planning) holds with this city-entity, being both challenged and constrained by a set of institutional practices that draw their power from as diverse a range of sources as capital and economies, national and municipal governments, dominant classes, smaller yet mobilised interest groups, territorialised zones and cultural conventions.

Architecture's problem –that of the physical and social complexity of its arena of action, compounded by the multi-faceted negotiations it has to undertake in order to act at all –is then replicated in the representations made of it in history. Unable to see the wood for the trees, historians are constantly tempted to focus on the minutiae of architecture, on individual agents, individual projects, individual codes as the constituting elements of their histories. Too often, they closely follow architects such as Richard Meier who earnestly believe that “[a]rchitecture is the subject of my architecture,”^{iv} and that, consequently there is no need to look beyond the internalised concerns of the discipline in order to understand it historically. Hence the monograph on the single architect or architectural practice, the special publication on the single building, or a focused study of a particular aspect of architectural practice. All these provide glimpses or partial views of architecture, but ultimately do little more than

record the general character of architecture, yielding a textual snapshot of particular objects and surfaces. Not so much hidden away as lost altogether are the forgotten peoples, the alternative practices, the imagined representations that fall outside of the hegemonic realm. Similarly struck off from the political agenda are the wider concerns, the mobilising forces that provide both the occasion and much of the substance for city development and architectural activity. What these studies lack is an explicit framework in which to situate their objects of study. As a result, the apparent implication is too often that the given subject is, at best, an isolated arena of activity, and, at worst, the only one really worth studying.

Alternatively, unable to see the trees for the wood, historians are tempted to throw what they intend to be a catch-net over their objects, seeking to cover all peoples, all things, all activities under one banner. Here, encyclopaedic historical volumes attempt to survey such things as the whole of twentieth century architecture,^v the whole of Indian architecture,^{vi} or, in the case of the magisterial Banister Fletcher, the whole of everything.^{vii}

If architecture is the conception, design and construction of the spaces of the city, then it is important to realise that this creative system occurs neither solely in the ways in which the great projects purport to operate (that is, architectural activities have discursive content and meaning far beyond their avowed intentions and surface appearance), nor indeed only through these great projects. There are not only hidden meanings, but hidden practices to architecture.

How then is the historian to cut through this dense swathe of money, power and ideology? How to make sense of its concomitant spatial existence, the city, and of the creative practice of architecture? The aim must be, first of all, to recognise the grounds on which the historical interpretation is being made, by which is meant not so much the meanings that can be located within the historical object as the questions that may be asked of it according to an explicit historian-centred agenda. It is to this problematic which we now turn.

References

This introductory essay has been written by Iain Borden; the content is based on a two-way exchange of ideas between the two authors.

i Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

ii For a review of publications specifically in the context of planning discourse, and on which this introduction is partly based, see Iain Borden, Jane Rendell and Helen Thomas, "Knowing Different Cities: Reflections on Recent European City History and Planning," Leonie Sandercock (ed.), Making the Invisible Visible: Insurgent Planning Histories, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 135-49.

iii Kenneth Frampton, Modern Architecture: a Critical History, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 9.

iv Richard Meier, quoted in Seeing the Getty Center, (Los Angeles: John Paul Getty Trust, undated, ca. 1997), p. 20.

v See, for example, William J.R. Curtis, Modern Architecture Since 1900, (London: Phaidon, third edition, 1996).

vi See, for example, Christopher Tadgell, The History of Architecture in India: From the Dawn of Civilization to the End of the Raj, (London: Architecture Design and Technology Press, 1990).

vii Dan Cruickshank (ed.), Sir Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture, (London: Architectural Press, twentieth edition, 1996).