



Assyrian, Egyptian, Roman, Renaissance, and Le Corbusier's symbol for the cosmos, the world and the city.

# HISTORY, THEORY, and ARCHITECTURE

About thirty years ago there was much talk that geologists ought only to observe and not to theorise; and I well remember someone saying that at this rate a man might as well go into a gravel-pit and count the pebbles and describe the colours. How odd it is that anyone should not see that all observation must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service!<sup>1</sup>

Charles Darwin expresses adeptly the aims of the (theorising) History in Architecture and Design Conference held in Oslo between 25–27 April 2003 on behalf of the Nordic Association of Architectural Research to which this number of the Nordic Journal of Architectural Research is dedicated. This issue contains the papers from each of the group leaders for the three themes into which the conference was divided: History, Modernity, and Praxis; the group leaders' selection of papers in each theme; and the closing remarks. The full proceedings of the conference have been published as a book edited by Elisabeth Tostrup and Christian Hermansen.<sup>2</sup>

The aspirations of the conference organisers were to promote a debate on the relations between history, theory and architecture at a time when the explosive proliferation of architectural historiography was being questioned and the suggestion that too much theory had placed buildings in a secondary position had been put forth.

More specifically we wished to ask: What are the influences that philosophical preferences have on the understanding of history in general and on architectural history in particular? Which world-views underpin contemporary historiographies? How do these affect architect's conceptions of history? What are the relations between philosophies of history, historiographies, and historical validation within the practice of architecture. Is there logic in history? Does history display grand trends? What is the relation between "history", which focuses on events, and "architectural history", which focuses on buildings and their conception? Can one claim that there is an "architectural history" independent of "history"? If not, what are the relations between historical conceptions and the practice of architecture?

Underlying these aims is the belief that every historical study, most often implicitly, is constructed on the back of a philosophy of history. As cultural, phi-

losophical and epistemological positions change so does our understanding of the past.

Enlightenment thinkers had as their grand ambition to show that history was more than the mere accumulation of individual human actions, that there had to be, in its unfolding, a logical – if not divine – purpose at work. Kant, in his essay *The Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), was one of the first modern philosophers to try to make sense of a world history. Not long after its publication Kant's idea of universal history was criticised because it ignored historical contingency in favour of historical necessity, but in spite of this it had a marked influence, for example, on the work of Herder, Condorcet, Hegel, and Marx. In the nineteenth century the success of the application of the methods of the natural sciences to industrial production fuelled the rise of positivism and historicism, which, while tending to reduce human events to empirical facts, nevertheless clung on to a dream of a universal history fuelled by progress. Since then, of course, the idea of a universal history has been discredited, but perhaps curiously revived during the last decades in the post-modern denial of the possibility of any holistic explanation.

Historicism has been defined by Friedrich Meinecke as “the substitution of a process of individualising observation for a generalising view of human forces in history”. These generalising views – guided by constructs such as the idea of progress – have come under attack in twentieth century thinking. Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, discredited the construction of the grand historicist narratives, yet replaced it with another grand construction: the ambition to give history the status of a natural science. The objectives of historians who aspired to a “scientific” status were to achieve neutrality with respect to their subject and use only observable and verifiable facts. The main concern of philosophy of history became methodology; the problems associated with historical research based on the methods of inquiry of the natural sciences.

The difficulties encountered in trying to fit history into a “scientific” mould can be exemplified by the question: can historians explain events in a similar way to natural scientists who give causal explanations for natural phenomena? The negative reply to this question led to scepticism and eventually to the examination of alternative epistemologies. The work of philosophers such as Vico, Herder and Dilthey was re-examined and came to be seen as pioneering this new departure. In the twentieth century the most prominent exponent of this position was R.G. Collingwood who in his *The Idea of History* (1946) proposed an alternative to historical understanding based on the natural sciences model. He pointed to the differences between natural processes and historical events, arguing that only the latter have “meaning”.

The early 1960s saw a big turmoil in philosophy of science which had a marked influence on the humanities and specially on history. In 1962 Tho-

mas S. Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as a challenge to the then dominant logical empiricism. He argued that historical studies did not support some of logical empiricism's fundamental principles and proposed a different developmental scheme for scientific fields in the basic sciences. Kuhn's central concepts, scientific revolution, paradigm shift and incommensurability, afforded a more important role to cultural factors, and thus to history.

In the last decades of the twentieth century history became an increasingly important component of philosophical explanation. Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980), Alisdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989) all exemplify this trend in their concern with the relation between the development of the human mind and the development of ideas.

In parallel, continental philosophy set its point of departure in the collapse of Enlightenment rationalism and proposed a post-modern relativistic view of the world in which knowledge and values were in a constant process of change. Foucault and Derrida were amongst the most prominent figures in this movement which views the modern mind as composed of fragments of the past and thus unable to construct the rational paradigm to which the Enlightenment aspired.

Philosophy of history has consisted of successive attempts to organise knowledge into coherent constructs based on the interaction between philosophical and historical understanding. What this extremely schematic outline aims to show is that since the Enlightenment there has been a close relation between philosophical attitudes and the understanding and practices of history. That this is the case can be confirmed in the relation between each of the successive philosophies of history outlined above and the attitudes to history adopted by the authors of the essays in this book. In this collection we see reflections of most philosophies of history, from attempts at a universal history of architecture, to the application of post-modern relativism to the understanding of particular episodes in the history of architecture. The common thread of the essays in this book is that they address, implicitly or explicitly, the central question of the relation between philosophy of history and historical practice.

As mentioned above the conference was divided into three themes, History, Modernity, and Praxis and we have retained this structure in this issue:

## Theme 1: HISTORY

During the last four decades of the twentieth century the declared relationship between history and architecture has been turned on its head. While the modern movement largely sprang from a reaction against the excesses of historicism, the rise of conservatism, in the last decades of the twentieth century, manifested itself in architecture in a re-evaluation of a "return to the

past” which reveals itself, for example, in the continuing rise of the conservation movement.

One of the results of this shift has been the re-evaluation of the history of modern architecture. The propagandistic and tendentious early historiography of the modern movement (Pevsner, Kaufman, Giedion, followed by Zevi and Benevolo), has given way to more in depth and critical re-evaluations of key aspects of that history. It was not that the early historiographies of modern architecture were consistent – they shared aims and objects – but differing beliefs about society, history and architecture resulted in quite different discourses.

The papers in this section focus on the relationship between society, history and architecture in different periods. A significant number of the essays engage in a re-evaluation of historiography seeking not merely to confirm the pioneering status of a figure, building or text, but searching for the whole critical picture, “with warts and all”.

## Theme 2: MODERNITY

This section contains those articles that throw light on the relation between philosophy of history and the understanding and practice of architectural history by focussing on the development, aims and practices within the “modern project”.

In 1859 Baudelaire sketched the modern concept of modernity in his *Constantine Guys: Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. Baudelaire argued that modernity was that which was new. To be truly “new” you must be in the present, the moment the present becomes past, it has ceased to be new, and thus it has ceased to be modern. In consequence, the truly modern is that which is “ephemeral, fugitive and contingent.” Baudelaire’s was not actually a theory of modernity but suggestive fragments of one that would later be developed by Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin.

Although the term “modern” has been variously applied to different phenomena at different times, the term “modernism” is used to denote a group of forward looking (avant-garde) poets, dramatists, musicians, painters, architects, designers and artisans who, from the 1880s onwards, created a new vocabulary in order to escape the hegemony of historicism, positivism and naturalistic representation. The movement peaked around the First World War and ever since questions about its demise have been frequent. Despite this increasingly common scepticism, modernism has had the most profound influence on all twentieth century art, and still today many claim that its objectives are still to be realised.

## Theme 3: PRAXIS

A Greek term for “action” or “practice”, it implies the unity of theory and practice. The essays in this section approach the central question of the relation between a philosophy of history and architectural history through the analysis of specific activities and practices.

The basis of this approach is a conviction that the world, and history, must be understood primarily through the analysis of human activities and practices in their concrete settings. The group of philosophers that has most strongly held this view, called Praxeology, which originated in Norway and Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s and has had a large following in Germany, argue that the method for arriving at what is constitutive of, or essential to, a certain activity is through close readings of examples.

Elisabeth Tostrup and Christian Hermansen, editors.  
Oslo, December 2003.

### Footnotes

1. Charles Darwin, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Vol.9 (1861), ed. F. Burkhardt, et al., Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1994, p. 269.
2. Elisabeth Tostrup and Christian Hermansen (eds.), *(theorising) History in Architecture*, Oslo: Arkitekthøgskolen i Oslo, 2003.