

History, Historiography, Historicity

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Introduction to the section HISTORY

Over the past quarter century, which is about how long I have been involved in depth with architectural history, the field has clearly moved from the edge towards the centre of research in architecture. When in the 1960's research was established within Swedish schools of architecture, their new buildings were designed to house substantial laboratories for studies of construction and materials as well as functional behaviour, and even for the psychology of perception. Architectural history was comparatively a modest thing. Some would have considered it merely a branch of art history, sheltered by the technical universities as a slight gesture towards the humanities. Since then, however, history has certainly moved to the forefront. In various disguises it could now be regarded even to be dominating the scene of architectural research.

And tasks for historic research are not lacking. After all, history of architecture must be considered a wide field of study. If architecture comprises all the

elements that are stated at the beginning of the first of the ten books by Vitruvius, then its history must also be able to cover all those aspects. Among many subjects – such as geometry, arithmetic, optics, music, law and philosophy – this also includes history itself. The history of architecture, among other things, must also be the history of history.

When occasionally lecturing to civil engineers, I find myself trying to explain why history is an integral part of the curriculum in architecture, while not in engineering. I can see three main reasons for this.

First and perhaps most obviously, there is the relationship to a site. Architecture always means intervening into an existing fabric, and in this way forms a continuation of an historic process which was begun long ago. Whether by adding, subtracting or altering, this relationship calls for some sort of understanding and interpretation. This may become most obvious in cases of restoration, but some dialogue with what is already built can always be recognized. And where context is being questioned or opposed to, even the denial forms an active relationship. So, architecture never escapes history as a condition for understanding

the city, landscape, context – site.

Secondly the historic object is itself a primary source of knowledge and understanding. It may be seen as a type or model, as an analogy or in other ways as an object of reference and reflection. These uses of historic architecture may have been questioned on the surface in some episodes of the modern movement – but the reflections from history were always there. Le Corbusier's work is certainly loaded with them, as many have shown. And where architecture is actively considered to be transformative, being the result of a process of transformation, the historic object is the evident source of this process. This use of historic objects may in some schools belong to design studios as much as to history departments – but we believe that such a method will be improved where the analysis also includes an historical understanding.

This aspect, then, brings us to the more complex question of historicity, which forms the third reason for history being a part of the curriculum in architecture. The discipline of architecture belongs in part to the humanities – as well as of course to the social sciences and technology. In the humanities, the basic discipline is history, by which we explain our present position to be determined by an historic process, or framed by historic circumstances. As systematic thought, this is basically a modern conception, which was formed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The connection between conditions and expressions of times and cultures is achieved through a modern understanding of the historical process, as defined by periods or cultures in the plural. History in this way becomes a fundament of theory.

Even if in this perspective all history is closely related to theory – it seems that history of architecture as theory in contemporary research often tends to become the history of theory. I would certainly admit to participation in this tendency myself. (Likewise, most essays in this section could be said to belong to this category.) The tendency can be shown in the recent interest in a figure such as Alberti. In Scandinavia we have seen Liisa Kanerva's thesis from Helsinki the other year (*Defining the Architect in Fifteenth-Century Italy*). Exemplary Architects in L. B. Alberti's *De Re*

aedificatoria, 1998), and the ongoing research by Tim Anstey in Stockholm. Much important work on Alberti has also been produced in the international scene. The book on Alberti by Mark Jarzombek of 1989 could be seen as significant (*On Leon Baptista Alberti. His Literary and Aesthetic Theories*). Not only was Jarzombek focusing on texts rather than on buildings. He was in fact dealing mainly with texts by Alberti which are not about architecture, and also rejecting any direct relationship of the theoretical works to his buildings. And when finally in an appendix Jarzombek brings the buildings back in, he reads them in his conflicting light, stressing the contrasting and the unfinished, almost seeing them as anti-architecture.

This kind of critical history, where text and context are set before the buildings and projects, may of course seem to marginalize the architecture itself. Theory as a field of historic study tends not only to be widening the scope and strengthening the interpretations, but also actually to exclude those objects that were traditionally the sources as well as the very *raison d'être* of architectural history. Are the buildings now seen as obstacles rather than objects of study?

One possible interpretation of this would be that after the modern rejection of ornaments on buildings, in the very same process of abstraction the buildings themselves are rejected in favour of the even higher Platonic reality of theory. In other words, that the tendency towards theory forms a part of what has been called the crisis of the object. But there may also be institutional reasons. While historic research has expanded in schools of architecture, it has recently been remarked on the international scene that architecture has largely been removed from art departments. The emphasis on theory may at first seem paradoxical in this context. Since the days of Winckelmann art history has been focusing on objects – why do we as architects find ourselves dealing more closely with writings than do our colleagues, the art historians?

One could of course think of this as being related to a fear of revivals, of bringing out ghosts from the past. In other words, the fear of mixing up the theoretical or "scientific" interest in history with the first or second

aspects mentioned above, those of relating literally to context or to the historical material itself. Or – is the reason for the emphasis on theory rather than the critical capacity of history is believed to be stronger when dealing with texts than with built objects?

More likely though, I would say that in the schools of architecture, where projects, methods and theories are more strongly present than built works of architecture, history naturally tends to become that of the discipline rather than of the built objects. The critical task of history in these environments includes largely questioning the role of the architect. It serves to establish as well as to question the position of architecture among the arts and in society at large. This is where history becomes that of architecture's verbal reflections as much as of buildings.

In the 1970's the need was felt for establishing a discipline of architecture defined at that time by its – perhaps lost – centre rather than by its peripheries. Architecture was seen to have been reduced by being a servant to other fields – politics, economy, and social life. Therefore theory was brought out. The definition of architecture as a discipline was needed in order to establish its autonomy. And the key to that definition lay in the tradition, or history, of architecture itself. In this process theoretical search was turning to the classical categories, such as the monument and the city.

Since then this definition of a centre as established through tradition has again been questioned. We have seen the edges of the field being explored more often than the centre. Criticism and self-criticism seem inherent in this theorising approach.

Where history of architecture now largely includes that of writings and theory, it will also be that of reception. This must be one of the contexts in which architecture is interpreted – architecture as it is seen through the eyes by which it is being received. That will include the fields of literature, film, advertising as well as of society and politics in general. This history of reception, then, will also include the history of historiography. So, critical history must also question history itself, and its concepts or categories such as progress, periods or styles.

History must include meta-history. A number of significant works in this field have been published internationally in recent years, where one aspect must be that of self-criticism. Historiography is normally words about things, and critical studies on historiography will explicitly or implicitly question the capacity in general of language and words to relate meaningfully to architecture and buildings.

But reception, whether by historiography, arts or politics, is also a delivery. It shows us readings and interpretations, projections, ideals – which eventually take us back to architecture. Theory, or history as theory, may therefore evolve from architecture, or from the practice of architecture – but even if theory may remove us from architecture itself, it also contains the capacity to bring us back. One may rightly criticize the instrumentality, the prescriptive and proscriptive functions of theory. Yet in the end theory of architecture must contain a direction towards architecture itself.

Since initially I gave three reasons for history in architecture, let me also finally make three statements about directions, or three proposals for historic search:

Returning to architecture, then, will be the first of these, in other words to consider history and theory as means to bring us back to the thing itself. This means not to forget the values of close observation, documents, measuring, the classical tools of architectural archaeology. And in the next step, the beauty of close analysis, by the critical instruments which have been sharpened in the “theorising” process. After all, reading the project as represented in drawings and buildings is the method fundamentally unique to the discipline of architecture. As the German eighteenth century philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg had it: The point is to determine the entire class of the thing – and then to return to the thing itself. For all the importance of examining limits and external relations: We must never lose sight, as the Abbé Laugier said, of the building itself.

This brings me to the second statement. In Laugier's case the building to which we must return was of course the mythological primitive hut, in oth-

er words the building type felt to be as far as possibly removed from his own contemporary scene. In this a critical tool is evoked. Although it is important when using history as a critical instrument to handle the contemporary, or the very recent past, it is also crucial to view what is distant – in time and space as well as in type. History, and especially critical history, must also be about alternatives. My second proposal therefore is to return to the distant, meaning that which seems diametrically opposed to what is close at hand. After all, architectural history began by studies of antiquity. Historians of architecture should not forget this – and we may remember Vincent Scully's enlightening study, *The Earth, the Gods and the Temple* of 1979. But we should find other remote antiquities against which to place ourselves, in the vernacular, pre-Modern and non-Western as well as in what is normally considered to be the blind alleys of modern historicism.

Yet, one point about this search of remoteness is to overcome distance itself, and this will be my third statement. While we need this distance, and history helps us achieve this, the distance is also the sign of crisis inherent in all relativism. History as a critical tool

naturally creates a separation from the historic event or object itself, also in a negative sense. We need also to transcend this distance, to identify with the object. Through history we need also to relate to architecture "poetically". It will be appropriate I believe, here to refer to Christian Norberg-Schulz and one of his favourite expressions, that of "feeling at home".

The nineteenth century, it seems, tried to resolve this dilemma through its interest in restoration. The restoration movement was allowing the modern to identify with the past, by actually entering into its materials, structures, formal detailing, geometry etc. In the most literal sense the future was seen to be inherent in the past. But perhaps this attitude could still teach us to return not only to the thing or the object, but also to our original relationship to the external world, in other words to empathy. While not denying Kant's so called second Copernican revolution, the task of history should also be to re-establish the classical unity of the self and the object, or in other words to identify with our material of research strongly enough to "let the stones speak".