# Just So (hi)Stories[1]: Oslo 2003

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**First Story**

The Time

The mid seventies, late spring-early summer.

The Occasion

The first International Donato Bramante [1444(?)–1514] Conference organised by Arnaldo Bruschi, the professor in History of Architecture to whom I was teaching assistant.

The Place

The splendid rooms of Palazzo Venezia in Rome. Damask drapery creating dark recesses. The frescos acquiring mythical significance in the dusty light filtering through the tall Renaissance windows. A properly dressed crowd of international experts, some more famous than others.

The Story

Many had given their papers. There was jostling for position but a general consensus that Bruschi's new book: Donato Bramante Architetto, his labour of ten years, had answered all the unanswered questions of attributions, dating and influences. The relationship Raffaello/Bramante was discussed at length, as was the issue of the exact point of Bramante's intervention in St. Peter. The issues opened up went beyond the interpretation of the life and work of a single architect, and touched the core of the Renaissance as an intellectual construct. Many of the participants in the conference had created that construct in the second part of the twentieth century. All had a stake in it. The wrong or right attribution could make or destroy a career.

On the second day of the conference my professor, Arnaldo Bruschi, was starting to relax, perhaps thinking that his Chair was not too far ahead.

Then was the turn of Rudolph Wittkover to speak. He extracted a little leather book from his pocket and waved it in front of the audience. In this previously unknown manuscript, recently acquired by his own University library, the Avery, there was – he said – a drawing, which uncontroversially demonstrated, in Wittkover's opinion, that a particular problem of interpretation of St. Peter needed to be resolved in the direction he sug-

gested. All what Wittkover needed to prove his point was the authority of a dated drawing.

The fact that his interpretation of the drawing could be disputed never crossed his mind, nor, to be honest, that of many in his audience.

That was the tacit understanding on the status of facts and on how to make history of architecture in the mid seventies.

Post-Scriptum

The facts are not at all like fish on a fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants.[2]

**Second Story**

The Time

The mid eighties, winter.

The Occasion

A lecture by Colin Rowe, then just appointed the Andrew D. White Professor of Architecture at Cornell University. It was organised by the RCA Architecture Department. The occasion was special as Rowe did not perform often in London after his departure for the States and the audience was somehow a self selected one.

The Place

The Royal College of Arts' small Lecture Theatre in London, all white and chrome, slick as a designer's statement. A mottled crew of students and architectural academics formed the audience. Most wore the standard black on black.

The Story

I heard much about Colin Rowe from friends, enemies and relatives and all had spoken about his charismatic personality and his huge influence on design studios. Having never met or seen him before I was eager to check what the fuss was all about. I saw a smallish man of average constitution and average looks. He spoke eloquently about the architecture he considered worthy of appraisal. He had strong likes and dislikes, appearance, i.e. what things look like, was his paramount interest. I saw indeed how he could be influential in design studios, as he reinforced the opinion, held by many schools and architectural students, that the main job of an architect is to create beautiful forms. I still remember him vividly raising his arms, his back to the audience, pointing to his final two slides: on the left side la Ville Savoye, on the right Michelangelo's statue of David. There he just proclaimed: "Look, is that not self evident?" and, in doing so, concluded the lecture. How many in the audience found it self-evident and how many found his panache irritating? It is still hard to tell.

Post-Scriptum

What formalism must learn to understand is that rules of tacit knowledge do not emanate from a centralised, invisible Authority that causes the social machinery, populated by sleepwalkers, to move by remote control; tacit knowledge does not arise by occult edict, but rather from a suite of practical instances that furnishes the material for the operator's own improvisations-within-context.

The image, both in its production and its recognition, is from the beginning part of a continuum of social practice, and interactive with the other practices around it… [3]

**Third Story**

The Time

The beginning of the nineties.

The Occasion

A conference organised by the Block group of radical historians of art on issues of Modernity and Post-Modernity. A book would be eventually produced from the papers delivered on that day.[4]

The Place

The newly created lecture theatre at Tate Britain in the

Clore extension. Stirling and Wilford's signature colours felt at odd with the Turner collection. There was a large number of invited speakers and a small audience of cognoscenti interested in the recent debates in critical theory. The audience and the speakers were eclectic, their appearance as varied as their provenance and/or intellectual affiliation.

The Story

When David Harvey's book The Condition of Post Modernity [5] was published it caused quite a stir. Not only the book offered a new perspective in its own field, geography, but also it seemed to be able to address the concerns of several of the disciplines which focus on the production of space. Moreover, Harvey had an academic foot (and a public) on both side of the Atlantic and thus it was more than timely to address from London some of the issues he raised.

Post-Modernism had been by then in the critical field for more than a decade, that is enough for most of the serious contributors to become acquainted with the interdisciplinary dust it had raised. Yet, in the late eighties, some scholars, when entering into another academic discipline, could still find it difficult to discern serious contributions from popular ones. Much was then written about many subjects by authors which branched outside their own field of specialisation and were looking for basic information about the state of affairs in the field they wanted to raid. This needed some correction and it was one of the reasons why a bunch of critically minded authors, each representing a specific discipline concerned with space, was chosen to address the issues raised by Harvey's book.

The situation was potentially polemic, not only because of this brief, but also because Harvey was going to respond at the end.

Cloaked under the pretence of a fair academic debate the attack punctually happened along some of the pre-envisaged lines. Harvey was considered lacking in understanding of the complexities of theory mainly because, in his assumption of the Lefebvrian framework, he had not emphasised enough both gender and globalisation, and thus he did not adequately account for a-symmetrical relationships of power in the production of space.

What was particularly interesting about that debate was that it was not an empty theory people were arguing about, but ideas which were informing the methodology of field work in many academic disciplines, some of which, like geography, had direct connection with local planning and political issues. On that day, ideas did indeed matter.

Post-Scriptum

The last few years have seen the building up of a series of exegeses of or around architecture which, in stretching the conventional boundaries of historical, theoretical, or critical work, have located themselves in a space between cultural commentary and theory-in-use that has been vacant since the age of treatises. These writings, in placing themselves at the border between theory and design, have taken on the cultural aura of the theoretical while adopting the intellectual standards of design production. However, these writings, while expanding the traditional disciplinary boundaries and introducing desirable cross-cultural influences, have seldom achieved any significantly contributive arguments, having depended so much upon the implicit acceptance of conniving cultural practices. Thus the contemporary architectural debate has condoned both a lack of rigor and the lack of appropriate intellectual tools with which to tackle the task but at the same time seeking legitimisation through the adoption of selected philosophical tendencies.[6]

## Fourth Story

The Time

The beginning of the following century, it supposed to be spring but it snowed.

The Occasion

The History in Architecture and Design Conference organised over three days of lectures, visits and workshops. It was attended mainly by specialised academics, Ph.D. students and some practitioners in the field. The audience was small, well informed and opinionated.

The Place

The lecture room in the new Oslo School of Architecture in Norway.

The Story

It was the first time the conference was held in English, a language common to all and foreign to most, which at the same time allowed better communication and stifled free flowing debate. Perhaps because of this, those who were presenting papers gave the impression that they were keen to "get it right". But language was not the real issue. The problem felt by many, and expressed only informally during coffee breaks, was the international state of the scholarly debate within the discipline. In the last ten years it had been over-inflated by theoretical and philosophical debates within the main academic centres and those who had been untouched by it felt both confused and somehow under-privileged for not being exposed to its incessant maelstrom. While it allowed them to get on with what they knew how to do, it also created a state of intellectual anxiety. Many of the less experienced participants were unsure about how to go about "making history", was there, out there, a different way than the one they had been following? The experienced chairs of the workshops were steering the audience between probing questioning and supportive commentary.

A general attitude of intellectual modesty, of open-ended enquiry reflected much of the difference between the present, i.e. the time after September 11, and the smugness of the nineties. We know now how dangerous it is to be too sure, too comfortable, and too dogmatic about one's own position.

Yet some old anxieties kept re-surfacing under different guises. One focussed on how to deploy the appropriate theoretical apparatus towards the empirical evidence which needed sifting through, another was directed towards the relative "usefulness" of critical theory. A third anxiety, potentially more insidiously destructive, appeared as that desire to practice history as the activity which reveals, "what really happened".

But we cannot rewind the practice of history to the time of Ranke. We know now both the ideological fallacy and the factual impossibility of such gentle nostalgia. And many papers pointed out, either implicitly or explicitly, that the practice of history is not innocent and that the underpinning of a critical method/theory is a problematic, yet necessary practice.

But, common to all and running as hidden motifs of the conference, were three unresolved issues. The first focussed on the difference between theory and method, the second probed the status of critical theory and the third had something to do with the role and status of teaching history in schools of architecture and the role of theory in design studios.

A detailed discussion of these issues necessitates a longer time than the one provided by this conference but I would like to provide a few reflections, perhaps as starting points for other meetings.

- The making of history is not an accidental activity but one whose outcome is determined as much by the attitudes of the historian as by what is studied. This activity has been and continues to be debated in the humanities. These debates shift considerably the activity of history.
- Architecture, so far, has seen less historiographic debate than other disciplines. One of the reasons why this has happened is the special relationship between history, theory, design in architecture and the way in which these activities underpin and legitimise each other.
- Architecture tends to borrow its system of explanations (epistemologies) from other disciplines. Any act of borrowing implies a transformation and often a reduction of complexities.
- Our aim ought to be the opening of the relationship between the different components of making architecture. Our desire is not purely intellectual but stems from the awareness of the present difficulties of the discipline. I hope that by opening this relationship and by making its ambiguities more evident we will be able to influence the discourse and practice of architecture.
- One of the principal components of making and living with architecture is the perception we have of its tradition. The perception of a past is that act of interpretation the historian involves herself in. The

making of history, as we have said, is not accidental, thus, if we want to modify its effects on the practice of architecture we need to study its mechanisms of production, i.e. historiography.

- The history and theory of architecture are activities intimately linked to its process of production. I thus hope by opening history to its theoretical components that there will be established a mode of enquiry which will open up by inference, the theoretical mechanisms which govern the production of theories of architecture.

- Why do we need to study historiography within the humanities? Because to study historiography from a purely architectural point of view would mean to have only access to a transformed and modified debate. Our hypothesis is that the progressive application of unverified mechanisms of transformation and the narrowness of the present theoretical debate have contributed to the increase of the epistemological difficulties of architecture. By opening the debate to historiography within the humanities I hope we will be able to achieve:

1 – an increase of the cultural components considered by the architectural discourse, thus an increase of the possibility to find a way of understanding complexities,

2 – a simplification of the discourse as different and differing components find an appropriate reference within the larger debate of the humanities,

3 – the possibility to verify rationally, and thus in a communicable way, the assumptions of the architectural discourse and thus the possibility to open up architecture to a richer and more precise location within cultural production,

4 – a transformation of the discipline because, if the above three steps of a discursive practice can be established, it would mean that architecture, as a practice and as a discipline, would undergo a series of transformations.

Post-Scriptum

Expressing the modern world in an edifice of thought means of course only reflecting the essential features of the age as in a mirror – which is not the same as conceiving it.[7]

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## Notes

1. The title of this paper refers to Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories, a book for children which re-invents reality and tries to explain, in a surreal and allegorical way, the "whys" and "hows" of many important questions. Funnily enough, Kipling's fantasy has fed my imagination in a richer and deeper way than many of the proper explanations I read as an adult. Thus the implicit question I am asking by punning his title is: what is the purpose of history of architecture in schools of architecture?
2. E. H. Carr, What is History?, London: Penguin Books, 1980, p.23.
3. N. Bryson, Vision and Painting. The logic of the Gaze, London: The Macmillan Press, 1983, pp. 75 and 151.
4. Bird, Curtis, Putman, Robertson, Tickner (eds.), Mapping the futures. Local cultures global change, London: Routledge, 1993.
5. D. Harvey, The Condition of Post Modernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change, Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1990.
6. M. Bandini, "The conditions of criticism", in The Education of the Architect, M. Pollak (ed.), Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997, pp. 425–426.
7. J. Habermas, "Modernity's Consciousness of Time", in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991.