

The Hidden Influence of Historical Scholarship on Design

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Historical Instruction for Architects

As architects we recognize that historical knowledge influences how we design, but we leave the teaching of history to professional historians and assume it is our responsibility to use the material they present to us as we see fit. This presumes that the material we receive is, in effect, inert. What we fail to take into consideration is that the way history is taught to architects influences *how* architects incorporate historical knowledge into the process of designing.

First, a brief look at how historical material came to be included in architectural education. Formal courses in architectural history have been an integral part of the academic training of architects since 1819 when history courses were introduced into the reorganized *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, which was becoming the paradigm for architectural education throughout the West and would eventually come to influence the way architects are trained throughout much of the world.¹ Beginning in 1671, the process for evaluating existing architecture for use as paradigms in design took place in the form of public lectures and debates at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*'s predecessor, the *Académie Royale d'Architecture*, with the members of the academy coming together, "...to publicly expound [in the Academy] the rules of this art [of architecture] drawn from the doctrine of the greatest masters and from those examples of the most beautiful buildings remaining from antiquity."²

These theoretical discussions and debates (which were frequently very heated), concerned *how* existing architecture should properly inform the task of designing. The process included a formal approach to the notion of precedent—not entirely unlike the idea of precedent in Anglo-American common law. This is to say that works of architecture considered as paradigmatic served as both practical examples and as exemplars of a living, evolving body of theory regarded as integral with western civilization. It was not until after 1848 that the history of architecture began to be presented in linear fashion, "from antiquity to the present" somewhat as it is today. For students of the *Ecole*, throughout much of the earlier period as well as after the introduction of a strict chronological presentation of history, the active study of specific examples of architecture took the form of the *analytique*, which was a careful rendering of an existent building that combined salient details, characteristics of site and setting, overall form and disposition of major elements, all presented in a carefully composed presentation on a single sheet of water color paper.³

Eventually, all schools dropped the practice of teaching the architecture of the past from the perspective of architects, and changed to teaching it from the perspective of professional historians, whose training was based in ongoing methods of historical scholarship. This meant that the criteria for the selection of examples from the past, as well as the evaluation of those examples, shifted away from the architect's search for appropriate paradigms to the historian's quest to understand the forces that guide historical processes, an approach to historical material I refer to here as "historicism."⁴ After the writings of Voltaire in the middle of the eighteenth century, historical scholarship had begun to shift to the examination of sequences of changing customs, habits, manner of governance, and the like. In art history, Wöfflin and later Panofsky provided critical examples for understanding art and architecture as sequences of styles, each style succeeding the one before it in a continuous response to changing circumstances throughout the broader social milieu. In the late twentieth century, Marxist inspired theory began to effect the ongoing historicist approach as applied by art and architectural historians by focusing on the social dimension of historical determinism—encouraging, for instance, the evaluation of works of architecture as expressions of gender related issues, or of competing power structures such as a world-wide economically based class struggle, or the presumed will of governments to hold and consolidate their power, and so forth. Historicist based perspectives on the past—reinforced by theories of the inevitability of certain events in history (especially from Hegel) and methods of inquiry that emphasize objective detachment (the empiricism of Kant and rationalism of Descartes), and the notion of continuous progress (especially from Kant's teleological view of history)—forged a way of viewing historical events and artifacts characterized both by attention to continuous change and by a broadly held, often implicit, assumption of continuous progress.

Now, for the sake of brevity I have lumped the whole history of political and social scholarship since the Enlightenment into one paragraph, and the history of the inclusion of historical material in architectural education into another—so that this brief recounting must suffice to recall the sources of our collective wisdom about the past. Be that as it may, regardless of the actual sources of influence, we can all recognize certain assumptions that characterize our thinking as designers, and those assumptions are related to the way we approach history. Among them are:

1. Because we approach history as a chronicle of progress in such areas as human health, material wellbeing, and technological achievements, we tend to regard the past as inferior to the present.
2. Therefore, architecture of the past may only be regarded as exemplary in the way that it has led us to where we find ourselves today.
3. Thus, while the history of architecture can present us with examples of fundamental principles to inform designs of the present, it can (or at least, should) only do so in a remote or abstract way, lest we be unduly influenced by the past and thereby constrained in our quest for originality and invention.

The Problem of Historicism

The success of this approach to designing is associated with its ability to accommodate new technologies and to yield to the demands (or to accommodate them, depending on the point of view) of changing economic circumstances in the ever increasingly commercialization of just about everything with which modern society is involved. It also is seen to be flexible enough to yield to or accommodate rapidly changing social conditions, or by extension, to assist in the purposeful promotion of social change. These are regarded as its primary virtues; here are some of the problems: Some point out, for instance, that historicism tends to encourage a fleeting expressionistic approach to architecture, one that is relevant only to a moment in time and thereby quickly rendered irrelevant by time's passing (in other words "the *Zeitgeist* paradox"), while at the same time it tends to overlook broadly held and long existent social values in deference to current economic, technological, and commercial pressures and the latest trends of fad and fashion.⁵ In addition, the progressive view of history fostered by contemporary historicism necessarily favors the architecture of the West over any other because our historical scholarship (our view of history) is based on western observations in the first place, and non-western architecture appears to lie outside the chain of influences—at least until it eventually yields to western values driven by economic and technological circumstances. In other words, I refer here to the "Eurocentricity phenomenon" as it is sometimes called. This view is particularly well illustrated by the frontispiece of earlier editions of Sir Bannister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. Here a drawing depicts "The Tree of Architecture," where western architecture emanating from ancient Greece and headed toward the Modern Movement is the trunk, and "Egyptian", "Chinese" and so fourth are branches which do not contribute to the mainstream of architectural evolution. Finally, there is the popularly held belief—based on the rapidity with which change has taken place during the modern era—that humankind has virtually re-invented itself by restructuring its societies, their physical contexts, and the basic mores and social values that sustained human societies from a time somewhere in the mists of prehistory, in effect denying the ex-

istence of a universal "human nature," as something shared by all societies around the globe and down through time.⁶

Any particular designer you may name will necessarily be biased for or against the specifics of what is characterized here as the negative and positive influences of contemporary historicism. The intention is to point out the general influences that tend to arise from the way history is presented to us and not to suggest that the result is in any way monolithic. In fact the effect is quite the opposite. While the resultant effect is sometimes celebrated under the banner of "pluralism," more often it simply reflects a plurality of opinions by architects, which is not necessarily a reflection of the makeup of the community for whom the architect is designing. "Anything goes," is perhaps a better characterization of places like downtown Houston, for instance—not "the triumph of pluralism." Inconclusiveness or relative incoherence in theoretical precepts, based on relativistic historical theory, effects an increasingly chaotic built environment. This is not to suggest that historical studies are solely responsible for the disjointed character of today's more recent urban settings. Popular deference to the automobile, economic competition between constituent commercial interests and the like all play a part, abetted as they are by a foundation in a relativistic design theory which in turn is encouraged by our normative approach to historical knowledge.

The Anthropological Lens

Be that as it may, an informative exercise would be to approach historical material through a different lens, then apply that view to design in architecture to see, albeit hypothetically, what differences there might be. The lens I suggest comes from anthropology.⁷ While anthropologists study social and political history from historians during their academic training like the rest of us, their approach to ethnographic material assumes a somewhat different focus. Unlike cultural and political historians, for instance, they are not necessarily interested in historical circumstances for their own sake. While historians search about the tree of history to see how each branch and its particular leaves contributed to the development of the main trunk of history, most anthropologists content themselves with the study of societies which may have influenced absolutely no one outside their isolated domains. Instead of looking for influences and change affecting "the march of history", they are usually found looking for common expressions of characteristic ways of dealing with life among widely scattered and verifiably disassociated, and consequently, unique societies. Anthropologists speak of "human nature" as the reliable constant among all humankind, although its expressions are widely varied from one culture to another. At the core of each cultural characteristic—each custom, ritual, habit or practice—there is presumed to lie a deeper human proclivity, one which is endemic to all humankind, but which is dependent in its local form upon how a particular culture deals with that particular natural proclivity.⁸

A few brief examples of the anthropological approach will

illustrate the point. Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, viewed religion through an anthropological lens. Rather than chart the historical evolution of given religions, he selected rituals and beliefs from a particular religion, then searched for their presence and characteristic expressions in others. The result of such an approach suggests a unity of purpose, belief, and intent among all religions.⁹ Architects have been particularly interested in his work on phenomenological interpretations of place as reflections of meaning emanating from natural sensibilities in all of us. He demonstrates their presence in religious thought and practices as well as in the secular realm in modern societies. Another example may be found in the work of the principal theorist of structuralism among anthropologists, Claude Lévi-Strauss. He gathered examples of rituals, myths, and common social customs from his early ethnographic studies and from documented field work of other anthropologists, then analyzed the structure of each myth, ritual, and custom to reveal what he believed to be hidden commonalities. The process, known as structural analysis, seeks to identify and isolate certain human proclivities shared by all individuals, revealed in very different forms in different societies. Still another example comes from the work of anthropologist Peter J. Wilson. He is interested in the building practices of early societies in relation to geometric and organizational techniques developed in early architecture which in turn provided a basis for other inventions.¹⁰ One of his conclusions is that there is a basic human proclivity for structuring the built environment in ways that distinguish it from the natural environment while, at the same time, alluding to the natural world. His work in this area, like that of many others, tends to reveal a basic human quest for a unity of knowledge parallel to an existent cosmic unity that lies beyond human comprehension.

All these examples reveal a quest for the details of an illusive body of natural human proclivities which manifest themselves in all cultures, both modern and primitive, in ways so widely varied that the wellspring of their presence eludes cursory observation. The upshot of such analyses, it is assumed, is that they reveal the constants of human nature.

There is still one more characteristic of the anthropological lens that bears mention here. It has to do with operational techniques, or methodologies. One scholar who has written extensively on the subject of anthropological method sums it up this way:

“The anthropological perspective is holistic, and it strives toward an integrative paradigm. But within it two major divergent tendencies are apparent. One reflects the influence of the positivistic sciences; it attempts to achieve systematic and objective factual knowledge and generalization about humankind. The other reflects influences of the humanities; it attempts to characterize truths about humanity through descriptions and analyses that balance subjectivity and objectivity.”¹¹

It would seem that anthropology has had to face a problem similar to architecture’s with respect to the tension between sub-

jective and objective truths. Anthropology, however, has found a systematic way of resolving the problem of these opposites, while architecture has not. The history of the Modern Movement in architecture in particular may be characterized as a struggle to eliminate arbitrary decisions by turning to something like an architect’s version of scientific method, all in the expectation of eventually drawing the inevitable subjective criteria into a reliably objective program brief. For architects and urban designers, in an era of increasing separation from fundamental relationships between human society and our built environment and the built environment from nature, the search for totally objective and irrefutable criteria to guide us is inviting—although remarkably illusive. Perhaps the anthropological lens could serve as a model for architecture in this particular area, accepting the presence of humanistic bias and finding a comparatively disciplined place for it alongside the objective criteria of the design program.

Most important, however, is the focus of the anthropological lens on permanence and the timeless. I believe that this is the place where the practice of architecture and especially urban design can begin to temper some of the excesses of relativism that have come to guide decision making in design. At its base, the anthropological lens distinguishes itself from historicism this way: Because historicism assumes that “humanity is the ever evolving and ever changing offspring of history,”¹² it follows that humankind lacks a fixed nature, therefore there can be no fixed norms to inform our actions so we must content ourselves with those norms and values that are relative to our given moment in time. Anthropology, on the other hand, counters this view by assuming a fixed nature for humanity, and so regards cultural differences as always emanating from principles of nature that are common to all humans everywhere. Posing the two views side by side sets universal and timeless principles in contrast to the realities of change. While one view emphasizes the relativistic and contingent, the other highlights the presence of universal constants. Ideally, their combination might eventually be refined into a kind of yin-and-yang for architecture and urbanism, the theoretical means to a balance of opposites in the pursuit of harmony.

How might these two forces, if they were to influence design in equal measure, manifest themselves in architecture and urban design? That is, of course, anyone’s guess, but I believe it would produce the most significant changes in four principal areas of practice: architectural regionalism, restoration and conservation, the interpretation of emerging technologies, and especially the character and direction of urban design and planning. I will take them briefly one at a time.

Architectural Regionalism

The anthropological perspective would tend to encourage a direct relationship with intrinsic cultural traditions in the design of new buildings, as opposed to overt and unconditional expressions of corporate allegiances, international “styles”, or avant-

garde pretensions. In doing so, it would de-emphasize the role of the architect as artist who rightfully exerts his or her personal stamp of identity on the design, in deference to intrinsic characteristics of the culture, sub-culture, society, or region. Additionally, it is important to recall that regionalism, as a concept, is not exclusive to cultural and social differences alone. Historically speaking, the buildings and urban places of traditional societies, built of locally procured materials and attuned to regional climatic conditions provide for an economy of energy expenditure in both construction and in the long-term operation of a building. Simply put, the anthropological lens, with its attention to the natural setting of a community, would encourage perpetuating long evolved relationships between societies and the places where their cultures evolved, as expressed in their buildings and urban form.¹³

Restoration and Conservation

The present practice of conserving historic structures as museum pieces to reflect the time of their creation would likely change. The anthropological lens would encourage emphasizing the utility of old structures in the present, even to the extent that additions and renovations be rendered indistinguishable from the original, as opposed to the current practice of distinguishing the new from the old. The anthropological basis here comes from two directions. First is the suggestion that it is important for buildings, along with other artifacts, to reflect the passing of time rather than to promote the idea that their meaning and utility is relative only to “olden times” when people’s values are thought to be unrelated to today’s; and second, the anthropological lens would encourage the view that the past embodies a covenant for the future, linking past and present in a common quest for the timeless aspirations of human nature.¹⁴

The Interpretation of Emerging Technologies

The historicist view which encourages seeing history as a record of progress—while indisputable with regard to certain areas of endeavor—is all too easily construed to suggest that all technological innovation is inherently progressive. The anthropological lens would suggest that technological developments are not ends in themselves, but rather are means to accomplishments for the greater good of a society. If a technological breakthrough is disruptive to the stability of a society and ultimately counter to traditional inculcated ideals, that particular technology is inappropriate. For instance, if we build one hundred story building just because we have the technology to do it, that does not necessarily prove the value of doing so in the first place. Again, the quest to realize ideals at the scale of community would tend to supersede yielding to external forces such as world-wide techno-economic deterministic forces (sometimes known as McWorld) just because they are regarded as part of an inevitable pattern of continuous change.

Urban Design and Planning

It is in the area of urban design, I believe, that the anthropological lens would have its most valuable impact. While for a long time the doctrine of progress condoned nearly every innovation in modern urban planning—from completely new theoretical exercises such as “the city in a park” (for instance, Le Corbusier’s *Ville Radieuse*, etc.), deconstruction’s shattered and chaotic “event cities,” and so forth, to actual turns of events on the urban scene such as the growth of endless suburbs, the isolation of ethnic and racial groups into de facto communities of the poor, the advent of gated communities for the affluent, and the wholesale reconfiguration of urban areas for the automobile. The anthropological lens, on the other hand, would encourage opting instead for the continuity of long existing community structures—so long as they are not inconsistent with the highest ideals of the broader culture. This is based on the anthropological assumption that the natural evolution of culture takes precedent over innovations of the moment, whether they are technologically based or the products of the latest development in social engineering. In other words, the anthropological lens, when it comes to cultural developments, is inherently conservative, therefore it signals caution at each new bend in the road, each new direction that may be seen as possibly counter to those existing social structures that are long evolved and inherently stable.

In addition to these four specific areas of design, the anthropological perspective would likely effect general changes in normative design processes. Typology, for instance, would likely receive greater attention, given that a “type” tends to carry cultural information along with it through time, helping to ensure the evolution of forms as opposed to encouraging the complete re-ordering of forms in the face of newly construed requirements brought about by economic or technological changes. And I would like to believe that the anthropological lens would promote the identity of communities in such a way as to stress their uniqueness while at the same time stressing their commonalities with the broader culture and with other, even very distant and unrelated, communities and cultures.

All of that said, let me reiterate that what I have outlined here is hypothetical. Still, the problems addressed are real. While the more or less exclusive application of the historicist view of history has been injurious to architecture and urbanism, so would be its opposite if applied in similar singular fashion. Architects do not make all the decisions that effect the environment of cities or the character of buildings; we are only a part of the mix that ultimately shapes the environment—but we do have the ears of others, and we should not dismiss the potential of our influence lightly. The progress that has been made in Portland, Oregon for instance, is a prime example. The city today, compared to the city I knew when I was living in Oregon in the 60’s, is encouraging indeed. And while no single event may be said to have made the difference, the collective efforts of many added up to an effect that rendered this place a lot closer to the ideal than it was. The achievement of a harmonious relationship between opposites outlined above—whether it is the anthropologi-

cal lens in contrast to historicism or a different set of conservative and progressive constructs, whatever their origin—that is the real point of this argument.

NOTES

¹ Annie Jacques and Anthony Vidler, comp., “Chronology: The Ecole des Beaux-Arts, 1671-1900,” *Oppositions* 8,(Spring 1977): 151-157.

² *Ibid.*, 154, 155.

³ A careful account of these methods may be found in Donald Drew Egbert, *The Beaux-Arts Tradition in French Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁴ My use of the terms historicism and historicist here is drawn in particular from Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986, an imprint of Routledge & Kegan Paul plc., 1957).

⁵ Two articulate observers of this problem in contemporary architecture and urbanism are Colin Rowe and Carroll William Westfall. See Colin Rowe, *The Architecture of Good Intentions: Towards a Possible Retrospect* (London: Academy Editions, 1994); and Robert Jan van Pelt and William Carroll Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

⁶ It may be said that, in comparison to earlier views of history—that is, before Voltaire, for instance—the historicist view tends to distance us from the past and consequently from the assumption that past architecture is relevant to the present. While historicism reveals the workings of history by revealing detailed relationships between historical events and artifacts through time, it distances us from them at the same time.

⁷ The discussion of the anthropological view here relies largely on James L. Peacock, *The Anthropological Lens: Harsh Light, Soft*

Focus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁸ Anthropologists have studied changing conditions within a given culture as well, of course—the most well known example being Margaret Mead’s work on the impact of western culture on Samoan society—but here again the focus is on an immediate setting, and not its long term influence on other cultures.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959).

¹⁰ Peter J. Wilson, *The Domestication of the Human Species* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988)

¹¹ Peacock, *Anthropological Lens*, 101.

¹² van Pelt, *Architectural Principles*, 4.

¹³ Recent studies concerning embodied energies in materials and methods of construction in relation to broader environmental issues reinforce this point. Scientists looking into problems of materials procurement and manufacture in relation to the building industry, support the view that economies of energy expenditure and resource conservation, as well as the problem of pollutants associated with the construction process and the manufacture of building components, would be alleviated considerably by a return to more traditional building designs and materials. Especially see Nicholas Lessen and David Malin Roodman, “Making Better Buildings,” *State of the World 95: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, ed. Lester R. Brown (New York: Norton Publishers and The Worldwatch Institute, 1995), 95-112.

¹⁴ For a careful treatment of this view of the past as embodying a covenant for the future, in contrast to the currently popular view of former societies, see John B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). Especially, see the chapter titled the same as the book.