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History as a model. Models as history

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) wrote in the second essay of his *Untimely Meditations* (Unzeitgemäßen Betrachtungen, 1873–76), “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life” (Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben, 1874), that each past era deserves to be “painfully examined” (peinlich inquiriert). In contrast to an animal, which lives only in the present and therefore lives unhistorically, man has the ability to remember and thereby to create culture.

Nietzsche distinguishes three functions or categories of history, namely monumental history, which strives at great deeds; antiquarian history, which creates collective identity; and critical history, which purges adverse memories. All three have to be in balance in order not to be transfigured into something harmful: “That life is in need of the services of history, however, must be grasped as firmly as must the proposition, which is to be demonstrated later, that an excess of history is harmful to the living man.”

The service of history for life is not only aimed at a view of the past that is faithful to the sources, but also at taking a critical look at both the present and the future. Cultural history in particular – the historiography of philosophy, art and architecture – aids us in creating an awareness of our own cultural identity, and in formulating our rights and responsibilities for the present and future.

Yet the function of history as exemplary is by no means uncontroversial. As early as 1687, in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns (Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes) debate in the Académie Française, occasioned by Charles Perrault’s (1628–1703) poem “Le siècle de Louis le grand” (1687), antiquity as the eternally valid model for art and literature was questioned.

The dispute between representatives of the ancient and the modern (antiqui et moderni) – or in more general terms between the normative model of history and the innovative drive of progress – has characterized the arts in recurrent cycles from that time until the present.

In the following contribution the problematic relationship of architecture and history will be illustrated through some examples. Attention should also be given to how history is handed down and received in architecture. It is a feature of the discipline that it is not limited only to the structures themselves but also includes the production and reception processes linked to them in various media, such as drawings or models.

The model especially presents a multifaceted medium which transmits a specific form of knowledge and which can be replaced by no other medium in architecture. The three characteristics which models in general present, namely reproduction, simplification, and non-unique assignment

1. Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), *View of the Flower of Greece*, 1824–1825, copy (original lost) by August Wilhelm Ahlborn (1796–1857) – Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s idealised view of ancient Greece.



capability, give them a special significance in the mediation of history and contribute to its utility.

Historicism: Truth of history?

Scientific research on architectural history began in the middle of the eighteenth century with the rise of historical scholarship and the development of historical consciousness.

With it art in general, and architecture in particular, acquire a special place in the discipline of history. Because not only are the two regarded as the most important testimony to bygone eras, but experiencing historical architecture also

allows one to dissolve the border between past and present and to develop an historical consciousness in person in the midst of historical buildings. Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) proposed that “Art is the voice of History,” and he naturally assumed that the goal of architecture was the expression of historical truth.

The beginning of scientific study of architectural history is closely tied to the rise of the Grand Tour – those educational travels through Italy from the late sixteenth century onwards, and from the middle of the eighteenth century through Greece as well, by the sons of the European nobility and later

by artists and architects to study the sites and the culture of antiquity and the Renaissance.

Extensive archaeological studies were also undertaken along with these journeys, resulting in publications such as *Les ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce* (1758) by Julien-David Le Roy (1724–1803) or *The Antiquities of Athens and Other Monuments of Greece* (I–IV, 1762–1815) by James “Athenian” Stuart (1713–88) and Nicholas Revett (1720–1804). The architecture of Greek antiquity especially was celebrated, as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) expressed it, as a supra-historical quintessence and the highest aesthetic model – an idea which would have enormous influence in Europe in the so-called Greek Revival and Neoclassicist eras.

In tandem with the study of the history of architecture, scientific theories were also advanced on the development of historical processes. That is, history was observed as a systematic, even deterministic succession of historical eras. Julien-David Le Roy, the first teacher of the history of architecture at the Academie Royale d'Architecture in Paris, considered architectural history – in accordance with scientific ideas of evolutionary development (a “chain of being”) – to be a sequential development of building types that stemmed from the original prototypes and whose principles remain unchanged.

This idea continued in the efforts by Gottfried Semper (1803–79) and Eugene Viollet-le-Duc (1814–79), the two most important theorists of the nineteenth century. They endeavored to distil principles and constants from history and to track the forces of change.

Semper traced the history of architecture basically to four primitive elements and the principle of theory of dressing (Bekleidungstheorie), Viollet-le-Duc to a *principe générateur*. In his *Dictionnaire Raisonné* (1854–68), Viollet-le-Duc summed up the defining concept of historicism in his time as follows:

“Our era, and our era alone, since the beginning of recorded history, has assumed toward the past a quite exceptional attitude as far as history is concerned. Our age has wished to analyze the past, classify it, compare it, and write its complete history, following step by step the procession, the progress and the various transformations of humanity.”

Just how supremely important historical models were for nineteenth-century architecture can also be grasped from the close connection between research, education, and practice. On those trips through Italy and Greece the buildings of antiquity and the Renaissance were documented through drawings or books, but casts and models of them were also collected, which were produced with great precision and archaeological accuracy. Both individual architects and teaching institutions gathered large collections of books and drawings, as well as models and plaster casts, to serve as illustrative material for their own work and for educational purposes.

One of the largest private collections around 1800 was that of the English architect John Soane (1753–1837). It encompassed, in addition to 7,783 books and around 30,000 of his own and others’ drawings, 252 models. Of these, 118 were models of his own designs, 20 were plaster casts, and 14 were cork models of ancient Greek and Roman buildings.

1. Joseph Michael Gandy (1771–1843), *Public and private buildings executed by Sir John Soane between 1780 and 1815*, 1818 – Depiction of models in John Soane's collection.



The remaining 100 were models of individual ornamentation and details.

At the academies and universities, teaching materials were collected for the training of students – pattern drawings, casts and models – in collections, which stood at the center of the historical training of architects. They enabled a

combination of observing, studying, copying, and designing. The instruction consisted mainly of the study of examples based on drawings and models – that is, original drawings were copied, space and proportions studied, casts and models reproduced.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, with the



process of scientification and systematization, the relationship between history and the search for historical truth in history changes from one true historic solution to a question of historical accuracy. Architecture reaches the stage of a dogmatic or archaeological historicism.

The educated architect can avail himself of various different style systems of precisely defined historical examples in order to resolve the same construction tasks, as Benjamin

Latrobe (1764–1820), John Soane, or Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841) demonstrate in their work.

Ideally one can draw as it were from the whole of the known history of world architecture, as envisioned by Joseph Gandy (1771–1843) or Thomas Cole (1801–48), for example.

In the late nineteenth century, this scientifically based historicism shows fundamental problems. Confronted with a wide range of historical knowledge, it becomes increasingly difficult

1. Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *The Architect's Dream*, 1840 – Mid 19th century historicist overview over architectural history.

for architects to bear the weight of history and the large number of historicizing revivals and develop an architecture conscious of its own historicity. Architecture was becoming less and less capable of harmonizing with the reality of the time, and the consequences of the industrial revolution such as urbanization and technical progress.

In addition, the historical style forms in the nineteenth century were to an increasing extent used to define the cultural identity of the emerging nation states. The current ruling class was legitimized by creating a link to a great past, as this can be viewed in numerous historical stately buildings.

Modernism: A break with history?

With the advent of Modernism the relationship of architects to history is fundamentally altered. The groundwork for this had already been laid in the late nineteenth century – in art by the secession movements, for example, which famously divorced themselves from the historicism of the academies, and in the field of philosophy by the initially quoted Friedrich Nietzsche. He admittedly did not deny the importance of history as such, but called for a supra-historical awareness in order to live fully in the present.

The First World War and the revolutions in Russia and Germany swept away the monarchies and their cultural hierarchies and facilitated the breakthrough of radical avant-garde currents. Almost all of these avant-garde movements called for a harsh reckoning with tradition, history, and seniority thinking because they were identified with the old regimes.

The most radical rejection of every tradition was formulated

by the Italian Futurists. In his Manifesto of Futurism (1909), Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) proposed “to destroy the museums, libraries and academies of any kind,” and at the same time postulated as a new ideal that “a racing car is more beautiful ... than the Nike of Samothrace.” With regard to futuristic architecture, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Antonio Sant’Elia (1888–1916) wrote that, “This ... cannot be subject to any law of historical continuity. It must be new, just as our state of mind is new.”

Similar though less drastically formulated statements can also be found among the other protagonists of the modern movement. One of the few basic convictions on which most modernists were able to agree was the rejection of tradition, history, and academic historicism. At the founding of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), the declaration of La Sarraz (1928) concluded by stating that the members refused to adopt “the design principles of earlier epochs and bygone social structures.”

This rejection of history by the modern movement is also reflected in the agenda of their most famous educational institution, the Bauhaus. The first Bauhaus Manifesto of 1919 stated with regard to scientific and theoretical subjects, “Art history ... was not to be presented in the sense of social history, but serve as living knowledge of historical working practices and techniques.” In addition the curriculum established by Walter Gropius (1883–1969) did not originally include the subject architectural history – a radical break with previous training traditions. His argument for this was that history was not necessary for the architect’s profession. Accordingly, at

the Bauhaus there was never regular instruction in the history of art and architecture. *The Principles of Bauhaus Production* (1926) was much more directed at an ahistorical search for permanently valid, “timeless” forms. This was complemented by the guiding principle of an *International Architecture*, as Gropius entitled the first Bauhaus book. In contrast to a historically or nationally colored architecture, a universally valid, international architecture was now to arise deriving from the nature of the building task, from material and technology.

Historical architecture models accordingly lost their importance as teaching tools. However, they gained enormously in importance as a modern design and presentation medium. This was furthered firstly by the availability of modern photographic and printing techniques, such as image reproduction in offset printing from 1910 onwards. These advances enabled for the first time realistic reproduction of photographed architecture models in the mass media.

After his emigration, Gropius continued this doctrine as head of the school of architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He transformed the compulsory courses in architectural history into optional subjects and explained this in his *Blueprint of an Architectural Education* (1939):

“Studies of the history of art and architecture can verify principles found by the student through his own previous exercises in surface, volume, space and color; they cannot by themselves, however, develop a code of principles to be valid for present creation in design. Principles ... have to be established for each period from new creative work.”

In addition, the collection of plaster casts and models,

which up until then had been used for instruction, was removed and the walls of the historicist Robinson Hall, which had housed the collection, hidden by white partitions. However, the story circulated by Bruno Zevi (1918–2000) that upon his arrival at Harvard Gropius also had all books on architectural history packed away is fictitious.

Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that the protagonists of the modern movement by no means totally rejected architectural history, but rather used it selectively to legitimize their own work. In particular Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968), in his Norton Lectures at Harvard, which would later be published as *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), attempted to construct a modern tradition leading from Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace through the engineering architecture of the nineteenth century to the modern architecture of the twentieth. This selective, narrow focus on one’s own work prompted Vincent Scully (1920–) to compare Giedion’s approach with the view in a rear-view mirror, in which we can only recognize ourselves.

From the 1940s onwards, architectural education oriented towards modern architecture and the associated rejection of history spread first to almost all American and later also the majority of European universities. As a result, history developed into a term with negative connotations, with the criticism directed especially against the concept of historicism, as formulated in 1961 by Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–83): “Historicism is the misconception of believing so strongly in the power of history that each original action is suffocated and replaced by actions which are inspired by historical precedent.”

1. [Architectural Teaching Collection Technische Hochschule München \(today Technical University Munich\)](#), 1916.

Epilogue: The rediscovery of history after modernism

After the Second World War the rediscovery of architectural history spread from Italy. In the first place, the modern movement there was never as strongly anti-historical as in other countries, and in the second place significant modern architecture was created there even in the fascist era. Ernesto Rogers (1909–69) used the concept of *continuità*, a timeless, historical continuity, to historiographically characterize the quality of the buildings of this time in order to observe them apart from their immediate historical context.

The most lasting contribution towards re-introducing history into architectural discourse came from the book *L'architettura della città* (The Architecture of the City) (1966) by Aldo Rossi (1931–97). In this work, Rossi coins terms to describe the city that has developed through history, proceeding from *continuità*, as well as its permanence through changing uses. In tandem with this, Robert Venturi (1925–) in his work *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, published that same year, rehabilitates architecture as the bearer of a complex historical significance.

Postmodern architecture, which draws from these and many other similar works, is characterized by numerous historical linkages. However, individual architectural references cannot, as Peter Collins declares, create history but at the most create individual historical frames of reference.

Translation by Keneva Kunz

