Where Architectural Historians Fear to Tread

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The humanities and social sciences as practiced in the United States today have come under criticism from radical scholars. The editor of a recent critique charges the academic establishment with "public irrelevance" and "esoteric professionalism";1 his several contributors arrive at similar conclusions in essays on their respective disciplines. Only one criticism of art history, from the inside, has come to my attention2 though it would seem to offer a most vulnerable target; some American art historians' ritualistic preoccupation with the trivia of dating, attribution, and provenance certainly epitomizes mock scholarship at its most irrelevant.

The present essay subjects the related discipline of architectural history to scrutiny. It does not cover current research projects which are usefully listed from time to time in the Newsletter of the Society of Architectural Historians.3 It does not deal with the teaching of architectural history, which has been the subject of several symposia.4 It does not attempt to assess the entire printed output of architectural historians. My analysis is based upon all writings published in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians5 over a period of ten years, from 1958 to 1967 inclusive. This sample is large enough to be representative, and I regard it as particularly significant. These are the writings which the architectural historians have submitted to their peers; it is therefore just that they should be judged by these contributions.

In the ten volumes (40 issues) from 1958 to 1967 the JSAH published 257 by-lined articles. I have made no distinction here between the longer papers and the "Shorter Notices" and "American Notes." Each is counted as one article regardless of length. The JSAH also published 204 signed book reviews. These may be more influential than the articles because the JSAH does not claim to review all books on architectural history; it is therefore highly significant which books are recognized and which are ignored. Thus the total number of contributions was 461. I have not taken into account the "Letters to the Editor" because they are only comments on some of these articles and book reviews.

A word on the contributors: the Society of Architectural Historians has always been equally hospitable to academics, to other professionals, and to amateurs. However, most contributions to the JSAH come from the academy. Table 1 breaks them down by affiliation of their authors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleges and Universities</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Park Service</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Institutes and Organizations</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Affiliation Given</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only six contributions were written by men identified as architects; of these five individuals, one is a government official, and two had retired from the practice of architecture. Practicing architects have, of course, always been prolific authors of books and frequent contributors to many periodicals. They simply do not choose to publish in the JSAH.

I had read almost all 461 contributions on publication.

Mr. Maass would like it known that he feels that the merits and shortcomings of the JSAH are primarily due to its contributors rather than its editors. This, we feel, is not only gracious, but it also means that his article can stand as an invitation to contributors. Ed.

5. Subsequently referred to as JSAH.
For this study I conscientiously re-read every one of them. I found the experience entirely painless. The architectural historians must be given high marks for readability. There is no ritualistic format; treatment and style are quite varied. The tone is sober but I trust that most of the authors have not lost all enthusiasm for their topic. Most contributions are in clear English; there is little of the jargon which fouls some learned journals.

So much for the simple methodology of this study. As for results, I contend that this analysis reveals enormous gaps and serious deficiencies in the writing of architectural history. I have grouped these sins of commission and omission under eight heads:

1. THE BOURGEOIS STANDARD

A book of transcendent importance to architectural history was published during the decade: Bernard Rudofsky, Architecture Without Architects (New York, 1965). Over forty years of search—rather than re-search—went into this book of modest size and brilliant originality. Significantly, it was not reviewed in the JSAH. Its Preface begins with a brief polemic:

Architectural history, as written and taught in the Western world, has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures. In terms of space it comprises but a small part of the globe—Europe, stretches of Egypt and Anatolia—or little more than was known in the second century A.D. Moreover, the evolution of architecture is usually dealt with only in its late phases. Skipping the first fifty centuries, chroniclers usually present us with a full-dress pageant of "formal" architecture, as arbitrary a way of introducing the art of building as, say, dating the birth of music with the advent of the symphony orchestra. Although the dismissal of the early stages can be explained, though not excused, by the scarcity of architectural monuments, the discriminative approach of the historian is mostly due to his parochialism. Besides, architectural history as we know it is equally biased on the social plane. It amounts to little more than a who's who of architects who commemorated power and wealth; an anthology of buildings of, by, and for the privileged—the houses of true and false gods, of merchant princes and princes of the blood—with never a word about the houses of lesser people.

Architecture Without Architects attempts to break down our narrow concepts of the art of building by introducing the unfamiliar world of nonpedigreed architecture. It is so little known that we don't even have a name for it. For want of a generic label, we shall call it vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural, as the case may be.

The overwhelmingly rich and varied world to which Rudofsky's book provides a tantalizing introduction, is rarely mentioned in the JSAH from 1958 to 1967. The line between formal and vernacular architecture is not always easy to draw but, at most, only 13 articles out of 257 dealt with the latter.

American architectural historians of the 1960s are at the same stage as the French bourgeoisie was in 1789 when the Third Estate outvoted the Nobility and Clergy in the Estates General for the first time. Articles about cathedrals, royal palaces, and aristocratic mansions are now outnumbered by those on public and private buildings which are associated with the urban middle class. The architectural historians do not yet pay attention to the anonymous architecture of early and rural societies.

2. THE RACIAL BIAS

As Rudofsky points out, architectural historians virtually ignore all non-Western civilizations. Table 2 shows the record of JSAH:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Western Architecture</th>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Book Reviews</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Western Architecture</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All Oriental architecture, ancient and modern, from North Africa to Japan, is the topic of four articles. There is no contribution about China; the political situation during the decade may explain this lack. The same excuse cannot apply to the absence of any reference to Japan. The entire field of Far Eastern architecture is represented by one article describing two buildings in Honolulu. The so-called "Primitive" civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas are represented by a total of two articles.

There can be no doubt that the assumption of white supremacy forms the basis for this unbalanced view of the globe. The ratio of 251:4:2 corresponds with the Victorian scheme which divided the world into civilized, semi-civilized, and barbarous races. This simplistic doctrine should no longer be reflected by a scholarly discipline and journal in the late twentieth century.

6. One is in clear French; December 1962.
7. Representative examples are the articles by Walter Horn, Summer 1958; Jan Van Der Meulen, May 1963; Philip Dole, December 1964.
10. Even William H. Prescott, the sympathetic historian of the Aztecs and Incas, wrote: "The monuments of China, of Hindostan, and of Central America are all indicative of an immature period, in which the imagination has not been disciplined by study, and which, therefore, in its best results, betrays only the ill-regulated aspirations after the beautiful, that belong to a semi-civilized people" (History of the Conquest of Peru [1847], Book I, Chapter v).
American architecture outnumbers all other subjects in the JSAH. This is entirely proper and does not indicate any parochial attitude. It is a practical matter: not all American architectural historians have the opportunity of extended foreign travel and direct observation which are essential to any sound writing on foreign topics.

The map shows all contributions about European architecture which could be assigned to countries. It is evident that the architectural historians follow the well-worn path of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour from England through France and Italy. Germany and Spain are seriously under-represented. All smaller nations are badly neglected or wholly ignored. Russia does not exist.

Contributions about Western Architecture outside the United States and Europe are listed in Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Book Reviews</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese Asia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The absence of articles on Mexico and South America is surprising.

This conventional record bears out a contemporary historian’s aphorism: “Whatever tends to be uninteresting is either something with which we are excessively familiar or something which is utterly alien to us . . . Historically
speaking, we are usually attracted to places and periods about which we already know something.”

4. THE GENTEE TRADITION

Forty-five years have passed since the publication of Vers Une Architecture with its praise for American factories and grain elevators, but American architectural historians still consider industrial architecture a negligible subject.

Only three articles on industrial buildings were published: on a cotton mill, a canal lock, and a gas station. The latter was published because it is a work of Frank Lloyd Wright. The editor of the “American Notes” added a pertinent suggestion: “The filling station, as an all too conspicuous feature of the American roadside deserves further investigation.”

The high interest and merit of industrial architecture was demonstrated in an outstanding book published during the decade: J. M. Richards, The Functional Tradition in Early Industrial Buildings (London, 1958). It was not reviewed in the JSAH. The distinguished author and his noted photographic collaborator, Eric de Maré, presented an introduction to the following historic building types in Britain: Warehouses, Docks, Naval Dockyards, Textile Factories, Water-Mills, Windmills, Breweries, Maltings and Oast-Houses, Sheds, Bridges. No article on any such building was published in the JSAH except the aforementioned Note on a cotton mill.

American architectural historians have shown no interest in the workaday structures which are now usually designed by civil engineers, for example: bridges, dams, harbors, and railroads. The professions of architecture and engineering only separated in the nineteenth century; this neglect is therefore historically unsound.

5. THE SURFACE TREATMENT

Scholars usually deprecate the “façadism” of popularizing writers on architecture whose books are innocent of plans and sections. However, the architectural historians do not always practice what they preach; most of the contributions to the JSAH slight the structure of buildings. Only 30 out of 257 articles seriously attempt the technical aspects of building. Usually the authors do not tell us what happened between the architect’s plan on paper and the completion of the building; there is rarely a word about builders and craftsmen; problems arising during construction are not mentioned; detailed working drawings and construction photographs are seldom reproduced. This is a rather skin-deep and boneless way to write architectural history. We may compare it to a book on gastronomy which describes the handsome appearance and garnishing of dishes in the dining room but does not mention cooking; a writer on food need not be a master chef but he should certainly know his way around a kitchen.

The reason for this neglect of structure should be admitted frankly: A small number of American architectural historians were originally educated as architects; the majority have only had “soft” training in the humanities without “hard” courses in mathematics and science. They write little about the technology of building because they know little about it. Curriculum planning is beyond the scope of this essay, but it would seem reasonable that the education of an architectural historian should include some study of architectural design and construction.

6. THE ISOLATED BUILDING

In 1924 Lewis Mumford published his first study of American architecture and civilization; thirty years later he wrote in the preface for a new edition: “I have left to the last perhaps the greatest contribution that Sticks and Stones made, though it is one that has not yet, I regret to say, been fully absorbed by critics and historians of architecture. This is that fact that I thought to relate individual structures to their urban site or their setting in the rural landscape.” Another fourteen years have passed since, and, I regret to say, the historians of architecture still have not absorbed the fact that “except in the abstraction of drawing or photography no building exists in a void.” This lesson has, however, since been learned by architects and critics who now think in terms of “environment” and “townscape” as a matter of course.

I counted every article dealing with the architecture of a street, square, neighborhood, campus, village, town, city, and region; the total is 17 out of 257. Articles about separate buildings rarely project any “sense of place”; usually

16. Though it was listed under “Books Received,” March 1959, P. 36.
17. Representative examples are the articles by Charles E. Peterson, December 1965; Gustina Scaglia, May 1966; Cecil A. Hewett, March 1967.
18. They can sometimes be “spotted” by the fine old custom of doing their own drawings; for example the late Talbot Hamlin, Turpin C. Bannister.
20. Ibid.
there is no reference to town or country, landscape or climate; the buildings are described as if they stood on a library shelf.

The architectural historians evidently leave matters beyond the individual buildings to other disciplines, geography, city planning, and landscape architecture. This narrow-angle view of architecture is both obsolete and un-historical, for in past centuries "...no sharply defined border lines existed between city planning and architecture, between architecture and decoration, between decoration and stage design, between stage design and landscape architecture." It is time for the architectural historians to close the generation gap which now separates them from the architects and from other scholars who study communities rather than isolated buildings.

7. THE ISOLATED ART

Architectural history is usually regarded as a branch of art history, and some architectural historians are art historians as well. It is therefore surprising that very few articles in the JSAH make any reference to other arts.24

No articles were devoted to painting or sculpture in association with architecture, though a few pictures and engravings were mentioned in passing. Drawings and engravings are frequently reproduced as documents but the relation between architecture and the graphic arts is not explored. Buildings are generally presented as if they were empty shells, reflecting the rather old-fashioned distinction between the "fine art" of architecture and the "minor arts" or "applied arts" of interior design. The entire man-made environment, outside and inside, is the proper concern of architectural history, and the study of furnishings should not be relegated to periodicals for antique collectors and interior decorators.

No article referred to the performing arts of drama, music, dance or pageantry which take place in specially designed architectural settings.

Architectural historians are interested in the concept of style, but architectural styles should not be viewed separately from those of all other contemporaneous arts.

8. THE ISOLATED DISCIPLINE

Philosophically speaking, "Architectural History" is a contradiction in terms; History is a continuum which cannot be chopped into fragments of time like "Medieval History," or fragments of space like "French History," or fragments of content like "Art History." It should be evident that triple fragmentations like "History of Nineteenth-Century American Architecture" have no valid meaning except as the title of a college course or text book.

For practical purposes we compromise, dividing and sub-dividing the seamless web of knowledge into academic disciplines and specialized "fields." It is the historian's task to re-establish the connections between the fragments, though he can never reach the ideal state of wholeness again. The late Erwin Panofsky described this difficult process with inimitable elegance and wit:

As time goes on, the world of the German art historian—and this writer is no exception—tends to resemble an archipelago of little islands forming, perhaps, a coherent pattern when viewed from an airplane but separated by channels of abysmal ignorance; whereas the world of his American confrère may be compared to a massive tableland of specialized knowledge overlooking a desert of general information.25

High demands are being made of the "New Historian"; Harry Elmer Barnes proposed that he be trained in the following sciences: physics, biology, geography, psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, jurisprudence, ethics.26 These and more would also be relevant to the study of architectural history:

Social Science: The doctrine of L'art pour l'art has little historic significance, and L'architecture pour l'architecture is so absurd that it has not yet been proposed. Some articles in the JSAH do relate architecture to social history but more "light is needed to make the diamond sparkle."28

Economics: The architect has always had to be a man of affairs. Not many articles in the JSAH refer to economic conditions.29

Political History: The architect of a public building becomes almost inevitably involved in politics. A few articles in the JSAH recognize this fact but there seems to be some reluctance to "drag politics" into architectural history.30

22. The same narrow focus is reflected in conventional architectural photography which sedulously crops out neighboring structures. Architectural photographers have only recently begun to present buildings in their real setting.


24. Representative examples are the articles by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, October 1965 and March 1966; Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., December 1965.


28. This attractive metaphor is the last sentence of Heinrich Wölflin, Die Klassische Kunst (Munich, 1898).

29. Representative examples of economically-oriented articles are those by J. D. Forbes, Fall 1958; Roy Lubove, May 1964.

30. Representative examples of politically-oriented articles are those by Harold and James Kirker, March 1963; Anthony Jackson, March 1965.
When a distinguished architectural historian described political realities, she was savagely vilified for it in a "Letter to the Editor." The British historian G. M. Trevelyan asked that those who write the history of a period should be "soaked in its literature." The architectural historians are diligent in tracking down books about architecture but they do not often allude to general literature.

Psychology: This science goes to the deep roots of architecture. Almost no work has been done by architectural historians along this difficult line; no article in the JSAH referred to psychology.

Architectural history must maintain ties to other relevant disciplines; otherwise it could not claim a higher rank than pursuits like philately and the collecting of antique buttons.

To sum up: Much writing of architectural history is locked in a number of boxlike concepts. If architectural history is to remain a vital discipline, it will have to break out of these rigid compartments which are not only out of date but historically unsound. Architectural historians must consistently link architecture to wider concerns or they will merit John Betjeman's heartfelt sarcasm: "We know . . . the exact date and the name of the architect and the style of a building. The Herr-Professor-Doktors are writing everything down for us, sometimes throwing in a little hurried pontificating too, so we need never bother to feel or think or see again."

I may have given the impression that the writing of architectural history demands the multiple talents and universal erudition of a veritable genius; such a standard of perfection would be discouraging. On the contrary, I mean to suggest a bright prospect: Architectural historians are fortunate because they are working in a field where the surface has hardly been scratched.

34. Stamp and button collectors have many societies and journals of their own.