For those who study architecture, space is fundamental. It is an analytic category, an active force that affects what people do and how they think, and an object that designers manipulate. The formal analysis of artifacts studied in situ, the critical assessment of how people build and use what they make, and the meanings they ascribe to a material world have defined architectural history as a field of study. Volumetrics, spatial relationships, sequences of variously articulated spaces—such aspects comprise the materiality and experience scholars intend to convey when they present plans and sections as a means to understand how designers and builders create space. Our empirical base in drawings, structures, and material culture provides sources for seeing space as a product of design informed by taste and aspirations as well as by geomorphology and ecology, economies and institutions.

Yet, within the discipline certain aspects of design and space-making are seen more as a by-product than a product. Buildings are dynamic; the space between buildings is static. Architectural historians assign much (if not most) of the thought and agency to the figure rather than the ground, the footprint rendered in black rather than the context rendered as a void. Structures are symbols, material representations of ideology, a physical context for social action. They are generative of experience and meaning, stimulate memory and desire, offer a nexus for social possibility. The residual—the space in between—is seemingly devoid of these attributes and capacities.

However the ground, like the figure, is a product of human intention. It is an amalgam of ideas and actions, custom and governance, investment and ideology. In other words, the void is an artifact also. It is a thing produced over time. Often the history of that production is understood to be legal history, political history, or social history. It is all this, yet given its fundamentality for understanding the figure, that history ought to be conceived as integrally architectural.

In most cases the space between buildings and the ground on which architects and others build has been defined by a state. States assign, maintain, and police borders and boundaries. These mandates encompass the dimensions and configuration of building lots as well as homeland security. At each scale state policies and practices affect architecture and planning. The role U.S. federal policy played in tract-scale development following World War II illustrates this point. As a number of studies have shown, the construction of specific building types at particular sites was determined through a complex and contingent interplay of federal incentives, municipal zoning, private enterprise, consumers’ decisions, and exclusionary practices both legal and extralegal. Each factor is intrinsically spatial: state incentives are enacted in ways that are geographically uneven; zoning segregates land use by functions; investment varies across cities and regions; and social distance is constituted in part by physical segregation. Each factor is fundamentally tied to a state.

Though the design, construction, and use of buildings by and for states has been a mainstay of architectural history, such studies typically consider states as clients, a state that builds. A monarch’s palace, an imperial house of government, a national capitol, a city hall—these artifacts of governance are intended to evoke awe and sustain sovereignty. They are state power made concrete. Similarly, we have studies of popes or kings superimposing significant piles on top of those of the colonized or vanquished. Such projects convey and enact authority, authority that can be emancipative, repressive, or both. Equally familiar are state exercises of dominion over territory. The command of space (as well as capital and labor) has served as a symbol of state power at scales ranging from a plaza ringed by structures for civic functionaries as codified in the Laws of the Indies to the heroic comprehensive urban plans Spiro Kostof classified as a Grand Manner. In other words, architectural historians view states primarily as clients for buildings intended to glorify established regimes.

Yet, a state is an idea before it is a reality. Rather than an entity with intrinsic rights to land, states transform space into territory as a means toward sovereignty. Architecture, defined broadly to include the design and construction of systems for
water, power, or transportation, has been a principal tool for that process. Revealing how space functions as a means to state formation is James Scott's primary objective in Seeing Like a State. His cases (an analysis of forestry policy in Germany, Soviet five-year plans for advancing production in specific industrial sectors, and the drafting and implementation of plans for a new capital city in Brazil) are akin to the creation of networks and connections such as turnpikes, canals, and railroads in the United States during the nineteenth century. Projects seen then as a means to overcome geographic and economic isolation, to link consumers and citizens to a state. Or one might reference the projects constructed during the 1930s when an expansive New Deal federal state asserted its emergent prerogative as a builder, as an agent for regional redevelopment, and as a proactive shaper of a national economy more Keynesian (or supply-side) in orientation. What a study of these and like projects can reveal is the role architecture plays in state building and state formation; that states are a primary—if not the preeminent—agent mediating between the abstract space of systems and the materiality of lived space.

In addition to a role as clients contracting for buildings, states also facilitate building as participants in growth machines. Providing entrepreneurs with land and access to the capital necessary to construct railroads is a national example; urban renewal undertaken with the auspices of a community redevelopment agency would be a municipal correlate. Historians (such as Eric Monkkonen) and sociologists (most notably John Logan and Harvey Molotch) have traced the open exercise of state power in the domains of management, finance, and regulation. States also manage design and building through the administration of semiautonomous agencies (housing authorities, community redevelopment, transportation authorities), independent departments (for water and power), and partnership in public-private joint ventures. They also define space and guide design through the adoption and enforcement of prescriptive and prohibitive regulations. Whether licensing or denying (through permitting and approvals) or directing or guiding (via codes and guidelines), municipalities have long exercised authority to regulate land use, the placement and form of structures, and the provision, maintenance, and performance of services.

Regulations enabled and constrained building materials in imperial Rome; new foundations in sixteenth-century London and Antwerp; and buildings, streets, and wharves in New York at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, municipal officials enforced design standards that defined an envelope for building through floor-area ratios or criteria that dictate height and bulk. When comparing skyscraper construction from 1890 to 1920, Carol Willis found that height regulations in Chicago and the lack of regulation in New York explained the different skylines in the two cities. Causality can be traced to municipal policy rather than the predilection of design professionals.

Contemporaries in New York and Chicago viewed the expanding reach of state authority in the modern era via a sequence of ordinances, regulations, and codes as a march of progress. From our vantage we understand this to be a temporally and spatially uneven process (hence the divergence in high-rise design and construction), a product of the structure of states among other factors. Yet, within that unevenness, change has a pattern. A state that surveys and monitors construction but does little else is different in purpose, in practice, and often in its structure and organization than a state that inspects, licenses, and fines. On the former end of this sequence, state practice is reactive; on the latter end are states that design.

Only on rare occasion—and even then more obliquely—have political scientists and historians who study state formation considered architecture as a shaper of institutions. Architectural historians do no better; we largely refuse sustained analysis of how architecture, planning, and city building have been constitutive of states; how state promotion of, investment in, or oversight and management of projects large and small has been a process of state building.

When talking about states and design, there is a tendency in the architectural history literature to assume the former is stable and unchanging and the latter is an expression of these conditions. Architecture is intended to be an enduring symbol, ennobling institutions that are themselves timeless and enduring. These artifacts obscure the fact that states are subject to change and that they take their specific shape through such projects. Stated differently, implicit in much of the work on architecture, design, and states is a state that preexists its space. Space is seen to be a product of state action; states allow for the production of built landscapes.

Where then might models for alternative investigations be found? Historical archaeologists who study ancient civilizations and the origins of urbanization are paying greater attention to the strategies and practices societies employed when establishing territory. They have come to see the control of space as constitutive of early states. Current scholarship examining global cities, regional economies, and the “rescaling of statehood” suggests that at multiple scales, from the supranational (such as the European Union) at one extreme to the devolution of municipal authority down to neighborhood councils on the other, states are products of spatial practices, of territory, property, and projects. For the recent past, political economy and political science offer
accounts of states and state building, institutions and institutional design. When such studies are historically minded and attend to implications and effects in the material world, they can suggest how those who begin with design and the built environment might proceed to analyses of state building through city building. Consider two examples.

In a series of studies examining large-scale public works projects such as the Los Angeles and Colorado River aqueducts, the ports of Long Beach and San Pedro, and Los Angeles International Airport, Steven P. Erie has documented the process of developing these public works (from visionary proposals through engineering, approval, and finance to actual construction) and the interrelated development of governance institutions that in some cases, such as the Metropolitan Water District (MWD), are both municipal and regional. The MWD, a consortium of fourteen cities and eleven municipal water districts, is of a type with more than 35,000 special districts—semitransitory, limited-purpose bureaucracies—that provide public management through appointed government in American cities.

During the past century, a need for water in California combined with the imperial ambitions of place promoters to engender audacious projects to capture, control, and distribute this precious, essential resource. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the process of designing, building, and managing the Owens Valley project transformed a minor agency of city government—the Water Department, overseen by self-taught engineer William Mulholland—into the Department of Water and Power (DWP). As a public entrepreneur, and as the largest member of the MWD, the DWP functions as the lead manager for hydro-politics in southern California, one of the largest special districts in the United States. The MWD in turn serves as a de facto policymaker. Deciding where, when, and if it will supply “blue gold” means the agency functions as a gatekeeper of sorts. The MWD’s decisions can either permit or constrain development. Its standards and regulations, especially its more recent efforts to promote conservation, function as de jure and de facto design guidelines. These affect planning, architecture, landscape design, and the construction and performance of buildings. The agency’s decisions and actions define design parameters ranging from geographic location and pattern to scale and density. Former director Timothy F. Brick has described the MWD as the “handmaiden of growth” in its service territory. Yet increasingly its policies and practices are a deterrent to growth for growth’s sake and contribute to what is often called “smart growth.”

Jameson W. Doig’s study of the Port of New York Authority (established in 1921, now the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey) provides a second example. Doig charts the growth of a special district charged with improving transportation facilities in the New York–New Jersey harbor. This institution of regional governance grew and evolved in accordance with a program of public works (terminals, tunnels, bridges, and airports) designed to move goods and people within a region and beyond. His account reveals the construction and management of infrastructure projects as a process intertwined with the incremental growth of an institution. From its modest origins as a study commission evaluating rail freight facilities to its role as master builder of marine, rail, truck, and bus terminals, the Lincoln Tunnel and George Washington Bridge, and assorted airports, Port Authority–sponsored projects fixed a basic pattern for services in the metropolitan region, and the authority grew into “one of the most formidable political agencies America has produced.”

If architecture is defined inclusively, if an architectural historians’ purview encompasses policies and regulations that fix the parameters design professionals block out on a base drawing, then covenants, conditions, and restrictions (CC&Rs) and like instruments ought to be studied. Historic preservation is representative: in a matter of decades an avocation shared by activists passionate about saving and restoring structures deemed significant has become a formal institution within federal, state, and local government. That process can be traced in Los Angeles. Popular wisdom suggests the city is bereft of history, or that a general disregard for history guides elected officials, private interests, and citizens as they undertake repeated cycles of creative destruction. Adopting an architecture and state building perspective brings into view the robust activity of activists and nonprofits such as the Los Angeles Conservancy. An effective publicist for preservation, the conservancy leverages a critical mass of over seven thousand members when advocating for particular buildings and for policy that increases the likelihood structures will be reused rather than demolished.

The recent creation of an Office of Historic Resources (OHR) within the Department of City Planning, with staff drawn from the conservancy and financial support from the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), is an example of architecture altering the structure and capacity of municipal government. The OHR is leading a five-year, five-million-dollar effort to create a context statement and field guide for a city of 446 square miles. Professional surveyors will record building types, construction, style, and social use for a significant number of the 880,000 parcels within municipal boundaries. Planners envision the composite record as a tool for evaluating buildings, blocks, and districts throughout the city. Elected officials and other agents...
of the local state will consult survey data as they assess development proposals from property owners, investors, and design professionals.11

This example reveals a dialectic process. In this case, a local state reconfigured its administrative structure to accord with changing taste and values (both aesthetic and monetary) in architecture. As the OHR adopts, implements, and enforces additional policy intended to regulate the built environment, such action most likely will initiate further changes in municipal administration.

Consider New Urbanism: bracket its oft-rehearsed shortcomings as an ideal and an ideology, and instead consider its proponents’ efforts to define design standards and to enact and implement the regulation necessary to impose and enforce codes. The CNU (Congress for the New Urbanism) is changing the role states play in architecture by expanding government and institutional capacity. While CNU members strive to raise the bar in a public discourse about design standards and performance metrics, they quietly proceed along a parallel course working as code writers, setting baselines that enhance the likelihood proposals that meet a city’s metric will be those that adhere to principles they propound. It is as code writers, as shapers of (principally) municipal policy, that New Urbanists have been able to redefine discourse and debate and influence the construction of entire districts in cities and hinterlands across the United States.14

Public works, historic preservation, the writing of codes and regulations—each reveal state building, space, and architecture to be entwined domains. Architecture gives a state its form: it is a setting for ceremony and ritual. But architecture is also formative: it contributes to the shaping of a state. These processes have been and continue to be intertwined. What are the implications of this claim for architectural history?

If architectural historians pursue inquiries along these lines, we will want to engage scholars who study state formation, state building, and state regulation. Consulting or collaborating with colleagues in other disciplines might lead to taxonomies of state form and practice. At some future date we might have a framework and case studies to address issues such as the particular conditions under which states are more or less likely to engage in specific forms of design and planning, or to posit what form (or forms) of a state are most likely to promote and contribute to the creation of just cities.15

Bringing space, states, and architecture together will enhance attention to questions of scale. Broadly speaking, when architectural historians, political theorists, and economic geographers have considered states and state projects for securing, legitimating, and maintaining authority, the modal scale has been a nation state. Privileging one scale—the national—has meant that other scales—the provincial or subnational state, the municipal or local state—have received less attention.

In this note I have tried to suggest that states, the corporate organization of civic society, mediate scale. Architectural historians, on the other hand, tend to shuttlecock between the micro—individual buildings—and the macro—a city plan—pausing infrequently to examine the institutions and agencies that form the context within which architects and other professionals engaged in building design and city-building act. Architecture has the potential to serve as a mezzo-scale. If our studies were to encompass the figure as well as the ground, this would link macrolevel theories of capital circuits and growth coalitions associated with economic and political geography with the microlevel study of identity and subjectivity negotiated in space, a hallmark of recent work in anthropology and cultural studies. Attention to architecture as state building would bring those endeavors together while permitting investigation of the complex and contingent processes through which space is defined, identity is negotiated, and states are created and govern.

Notes


2. David Harvey, The Urban Experience (Baltimore, 1989); Greg Hise, Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis (Baltimore, 1997); and David M. Freund, Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in America (Chicago, 2007).


6. Jameson W. Doug, Empire on the Hudson: Entrepreneurial Vision and
Political Power at the Port of New York Authority (New York, 2001); Kee Warner and Harvey Molotch, Building Rules: How Local Controls Shape Community, Environments and Economies (Boulder, 2000); and Steven P. Erie, Beyond Chinatown: The Metropolitan Water District, Growth, and the Environment in Southern California (Stanford, 2006).


