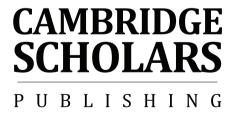# The Mental Life of the Architectural Historian

The Mental Life of the Architectural Historian:
Re-opening the Early Historiography
of Modern Architecture

By

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CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
P U B L I S H I N G

For Violet and Jahangir,
and in memory of Norick

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INTRODUCTION

With the question of the discursive formation of architectural history as the starting point, the following chapters investigate the particular nature of the historiography of the early modern architecture. Each chapter evolved from the theoretical conviction that the architect's work, including unbuilt projects and written texts, plays a constructive role in the mental life of a historian. The manuscript examines the historiography of Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983), Henry-Russell Hitchcock (1903-1987) and Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968). There are two objectives central to this volume. The first is to underline the ways in which architectural history differs from the traditions of art history. Even though the discourse of art history has been transformed in recent decades, its traditional hold on architectural historiography has not yet been shaken off. Secondly, the book concerns the specific characteristics of what might be called the subject matter of architectural history, exploring its capacity to problematize the autonomy of the text, the historiographic narrative. The argument presented in the following pages is expected to sharpen the profile of a historical time that has been formative for a contemporary understanding of the project of modernity.

The historians discussed in this volume are the regulars addressed by most critics who have revisited modern architectural history. The idea of dedicating a chapter to Pevsner, Hitchcock and Giedion individually, entails an economy of selection that is formative for a critical understanding of texts that framed the canon of the historiography of modern architecture. Essential to the canon is a discussion that concerns the work of particular architects. There is also the need to contextualize the work in the purview of events, dates, and both objective and subjective transformations, without which the particularities of modern movement architecture might nurture two misunderstandings. The first misunderstanding can be associated with the author/historian's over-emphasis on a chosen methodology. The second evolves from the tendency to represent the history of modern architecture as a mirror image of a broader historiography of what is still difficult to establish: the period constructive for the modernity of modern architecture.[1]

The argument presented in the first and last chapters discloses the ideological limits of the present volume. It is not difficult for the reader to

notice that the following pages draw mostly from "critical theory" understood through a close reading of Walter Benjamin's work. This theoretical paradigm, however, is neither an arbitrary choice nor the result of exhaustive research on the nature of various schools of historiography. Apropos of this, the examination of different methods of historiography, or for that matter the idea of formulating a new one, is deliberately excluded. While taking into consideration the contribution structuralism has made, this volume avoids reading historiographic narrative in isolation from the work of architects, the presence of which is expected to fill the void discursive formation leaves behind. The intention, rather, is to expand the scope of problematic underpinning the historiography of early modern architecture. The *choice* is imposed by the historiography of architecture unfolding since the second half of the last century.

Throughout this volume, the word *critical* connotes two things. At one level, it works as a strategy to deconstruct the revisionism implied in the work of post-war historians whose premise was to question the discursive formation of the canon established by Pevsner, Hitchcock and Giedion. At another level, *critical* draws its discursive legitimacy from the work of contemporary historians, particularly Kenneth Frampton and Manfredo Tafuri whose position is, in one way or another, influenced by the Frankfurt School in general,[2] and the work of Walter Benjamin in particular.

What has been said so far draws from the belief that any discussion concerning the idea of history in modernity is paradoxical by definition. That modernism was or was not against the past is not the issue. Essential to modernity is *time*, the time of the present. Starting from the now of the present, one is allowed to think of the notion of time in terms of past and future. This synchronization is, however, always in conference with dichotomies experienced at any particular moment of the *now of the present*. What this claim does not mean is that modernity is a transcendental force, hovering above our heads. The idea of modernity conveyed in these pages should be taken for a historical phenomenon that, since its inception, has produced its subjects and subject matters. This process of re-production, if you wish, does not take place immediately and in one moment of history. To explore the historicity of a particular subject, or subject matter, one is inevitably engaged with modernity as *history*.

Still, the reproduction, that is the act of writing the history of history's past, does not take place in a void. Rather it unfolds in its own past. The narrative re-enacts this past without reaching that which is commonly called as it happened. What then is involved in the implied doubling, that is: *re-production*? In the first place, the now of the present is imbued with

the past, meaning that the present is neither the continuum of the past nor separated from it. Secondly, the phrase, *now of the present*, concerns an understanding of the past that is centered in both modernity and the time needed to register its advancement. In modernity, the past of a phenomenon is recognizable when the subject comes to the recognition of its own presence as an autonomous entity. Therefore, particular dates and points of departure, those qualifying the modernity of architecture, for example, are of critical importance. When the criticality of autonomy is established for the early historiography of architecture, then, the discussion should turn to the idea of progress, the engine of modernity.

Consider this: even the forward-looking direction implied in the idea of progress and history is not immune to the historicity of the pre-modern era for which anthropomorphism was essential for any auratic experience. Implied in the cyclical recurrence of seasons, and in any act of making, there existed a sense of forward-looking that might be associated with the frontality of the posture of the human body. That the ancients celebrated the two moments of the beginning and the end of construction is a good old story. What has changed through modernity, and the loss of aura (to recall Walter Benjamin), is the following: the engine of collectivity that would necessitate rituals performed in the *expectation* of the completion of a building, for example, is now consigned to forces whose logic of formation and transformation has little to do with the collective. Thus we have the recognition of the formativeness of technology for the modernity of architecture, and the modernists' indulgence with the subject, to the point that there is no single architect who did not, in one way or another, attend the subject, and did not formulate the impact of modern techniques on architecture.

The historical development charted above had to take place as it did. What should not have happened, in retrospect, is the comradeship between the three historians discussed in this volume and the modernists' dream of a holistic unity between architecture, technology, and whatever was understood of the project of modernity? And yet, the very intention to solidify the process of modernization of architecture was problematic at another level. Learning from their colleagues in art history, architectural historians had no choice but to address the question concerning the past through the rubric of style discourse. As will be demonstrated throughout this manuscript, the "past" was a crucial subject in the problematic formulation of the concept of closure, and period style. And yet the historical urge to reinvent the style in conjunction with a linear vision of history was unavoidable. These observations demand the recognition of the link

connecting the three concepts of period style, autonomy, and closure, themes peppering every chapter of this volume.

Thus, one is informed of a neutral presentation of the idea of *past* in Pevsner's account of modern architecture where a chain of developments motivated by technology and abstract painting (and guided by the spirit of the time) culminates in the work of Walter Gropius, circa 1914. Giedion's text, instead, discloses a rather complex understanding of the idea of *past*. According to him, the image of the past is reflected in a mirror held in front of the forward-looking gaze of the historian. Hitchcock's position, to mention the third protagonist of this volume, is an interesting one: he makes an attempt to compromise the Jeffersonian vision of America with the actuality of modernity taking place in Europe. Where Gropius and Le Corbusier remained central to the historiography of Pevsner and Giedion, Henry H. Richardson is the architect whose later work presents the case by which Hitchcock could formulate America's contribution to the formation of modern architecture. Again the idea of *past* is an interesting one in Hitchcock because, in the absence of the idea of *historical style* developed in Europe, he had to reinvent a past that did not exist in the first place. Thus we see the significance of Hitchcock's idea of New Tradition and its recognition as a heterogeneous phenomenon if his work is mapped in the purview of the debate running between Lewis Mumford and others who were also interested in charting the index of modernity in America.[3]

At this point, it is useful to consider these preliminary accounts of the historiography of Pevsner, Hitchcock and Giedion in the context of the history of ideas pertinent to the historiography of modern architecture. In the first place, the discussion should turn to the idea of historicism.

In line with Maurice Mandelbaum, Alan Colquhoun traces the subject's history back to the discourses permeating Europe of the eighteenth century. He suggests that the word *historicism* can be used for three different purposes: "the first is a theory of history, the second, an attitude, the third, an artistic practice."[4] What makes that century's vision of history attractive is the fact that architects were able, for the first time, to detach their work from classical wisdom and the theory of mimesis. This development was significant for the emergence of a historical consciousness whose vision is analogous to a backward-looking beholder, the eyes of which are not yet contaminated with theories of relativism. Colquhoun recalls Hegel's formulation of two platforms critical for the development of modern architecture. Firstly, we have the thinker's advocacy for the opacity of art, and thus the question concerning architecture's autonomy. This unfolding dismantles architecture's rapport with any symbolism external to its own processes of production. "Why

should the architect tie himself to the past and chain his work thus to entirely alien shackles!" exclaimed Heinrich Hübsch, a nineteenth-century German architect. He continued, "Or how can evidence of the Beautiful ever be sought in Imitation?" [5]

Hegel's second contribution has to do with the autonomy of history, which in his work is charged with a teleological vision facing a dead end. Colquhoun sees both historical determinism and the idea of autonomy in the context of history. What is missing in his observation is the nihilism of modernity.[6] What this entails is that history does not take place outside of modernity's will to reproduce its subject and subject matters. Postmodern historicism, to recall the time when Colquhoun wrote his essay, was nothing but a moment of Modernity. Furthermore, one could speculate as to whether the nihilism of modernity, the negation of every value, is relevant to the modernists' discourse on historicism. In the context of major intellectual work developed in the last couple of decades, one might also suggest that to see modernity without History lands in the camp of the structuralist discourse, as articulated by Michel Foucault.[7]

Two years before the publication of Colquhoun's article, Demetri Porphyrios edited a special issue of *Architectural Design,* titled "On the Methodology of Architectural History."[8] Prominent scholars were invited to write on various approaches to architectural history. The volume aimed to *disclose* the ideological assumption implied in Hegelian or hermeneutical methodologies of history. Following the Foucault of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Porphyrios presented a convincing argument disclosing the weakness embedded in Hegel's concept of history while stopping short of fully questioning Erwin Panofsky's iconographic studies. His text also demonstrates that these historical interpretations have made inroads into architectural history. Interestingly, on the issue of architecture and ideology, Porphyrios comes close to Manfredo Tafuri's position. In addition to unmasking the imaginary, the very process by which architecture makes "reality" appear natural and eternal is suggestive that one should map the ideological dimension of architecture within historical events, both minor and major. These, according to Porphyrios, mark resolutions of contradictions inherent in both the theory and practice of architecture.

Let this be clear: a structuralist understanding of history accomplishes two tasks, and Porphyrios's text elaborates on this subject in the best possible way given the 1980s' epistemological turn to language and the discursive understanding of an *event*. Firstly, rather than contextualizing the work in the traditions of metaphysics, we are told that Hegel discussed art and architecture in reference to cultural life. From Hegel's point of

view, architecture's relationship with society, for example, should be understood through the presence of the spirit of the time, the *Zeitgeist*. Secondly, the social *Weltanschauung* as understood by artists should assure the historical contingencies of the work. In this paradigm, artwork and events are seen in casual and deterministic relation with the *Zeitgeist*. Architecture, for example, is expected to represent the *idea* if the design has a full grasp of the spirit of its time. Against this theoretical background, Porphyrios highlights Panofsky's contribution for his emphasis on the iconographical dimension of *creation* whose subject matter concerns both pairs of the architect/author and architecture/object. Unnoticed in this affirmation are the proponents of the neo-Kantianism, who in those years tried to shift the discussion away from the traditions of art history, Alois Riegl's discourse on the autonomy of artwork, in particular.

To articulate a methodology of history that would debunk "the ideological foundations of a 'humanist' anthropology of creation"[9], Porphyrios turned to Foucault, and for two reasons. Firstly, he needed to discuss the disciplinary autonomy of architecture, not as a unified totality, but as a structure whose "visibility" is sustained through "difference," or "problematic", as discussed by Jacques Derrida and Louis Althusser respectively.[10] Secondly, the structuralist understanding of architecture draws from a perception of the object whose architectonics do not assure the linear continuity of architectural traditions. The work's specificity, instead, is seen in its periodic capacity to depart from its own conventions. "We study neither hidden messages nor arbitrary encoded ones," Porphyrios assured his reader. Instead, "we study the rules which define— within an historical conjuncture—the field of knowledge on the basis of which the various discourses unfold their debates and thematics."[11] Thus, the discursive departure from Hegel's idea of history landed in "an historical conjunction" where history is ossified in "documents" and "events", if not in *types,* to use an architectural analogue.[12] Of this latter development mention should be made of Panayotis Tournikiotis. His book is the first one to take into consideration the entire gamut of the contemporary historiography of architecture. Foregrounding the importance structuralism gives to the discursive formation, Tournikiotis explores historical narratives, highlighting the way each attempts to map architecture at different moments in history. Both architects and their work recede in his historiography except when the work is of the capacity to structure the historian's narrative. Gone with the author (historian) is the latter's reconstruction of the past towards a defined end(s). What informs

Tournikiotis's narrative is the autonomy of text. His book, however, is a major feat in re-writing architectural history from a structuralist position.[13]

This brief account of the formation of the contemporary history of ideas has a twofold aim. It will be used to demonstrate the thematic commonalities recurring in the narratives of Pevsner, Giedion, and Hitchcock. It is also useful for showing the uniqueness in the American historian's discourse on the idea of *new tradition*. As will be discussed shortly, historicism was critical for the recognition of both concepts of period style and autonomy, themes the theorisation of which were not accessible to our three historians. For further understanding of these observations we need to turn to art history and its formativeness for the formation of the early historiography of modern architecture.

To understand the historicity of the traditions of art history, it is useful to approach the subject through Benjamin's work whose position on history is central to the argument presented throughout this volume. Written in 1935, the essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", discusses the impact of technology on human perception, a subject already taken up by both Heinrich Wölfflin and Riegl, and other German scholars.[14] Presenting the case of montage in film, Benjamin articulated the idea of *wish-images* in conjunction to the loss of aura. According to him, the aura recalls the magical and ritualistic origin of the work of art when space and time are intertwined and harmony prevails between the desire of the subject and technique. On another occasion, Benjamin describes the idea of *aura* in the following words: "in a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or resemblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be. While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour becomes part of their appearance - that is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains."[15] Juxtaposing impressions such as "the unique appearance or resemblance of distance" and "resting on a summer's noon", Benjamin presented the idea of *wish-images* in analogy to the waking moments when the distinction between dream world (past?) and reality (the present?) is difficult to make. The wish-images Benjamin was concerned with are analogous to intoxicated objects with no task except radicalizing the moment of awakening, the time-now. This was a project that surrealists fell short of realizing fully, and thus their work remained in a state of intoxication. One might speculate that the idea of *wish-images* concerns a state of mind where historicism is suspended. In the dream, "in which every epoch sees in images the epoch which is to succeed it", the latter, according to Benjamin, "appears coupled with elements of

prehistory—that is to say of a classless society."[16] Distancing himself from historicism, and discussing architecture in reference to the work's tactile and optical dimensions, Benjamin's position benefits and departs from the discursive horizon of art-history.

Wölfflin, for one, had already formulated the autonomous character of art, postulating a formalistic understanding of period style. Wölfflin marks the years around 1800 as the beginning of a linear mode of vision, which "comes to serve a new objectivity."[17] Interestingly, such a perception of the architectural object soon found its architectonic language in the "international style", a steel frame structure whose white clad surfaces were punctuated according to the aesthetics of the horizontal window discussed in Le Corbusier's famous "Five Points of Architecture".

While Wölfflin saw the formal properties of art from the point of view of a non-engaged beholder, Riegl instead highlighted the viewer's importance for the internal unity of the painting. The unity he pursued between the internal figures of Rembrandt's paintings and the beholder was essential to the art's transformation from haptic to optic. He weaved this observation with the autonomy of art to argue for the concept of *Kunstwollen*. These issues are further explored in the first chapter if only to underline Benjamin's affinity with Riegl.

Riegl's importance for Benjamin also related to what Michael Steinberg calls Riegl's "principle of externality", that is, the lived cultural context of a work, and the experience of the viewer.[18] Benjamin believed that the mechanical reproduction of art changes one's perception of the object. In modern times, he wrote, one appropriates objects not directly but through technological means. Technology rips the work out of its local context and interrupts the smooth flow of tradition. While lamenting the loss of art's authenticity, Benjamin celebrated technology's attack on tradition, turning it into an analytical tool for cultural critique. In the Arcades Project Benjamin presents monuments, commodities, and the body as symbolic images. These cultural products speak neither for the matter-of-factness, nor for the spirit of time. Benjamin reads the material manifestation of the nineteenth century culture as a dream-image, pregnant with the repressed or the unfulfilled utopias of the past.[19]

Benjamin's work on historical material speaks for a shift from the individual to the collective experience of a past that is not necessarily embedded in the high art, and period style. Rather it resides in anonymous works and in the detail. The attention given to the marginal was, for Benjamin, the result of a major methodological discovery laid down by Riegl. According to Benjamin, Riegl's study of *Late Roman Art Industry* broke with the theory of "periods of decline", and recognized in what had

previously been called "regression into barbarism" a new experience of space, a new artistic volition [*Kunstwollen*].[20] The lengthy attention I have given here to Riegl and Benjamin is in part due to my interest in Gottfried Semper who likewise broke away from the classical wisdom of architecture. He suggested seeing the origin of monuments in marginal works like the stage sets for carnivals, and skills developed in industries such as textile, carpentry, ceramics and masonry.[21] Similar to Semper and Riegl's interest in applied arts and ornament, Benjamin underlined the importance of the principle of montage as a means to "build up the large constructions out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements. Indeed to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moment."[22] While the high art solidifies autonomy, the so-called "insignificant" is apprehended through involuntary memory of the collective experience. For Benjamin the point was not to reiterate those moments of the bygone past, but to underline their function for the intelligibility of the work of art. They also hold "redemptive power" which should be contemplated in the light of the recent. Riegl too, according to Margaret Iversen, believed that "in order for a particular work of art to have meaning, it must be couched in something comparable to a public language."[23]

Discussing architecture towards the end of his essay, Benjamin stopped short of advocating the universalization of art and architecture, or subtracting form from historical context. His position recalls Riegl's discourse on a formal-contextual approach.[24] Nevertheless, it was Benjamin's critical appropriation of "intelligibility" that led him to criticize Riegl. Rejecting formalism, Benjamin had this to say about the theoretical orientation of the collected essays published by Viennese art-historians:

> … such study is not concerned with objects of pleasure, with formal problems, ... Rather, this sort of studious work considers the formal incorporation of the given world by the artist, not a selection but rather always an advance into a field of knowledge, which did not 'exist' prior to the moment of this formal conqueror... . We should never be interested in 'problems of form' as such, as if a form ever came into existence for the sake of the stimulus it would produce.[25]

To see the most archaic in the latest technologies was Benjamin's strategy for questioning the linear idea of progress without dismissing the radical potentialities of the new.

What makes Benjamin relevant to the main objectives of this study is his interpretation of the role technique plays in modern art. Equally important is his methodology in deliberating a strategy of criticism that

was unavailable to most critics and historians writing before the post-war era. Furthermore, his criticism of historicism reveals a vision of history for which *time* is collapsed in the present. His is a construction, fabrication if you wish, defying the linear perception of history, which, as will be demonstrated in the first chapter, monitors events along with the *natural* progress of history with eyes fixed on the past.

These remarks should be considered a preview for a critical understanding of two developments initiated by the structuralist discourse on history. Structuralism shifted the discussion from the object, say a building, to the discursive aspects of the knowledge of that object. According to Foucault, while those engaged in language analysis seek the rules that generate a particular statement, "the description of the events of discourse poses a quite different question: how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?"[26] And Porphyrios writes: "…instead of asking what are the compositional principles (grid, rotation, procession, etc.) which govern a given architectural work, we will ask a different question: say, what is the peculiar classificatory mode (for example, homotopic reasoning) which allows for the "grid", "procession", "rotation", etc. to be conceived in the first place?" He continues, "Such a history of architecture, therefore, is interested not in categories that would describe a building, but in categories that would describe the production (that is, the conception, design, execution, and recognition) of a building."[27] In the context of the linguistic theories of the 1970s, interpretation or deconstruction of the text became formative for the theorization of architectural history.[28] And yet, what remained unnoticed was the concept of time that in structuralist and post-structuralist theories denotes timelessness. Accordingly, events and ideas float autonomously. Or else, their presence is felt when a particular discursive formation erupts. Again one is reminded of the subject of periodization and period style. Paradoxically, these developments had to take place in the context of a desire to make space for the return of the subject. Exclusive to this latter idea was the absence of any sense of the past, except a perception which itself was the raison d'etre of *knowledge*, the author for one. Secondly, in the light of postmodern criticism of the major tropes of modern architecture, even the structuralist tendency for a synchronic understanding of history (time) could not hold strong. The idea of the end of history soon paved the way for the proliferation of colourful theories of the late 1980s. They were constructive in nurturing the pragmatism permeating North American academic circles, at least until the turn of the new century.[29]

To go beyond historicism and the claims made for "the end of history", architectural historiography should do two things: in the first place, any criticism of historicism should also question the canonical vision of modern architecture, and a one-to-one correspondence between architecture and the subjective and objective forces central to the development of modernism; and secondly, this entails assessing architecture's relation to modernity, the index of which is no longer determined by the technical alone. Unlike the concern of the historians discussed in this volume, the past of the present situation does not configure a style, the departure from which should be considered the main driving force of current architectural practise. In this line of consideration, it is important to stress the specificity of architectural theories as unfolding since the 1960s, the index of which differs from that of modern architecture. The early historiography of modern architecture dismissed the heterogeneous body of modern architecture even when the importance of technology was fully acknowledged. What is problematic with the canonical vision of modern architecture, however, is the use of technology to promote a particular aesthetics, a theory of architecture that came to its end with the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) 1932 exhibition, *International Style Architecture*.

There is another side to historicism that needs further attention. Central to the discourse of historicism is the dichotomy between periodization and autonomy. Most art historians of the last century did associate the formal aspects of art with the general manifestations of a given period. Period style establishes a chain of stylistic evolution cementing the idea of progress. It also presents *form* as the language internal to each artistic discipline. To depart from the uniformity implied in period style, periodization should be understood as a technique for articulating the undifferentiated mass left by history. We should not, Michael Hays writes, "think in terms of uniform periods and radical breaks but rather more nuanced shifts, making the placement of the specific work in the historical field every more complex and differentiated."[30] When this is established then the binary dependency between autonomy and periodization is unraveled. On the one hand, modernity's departure from its pre-history necessarily ended in formulating the concept of autonomy.[31] On the other hand, any discussion of autonomy that does not domesticate (historicize) the formal language of the work within a given periodic situation might turn to transcendentalism. The paradox is even implied in Theodor Adorno's discussion of autonomy, where the modernity of the work is seen in an attempt to save the work from the hegemonic power of the culture industry.[32]

How does the suggested paradox play out in architecture? The art of building possesses its own internal language, the tectonics. However, the thematic of the tectonic and its constructive and aesthetic possibilities are largely informed by techniques available in the developmental processes of capitalism. This is one reason Semper's name occurs in this volume whenever the occasion is deemed appropriate. Another reason for highlighting tectonics relates to the unreserved attention the three protagonists of this volume gave to technology, and the view that equates modernity of architecture with the appropriation of formal and spatial potentialities implied in the work of late-nineteenth-century engineering.

As a strategic concept, the tectonic brings to the fore the contradictions involved in establishing a productive rapport between style and construction, and the need to discuss architecture as a semi-autonomous entity. Even though some architects would still like to overstate the importance of formal autonomy, it is the task of the historian to problematize the concept of autonomy, and to demonstrate how *form* is inflected in architecture's inevitable participation in the production and consumption cycles of capitalism. In this proposition a sense of "time-now", temporality, prevails whose difference from the idea of *Zeitgeist* should be secured on two grounds: firstly, that modernity designates an epochal transgression, rather a chain in the linear progression of history; and secondly, what separates the time-now from its own immediate past is not of transcendental nature; rather it is subject to interpretation, sometimes transient and modish, fashion-like, at other times obsolete and forgotten. The enduring commonality underpinning the tectonics suggests that the historian's vision should not invest in the work of any single architect or group of architects. The discussion pursued throughout this volume supports the idea that the historian should attempt to historicise the work in reference to dichotomies of modernity, and the technical and aesthetic particularities of the time-now. This is important, speaking theoretically. It allows for discussing the tectonic not as an operative criticism, but the zone where the historian can see the scars that the crisis of capitalism leaves on architecture.

Now, should a historian look back at the architecture of the last fifty years and ensure the continuity of modern architecture, albeit the modifications induced by history? Or, should he/she acquire a different orientation towards the very tropes, including historicism and period style that were constructive for the formation of modern architecture?[33] The discussion presented in the last chapter of this manuscript attempts to expand the scope of questions raised here.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS THE MATTER
WITH ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY?

Out of sight out of mind. Is that so?

In a letter dated February 1929, Walter Benjamin acknowledged the receipt of Sigfried Giedion's book, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-Concrete,*[1] and praised the historian's intellectual capacity for "uncovering the tradition by observing the present."[2] Noting Benjamin's remark on Goethe, Kevin MacLaughlin suggests that the business of criticism, for Benjamin, was a kind of "excavation" in the sense of "mining—taking something out of the earth—but in this case, more accurately, also 'bringing to light'… ."[3] The word "uncovering" endows Giedion with the skills of an archaeologist[4], a person adept at recovering what is beneath the dirt, or the time-past as is the case with the historian's attempt to unpack the historicity of architecture. For Benjamin "vision" is central to the historian's search for that which should be rescued. But what is this vision equipped with? Is it the historian's intellect, the breadth of knowledge and information he/she accumulates through observation and collection of facts and figures? Or is it a worldview, "the philosophy of history", as Benjamin believed to be the case?

Following Benjamin's discourse on history, this chapter presents "autonomy" as a strategic position for highlighting the disciplinary history of architecture. Re-thinking autonomy is important today when "design" is informed by techniques and ideas shared by every cultural production activity. This development leaves no room for a creative engagement with the culture of building, that which is architectural in architecture. There is a doubling in "architectural". Firstly, it is informed by themes developed through the work of architects, critics, and historians. Secondly, such knowledge should be re-interpreted through *technique* available in various historical periods. The conjunction between technique and autonomy

should not be taken for discursive by definition. Rather it involves strategies by which architecture problematizes the linear continuum of history. This observation begs a different understanding of "autonomy", one that surpasses the modernist theories of architecture that, more often than not, compromise the disciplinary history of architecture with the *Zeitgeist*, a position primarily borrowed from art history.

The following pages attempt to unearth those attributes that position a narrative in the realm of architectural history. Obviously we are not concerned with the historiography of styles: how a particular architectural style emerges, and then in due course is overtaken by another. There are also, as termed by M. Foucault, *genealogical approaches* to architectural history. The primary task of this strategy is to map events and themes that led to a particular apprehension of architecture. To recall the discussion presented in the introduction of this volume, a different historiography of architecture avails when the apparition of history, and the architect's work structure the narrative. This is neither to underestimate the role *Zeitgeist* plays in the developmental processes of architecture nor to dismiss the extent to which architecture is influenced by themes and techniques developed outside the culture of building.

This chapter explores the index of critical strategy to assess the ways in which the narrative accommodates History and architectural history, both seen through the lenses framed by the architect's work.

The Ghost of History

My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back.
If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck.

Gerhard Scholem's poem nurtured Walter Benjamin's insightful interpretation of Paul Klee's painting named "*Angelus Novus*". This is how Benjamin pictured the angel of history: eyes wide open and wings spread, his face turned to the past where "*we* [my italic] perceive a chain of events", and the angel "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage." Benjamin continued: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise." The storm propels the angel forward into the future, to which the angel's back is turned. For Benjamin, "this storm is what we call progress."[5]

Benjamin's reading of the *Angelus Novus* suggests that once the storm of progress is associated with the myth of "paradise", then, the task of the historian is to de-construct the "chain of events" and uncover the catastrophe. It is important here to make a distinction between natural catastrophe, flood and earthquake, and historical catastrophe. The temporality implied in history demands distinguishing the ruins of the past from the wreckage left by the storm of progress. The ruin is not just the effects of time. It also involves the decay of material, and the appreciation of aesthetics that are bound up with the transitoriness essential to modernity.[6]

There is nothing new in saying that material decays. In modernity, things become outmoded even before their material disintegrates. In modernity, the specificity of time is experienced in the absence of a unity that would set the sub-text for the durability and meaningfulness assigned, or expected, from every action, including the act of design and production of architecture. In the Renaissance, for example, or even in the first decades of the last century, architecture played a crucial role in housing and gathering communities that were connected to the various institutions of the society. In contrast, the good intentions of today's architects cannot escape the forces of commodification of values and techniques that turn every edifice into a spectacular ornament. In this situation, one's relation to the past is subject to the temporality delivered by the storm of progress as it moves from one catastrophe to another.

According to Françoise Choay, "the historic monument has a different relationship to living memory and to the passage of time." On the one hand, "it is simply constituted as an object of knowledge and integrated into a linear conception of time: in this case its cognitive value relegates it irrevocably to the past, or…. to the history of art in particular. On the other hand, as a work of art it can address itself to our artistic sensibility, to our 'artistic will'."[7] If Choay is correct in saying that the dawn of this new century witnesses the decay of our competence to build, then, how might architecture articulate the architectonic of "witnessing"? Choay's idea of "the decay of competence to build" alludes to the disappearance of that totality, which prevailed in the pre-modern era, the artistic representation of which was indeed the content of what architects created in the name of *place*. Does the historical decay also banish the vision of competence in building? Here "image" is used interchangeably with the phenomenon of building as discussed by Fritz Breithaupt. According to him, "within the phenomenon there is something non-phenomenal that does not appear, and within the event there is something that does not take place." He

continues, "history comes into play by delaying the appearance of this nucleus within the phenomenon."[8]

The place is experienced through technique. But techniques are not just an assemblage of tools. In addition to performing their purpose, techniques set up a particular movement and rhythm, the temporality of which coordinates the body's action and its relation to a place. According to Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "Pre-industrial traffic is mimetic of natural phenomena… . Only during a transitional period did the travelers who transferred from the stagecoach to the railway carriage experience a sense of loss due to the mechanization of travel: it did not take long for the industrialization of the means of transport to alter the consciousness of the passengers: they developed a new set of perceptions."[9] Modernity inaugurated technologies. One task of technologies was to underscore the spirit of the place, the experience of which was based on natural time. Modern industrial techniques and machines were designed in coordination with the performance of the organs of the human body. Contemporary experience of time, framed by the advent of electronic networking, enjoys a different temporality. Electronic technologies, if one relies on Jean-François Lyotard's account in *The Postmodern Conditions* (1984), are changing the balance between the natural, the body, and the built-form. Computer technologies have also changed our communication system. They open up the spaces once considered private and appropriate for contemplation. Privacy, the micro-space, is invaded, if not subsumed by the global flow of information and goods. We eat, wear, watch, and even dream about things that have little relation to our immediate places. Involuntary memory of a bygone place is the only thing left to the present generation of architects. The next generation might have even less chance to imagine and contemplate a memory that would evoke any major aspect of "the competence to build."

These observations involve two sets of assumptions. Firstly, progress is registered in an understanding of time that transforms one's experience of natural time. Progress progresses, but its flow does not suggest that history unfolds according to a pre-planned linear path. Secondly, the juxtaposition of the natural and the ruins of modernity—the piled wreckage of the past—is essential for the landscape of modernity where everything is short-lived and subject to history. Harry Harootunian writes: "All production immediately falls into ruin, thereafter to be set in stone without revealing what it had once signified, since the inscriptions are illegible or written in the dead language." He concludes: "Beneath the historical present, however, lie the specters, the phantoms, waiting to

reappear and upset it."[10] What does this statement, drawn from Benjamin's vision of history, mean for architecture?

This question demands two considerations: firstly, to differentiate history from historiography; and secondly, to discuss the specificity of architecture's relation to history. The difference between history and historiography is obvious, but needs reiterating here mainly because of Benjamin's unique intellectual cause. The title of Werckmeister's essay, mentioned earlier, anticipated the author's detailed account of Benjamin's various re-writing of what finally would be formulated as the angel of history. The "transgression of the revolutionary into the historian", a phrase used in the title of Werckmeister's essay, summarises the tale of Benjamin's intellectual life, which was closely connected to the broader praxis of the left of the 1930s.

In the four available versions of Benjamin's text, the reader notes a modification at work, which demonstrates, among other things, Benjamin's disappointment with the fate of "revolution" during that period. This also reveals the process of distillation of the concept of angel from all religious connotations except one: that the angel, like a superman, represents the image of a gifted revolutionary figure, which reads more into the rubble of progress than anybody else. Dismissing the idea of progress as the ultimate engine of political revolution, Benjamin turned the revolutionary and constructive aspects of Karl Marx's understanding of history into the act of historiography. He wrote, historicism prevails by "establishing a casual connection between various moments in history", perpetuating "the eternal image of the past." Materialistic historiography, according to Benjamin, "is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well."[11] What is involved in arresting this flow?

If historicism endorses the flow of time, then, one way to halt the continuum would be to arrest the time. "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[12] And when "the time is out of joint", as Shakespeare said through Hamlet, then the present is saturated with the propelling wreckage of the *past*. In a standstill situation, the present merges with the past, and yet the distinction between the old and the new does not disappear. The redemptive power of the past, rather, shines out of the surface of the new. It is the task of the historian to capture the gaze of that power.

Such was the situation in the Russia of the 1920s, a historical period the transformation of which was of great interest to Benjamin. In his journey to Moscow[13], he witnessed his concept of history under construction

and at work. The Russian constructivists considered themselves constructors and not "artists". Emptied of the vision of historicism, their work merged with history, and architecture was conceived not only as a constructive form, *tecktonica*, but the agent of historical reconstruction. Aleksander Rodchenko, according to Hubertus Gassner, called the constructivists' objects "comrades."[14] These architects thought their work possessed a temporality where technology was conceived as neither a means to an end, nor a tool to overpower nature. Following the Marx of the 1884 manuscript, constructivists attempted, as Susan Buck-Morss reminds us, "to liquidate the distinction between artist and worker, not by the subservience of aesthetic pleasure to industrial instrumentality but by the interpretation of these activities, providing images suggestive of a reconciliation with nature, wherein sensual (aesthetic) pleasure was understood as the goal, transcending mere physical need."[15]

Her observation warrants the following question: Was not the work of constructivists unleashing the fear Giedion noticed resting beneath the historicists' inclination to mask construction? According to Giedion, "Construction in the nineteenth century plays the role of the subconscious. Outwardly, construction still boasts the old pathos; underneath, concealed behind facades, the basis of our present existence is taking place."[16] This statement of Giedion stimulated Benjamin to invest in technology as the source of new collective needs. After receiving a copy of Giedion's book Benjamin expressed his admiration for him in the following words. "I am studying in your book... . the differences between radical conviction and radical knowledge that refresh the heart. You possess the latter, and therefore you are able to illustrate, or rather to uncover, the tradition by observing the present."[17] However, while Giedion was making rather radical remarks in connection to Le Corbusier's early architecture, Russian constructivists were, instead, weaving the anticipatory potentialities of technology into the collective practice, and thus grafting the collective experience of those revolutionary moments into the linguistic potentialities of architecture.[18]

The experience of the Russian constructivists highlights the implication of Benjamin's vision of history for architecture. This is important because, while constructivist architecture was dissociated from the dominant cultural values of pre-revolutionary statehood, it was not until the mid-thirties that their work became subject to the politics of a dictatorial state.[19] This observation necessitates the following distinction: although the culture of building (architecture's interiority) runs through many historical periods, its thematic remains autonomous from the politics of any state except when the state apparatus attempts to control its