

POSITION PAPER

Make/Shift/Shelter: Architecture and the Failure of Global Systems

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The unanticipated challenges that architects and architecture face in the twenty-first century are no more daunting than those that plague other professions and other forms of cultural production. Just as these conditions call for a new set of disciplinary and practical flexibilities necessary to undertake on-the-ground architectural interventions in affected communities, architectural historians must make concomitant adjustments in chronicling the new forces, materials, ideas, methods and contexts that drive architectural design in these troubled and troubling times. One might reasonably suggest any number of ways to situate architecture and its histories in the current climate. The approach here taken operates from three critical perspectives: architecture *in* crisis, architecture *as* crisis, architecture *and* crisis. More polemical than prescriptive, this essay poses a series of questions and proposes a set of possibilities regarding the architectural-historical assessment of contemporary practice. Toward that objective, this article addresses the issue of crisis in architecture through a cursory and anecdotal selection of evidence in turn refracted through lenses global and local.

...if the architectural historian will meet today's
critical problems by a courageous and fundamen-
tal revision of his methods...by so much will he help
to steady the tottering equilibrium of our world.

—Meeks 1942: 7

Introduction

The unanticipated and often unforeseeable challenges facing architects, architecture and thus architectural historians in the twenty-first century are no more daunting than those that plague other disciplines, other professions and other forms of cultural production. These conditions necessitate a new set of theoretical and practical flexibilities targeted to on-the-ground, real-time architectural interventions that acknowledge and satisfy a broad range of stakeholders with often competing if not diametrically opposed interests. Architectural historians must make adjustments in chronicling the new forces, materials, ideas, methods and contexts that drive architectural design in these troubled and troubling times. At the same time, architectural history must retrofit itself to undo several decades' worth of exclusions and distortions rooted in Euro-American canons of Early Modern, Modern and Post-Modern forms, functions and materials. But what are those adjustments and how are they to be undertaken by the stewards of such a diverse and complex scholarly enterprise? One might suggest any number of ways to resituate architecture and its histories in current climates; this essay raises a series of questions

intended to provoke self-critical reflection among architectural historians as to the relevancy of past practices in addressing current and future trends in the designed and built environment—trends that are in many ways driven by the failure of the world's political, economic and religious institutions. Toward that objective, this essay confronts the issue of crisis in architecture through a selection of qualitative and quantitative correlations refracted through lenses global, local and personal to propose three areas of consideration: critical reassessment, expansion of scholarly focus across disciplinary boundaries and an activist reassertion of the value of the humanities and the role of architectural history in maintaining that value.

Architecture and its histories in a time of crisis

Traditionally, the designed and built sites, structures and spaces that constitute architectural history's documentary evidence have exemplified and enforced dominant political, economic, social, cultural and religious systems. Patrons of architecture comprised ecclesiastical administrators, governments, individual rulers, members of the nobility, capitalist corporations of various sizes, the upwardly mobile and, in some rare instances, the middle class. Today, most of those systems, organizations, sectors and individuals have, to one degree or another, failed. Institutions entrusted with the stability of civilization and the protection of humanity itself have turned against their constituencies, to the point that civil society and the public good have all but ceased to exist.

That the world is experiencing a failure of global systems is evidenced by a convergence of large-scale catastrophes and increasingly hostile conditions. Human rights

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and civil rights are under siege in even the most complex of developed nations; the marginalized suffer in exponential proportions in the developing world and human trafficking and slavery are at their highest levels since abolition of the practices in Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century. A substantial portion of the world's population lacks access to clean, safe drinking water, to adequate nutrition, to secure shelter, to quality education and to basic healthcare. Chemical and topographical degradation of land and water, illegal logging, poaching, climate change and resource abuse have triggered a series of unprecedented consequences in the natural environment. Preventable disasters—natural and manmade—keep parts of the world in continual cycles of devastation without a chance for recovery. To one degree or another, architecture and its histories touch all of these conditions.

While architects must determine whether and to what extent they are tacitly compliant with or even actively culpable in these various crisis scenarios, the architectural historian must develop critical and theoretical frameworks, rooted in scientific and interpretative strategies, to dispassionately analyze and characterize mutually constitutive relationships between architecture and crisis. The conditions in which contemporary architects function—and thus the contexts upon which architectural historians must draw in assessing the architecture of the early twenty-first century—perturb and even defy many of the mechanisms of conventional qualitative and quantitative analyses. Thus, crisis serves as perhaps the most precisely accurate term with which to characterize the state of affairs in which architects and historians currently operate.

In February 2012 the arts journalist Scott Timberg produced 'The Architecture Meltdown' for the online magazine *Salon*, in which he quantified the global recession's impact on architectural practice (Timberg 2012). Cuts of nearly 50% of all positions (licensed architects and non-professional staff combined) at major architectural firms in the US between July 2009 and December 2010, a purported 13.9% unemployment rate among recent US architecture graduates as of January 2012, and the closing or freezing of hundreds of mid-size and small firms all testify to the devastating impact of the global financial disasters wrought by the mortgage-backed securities/toxic assets debacle of 2008.¹ In the years immediately preceding the global economic implosion, students flocked to undergraduate and graduate architecture programs; today the numbers are down as much as 60% in some US programs.

The circumstances that led to these declines also contributed to the reduction, revision, indefinite postponement or abandonment of a number of construction projects at all scales of ambition and all profile levels. These harsh economic realities have led many architects to enter (or in some cases re-enter) academia as design studio instructors and teachers of history and theory. As Timberg notes, academic positions have always been a part of the field, which revels in its synthesis of theory and practice, but the consequence of the recent exodus from practice is architects doing less and less architecture, which means that historians of early twentieth-

century architecture will have even fewer monuments to consider among the already dwindling numbers of architect-designed buildings around the world. Architectural historians must decide whether the resulting distortions in the built and designed environment affect the evidentiary value of structures—be they completed, abandoned, repurposed or forcibly occupied. The scientific and interpretative methodologies of architectural history shift as the realm of starchitecture contracts and as economic volatility threatens to exclude many young architectural voices that may, under different circumstances, have altered the conversations that form history's bases. Gross demographic disparities exacerbate the impact of those exclusions: in the US white males outnumber all other categories of licensed architectural professionals and instructors (Ostroff 2006).

The conditions in which architects now find themselves connect directly to a set of statistics that here bear detailing. In 2006, a report by the United Nations on global wealth distribution and asset inequality found that the richest 10% of the world's adults owned 85% of the planet's wealth, with 50% of the world's populations owning less than 1% of the globe's assets. These ratios have only worsened in recent years. In September 2013, a report by University of California Berkeley economist Emmanuel Saez found that from 2009 to 2012, incomes of the top 1% in the US increased by 34.1%, while the remaining 99% saw an average increase of 0.4% (Saez 2013). In terms of the global economy, one can reasonably assume that these numbers qualify as the rule rather than the exception. The implications for contemporary architecture seem self-evident: architects who focus on monumental gestures, large-scale commercial projects and high-end residential commissions compete for commissions from an ever-diminishing portion of the population. Architectural historians will thus have fewer examples to consider as they formulate their critical and contextual responses to the architectural forms of the early twenty-first century.

Relationships between humans and their urban, rural and residential environments have seldom been more troubled than today. Drug wars; armed conflicts—some fought between units of child soldiers; drone strikes that indiscriminately kill civilians; sectarian violence within and between religious groups; sexual violence as a tool of war; and the myriad other cultural and political residues of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism today generate widespread levels of human suffering. The number of people currently living in occupied territories, refugee camps, homeless shelters and on the streets simply staggers the imagination. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council's report for 2012, popular uprisings, military battles, religious strife and forced evacuations in occupied territories resulted in the internal displacement of an estimated 28.8 million people—up from the 26.4 million estimate for 2011 (Albuja 2013; UNHCR 2013). In the Syrian civil war alone, over 100,000 people have died since 2010, and the residential and commercial structures of entire cities have been laid to waste. From the time of the US invasion in 2003, as many as 800,000 Iraqi children have been orphaned—with many of them transferred

from residences into state-run institutions. By some estimates, 40 million Chinese have been uprooted in government-sanctioned forced relocations of rural populations into newly built cities. Millions of additional refugees, from Myanmar to Mali, flee threats to personal safety, the threat of ethnic cleansing and the destruction of private property and urban infrastructure. The shelters of many others have been destroyed by human-exacerbated natural disasters. To add insult to injury, as many as 300,000 single-family, bank-owned residences remain unoccupied in the US as the result of evictions after mortgage foreclosures. Those homes sit empty as the number of homeless continues to rise.

Crisis as recurring theme

But what, if anything, do these sobering numbers mean for architectural history? In terms of impact on the lives of ordinary people across the globe, current conditions combine economic devastation not seen since the Great Depression with social and political upheavals on par with those of the Second World War. It was during World War II that architectural historians undertook the first serious reassessment of their own discipline, questioning not only its utility and its relevance in a time of crisis, but also its usefulness to architectural practice and to architectural education (Blau 2003: 125–26). Writing in 1942, Carroll L. V. Meeks—perhaps best known for his architectural history, written in 1956, of railroad stations—proclaimed that architecture was in a critical situation and that the best architectural historians of the day made ‘their historical researches an indispensable tool for dealing with contemporary problems’ (Meeks 1942: 4–5).

The crisis of the early 1940s, which characterized the state of world affairs at large, included the utterly incomprehensible brutality of the Holocaust and the Rape of Nanking, followed by the carpet bombing of Germany by the Allied forces and the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Intermittently over the ensuing decades, architectural historians responded to philosophical, ideological and cultural shifts—from the civil rights struggles in the US of the 1960s to the riots in the Paris *banlieues* in 2005—by considering new paradigms and undertaking new syntheses. In published remarks from her plenary address to the annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians in 2002, Eve Blau of Harvard University challenged architectural historians to undertake the necessary efforts ‘to discover sites of research where the discourses and practices of history, theory, and design intersect, and where new intradisciplinary methodologies might be generated within architecture itself.’ The proposed sites ranged from ‘open-air museums and historic preservation to fashion and points of intersection between digital technology, the city, and theories of the social production of space’ (Blau 2003: 128).

For Blau, the crisis in which architectural history found itself at the turn of the millennium differed from the devastations of World War II: ‘Architectural history, so we are told, and so we repeatedly tell ourselves, is in crisis, not necessarily in the life-threatening, medical sense of a turning point for better or worse in an acute disease

or fever, but rather in the existential sense of being in a state of transition—at a critical point of decision in which change is imminent’. This millennial crisis, for Blau, ‘is a sign of vitality and resistance...a critical habit of mind and a fundamental condition of historical thinking’. So one might reasonably conclude that crisis is a natural and even preferable state for a discipline dedicated to the study of a changing world as reflected in the designed and built environment. But does crisis prove similarly valuable for architecture? Is architecture ‘a project of crisis’ as well (Blau 2003: 125)? If so, do the crisis conditions of 2013 differ from those of the 1940s and the early 2000s? What are the implications of those differences for architectural history?

Occupation as allegory/Blunder as metaphor

One of today’s most potent exemplars (literal and symbolic) of architecture and crisis appears in Edificio A of the Centro Financiero Confinanzas in Caracas, Venezuela, the forty-five-floor office tower that is now the informal vertical settlement known as Torre David and home to 3,000 squatters. In the publication that accompanied their *Torre David/Gran Horizonte* installation (curated by Justin McGuirk) at the 2012 Venice Architectural Biennale, Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klemptner, of Urban-Think Tank, characterize the structure and its occupants as

an irony, an oxymoron, a contradiction in itself: a success of sorts within a failure; a barrio that is also a gated community; a hierarchical, authoritarian anarchy. ... From the outside, it is either a blight on the neighborhood and emblematic of everything that is wrong and dangerous about Caracas; or it is a potential safe zone, a new and better way of living, however precarious and temporary.

The architectural historian must pose the question: to what extent are the cultural conditions that facilitated the ill-conceived construction of the Centro Financiero the same conditions that kept the squatters’ lives from improving to the point where they could access opportunities and resources available to those born into different circumstances? Architects more often than not actively and unapologetically participate in and contribute to those systems of socioeconomic stratification. The outcry among architects in response to the installation’s receipt of the Venice Architecture Biennale’s Golden Lion award speaks volumes about architects’ feelings of victimization and culpability in contemporary crises. The situation in which the occupants of Torre David find themselves demands that both architects and historians question ‘whether, and to what extent, new buildings can be justified socially, ecologically, and economically’ when so many are dispossessed of shelter. That some architects complained about the accolades the Torre David project received indicates a lack of willingness on the part of some architects to engage in critical introspection (Baan, Brillembourg and Klumpner 2013: 135). What are the roles and responsibilities of the historian in chronicling that lack of willingness? Is it the responsibility of

the architectural historian to hold architects to account for their participation in and profit from such dramatic social stratification?

If the occupation of Torre David serves as an allegory for the current state of crisis in architecture, the proliferation of architectural blunders in the twenty-first century qualifies as one metaphor for the troubled relationship between architect as 'great man' (yes, still), architecture as ithyphallic gesture and the urban environments into which such structures insinuate themselves. Examples abound, as illustrated by a recent *ArchDaily* article entitled 'Seven Architectural Sins Committed Around the World,' which details some of the most egregious examples of architects' unwillingness to acknowledge everything from the laws of physics to the necessity of sufficient elevator capacity in a skyscraper (Taylor-Foster 2013). Among these structures is 20 Fenchurch Street in London, which produces a concentrated reflection of sunlight sufficient to melt automobiles parked on the street nearby, and Bridgewater Place in Leeds, which produces a powerful wind tunnel at its base that has been cited as the cause of serious injuries to pedestrians and at least one death. For the architectural historian, the very existence of such buildings begs a number of important questions. How should one characterize such blunders within the chronological, formal, ideological and material legacies of Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe? Is it ever the role of the architectural historian to 'assign blame' in such instances? How is one to account for these lapses in architectural judgment?

Solutions: A shift in method/A change of content

Rather than assigning blame, the discipline may consider whether and to what extent the monumental architecture of the Modern and Post-Modern eras has been dominated by the insistent expression of fundamentally misanthropic and biophobic impulses. It is in such provocative questions that the solution to the current crisis in architectural history may lie, perhaps couched in an expanded area of architectural-historical study: architecture as a cause of or contributor to crisis rather than a reflection of society's ills. This expansion would enable scholars who focus on the history, theory and criticism of urbanism(s) to confront and assess architecture as a form of cultural production that is at best inadvertently user-hostile and at worst lethal. Models for such studies might include *Governing by Design*, a multi-author work that crosses disciplinary boundaries to include politics, economics, the homogenizing forces of globalization and the sociological and psychological impacts of formally designed sites, structures and spaces.

This particular scholarly model also lends itself to a second possible solution to the current crisis: a shift of architectural history's attention away from a hagiographic assessment of the individual practitioner to collaborative efforts that focus on counteracting the corrosive forces of imperialism, capitalism and globalization. Over the past forty years a number of individuals and firms have undertaken pro bono, government-funded or NGO-

funded initiatives to address the exigencies associated with these forces; a handful of architectural historians have addressed the products of these efforts, but few of the resulting projects have achieved canonical status in architectural history. Examples of work that should enter into the architectural-historical conversation include initiatives by such entities as Design Corps, the Public Interest Design Institute, Architecture for Humanity, Design for the Other 90%, RuralStudio, Public Architecture's 1% Pro Bono program, Social Economic Environmental Design, MASS Design Group, Architectes sans frontières, Habitat for Humanity International, the Aga Khan Development Network, Architecture & Développement, Shack and Slum Dwellers International, Abahlali baseMjodolo, and Structures for Inclusion, among many, many more. Such an expansion of the content of architectural history would ultimately result in the inclusion not only in survey texts, for example, but also in texts dedicated to the history of healthcare design, of MASS Design Group's Butaro Hospital in Rwanda alongside Brunelleschi's Ospedale degli Innocenti, Theodore Jacobson's Foundling Hospital in London and Alvar Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium. Moreover, the integration of all stakeholders (as opposed to the interests of shareholders) into the histories of conceptualization and execution also affects architectural form; historians must acknowledge these voices in the same ways they acknowledge the Medici in Renaissance Florence, Pierre and Emily Savoye in 1920s Poissy or Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahayan in the Dubai of the twenty-first century.

The shift to a critical reevaluation of canonical personalities and monuments and the expansion of architectural history's content to include non-elite, non-monumental (and, in many cases, impermanent) forms allows for the introduction of a number of philosophical and formal variables into the architectural-historical conversation. The architectural history of the twenty-first century can address the aesthetics of sustainability, the aesthetics of public interest design and the aesthetics of healthcare design by adapting methodological frameworks from the biological, medical, environmental, social and political sciences, while simultaneously lending contextual, theoretical and critical mechanisms to each of those realms. For example, the architectural historian can bring a deep knowledge of climate-responsive features from pre-industrial architecture to inform contemporary analyses of the sustainability imperative and its effects on building morphology.

Once architects and architectural historians begin to transmit and receive knowledge from across disciplinary boundaries, new solutions can begin to emerge. Just as architects can reassert their relevance by shifting their professional and pedagogical focuses to current conditions, architectural historians can bring a sense of activist consciousness to the contextualization of the responses to those conditions. Thus, by reclaiming territory ceded to contractors and developers, by substituting the biophilic for the biophobic, by integrating vernacular forms and forces as legitimate, quantifiable design influences, by breaking new ground in their influence on other dis-

ciplines—by all these changes, architects can weather the crisis within and offer solutions to crises in the world; architectural historians can broaden their approach to incorporate these changes into the scholarly record.

Conclusion: Crisis as catalyst

The critical distance afforded by historical hindsight allows architectural historians to categorize and classify monuments of the past. Critical consciousness allows architectural historians to identify ideologies, trends and conditions as they develop and thus to formulate a relevant analytical apparatus through which to engage architecture in its contextual milieu. Fifty years ago, architects were radicals intent on refashioning architecture, its settings and its users; today the conditions facing architects are radical—historians will have to sort out the details by expanding their approach to move beyond skyscrapers, museum expansions and public libraries. When formulating new approaches to architecture as non-canonical, non-ithyphallic and non-interjective, architects and architectural historians can draw upon the models established by Bernard Rudofsky, Ghautam Bhatia (on Laurie Baker), John Habraken, James Steele (on Hassan Fathy), PREVI (Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda), Alison and Peter Smithson in Morocco and Elemental's Quinta Monroy project (Kallipolliti 2013: 159–61). Whether and to what extent the architectural history of the early twenty-first century will focus on architects as practitioners and theoreticians and on architecture as an avant-garde academic discipline and an innovative professional practice with relevance in the everyday experiences of ordinary people will depend upon the success of architects' responses to the challenges of the era. As Baan, Brillembourg and Klumpner note,

in mega-cities...the informal is rapidly taking over from the formal, traditional city; unless architecture as a practical profession, as a theoretical discipline and as a form of cultural production begins to see in the informal settlements of the world the potential for innovation and experimentation, we as architectural historians may find ourselves shifting our attention to other topics. (Baan, Brillembourg and Klumpner 2013: 27)

Attending to the immediate needs of a world in crisis, architecture can emerge from its own crises of theory, practice and identity. Public interest design need not replace the ithyphallic starchitecture that draws the attention (and the money) of the world's elites. Rather, by assuming a predominant position in the built environment, design that focuses on those historically excluded from the benefits of good design can complement and perhaps even re-humanize architecture through a series of humanistic reforms and reassertions. Architectural history must prepare now to expand its discursive field to accommodate the shift from the monumental to the informal and from the misanthropic to the biophilic, while at the same time offering a provocatively critical reassessment of those once-lionized individuals, movements, sites, structures

and spaces that have contributed to today's failure of global systems.

Writing some sixty years ago, Meeks observed that 'the value of the humanities as a whole is not questioned by even the most philistine, who...recognizes them as indispensable in making existence supportable' (Meeks 1942: 6). Though cognizant that the humanities 'are not of primary importance in making money,' Meeks could never have envisioned a world in which everything is judged by standards of profitability. If architectural history should be a 'laboratory for all of the humanities', as Maarten Delbeke and Adrian Forty (2013) have suggested, its practitioners must acknowledge that they operate in a period not only of widespread institutional attack on the value of the humanities (from within the academy as well as without), but also of unprecedented inhumanity rooted in the failure of global systems. Architectural historians, then, must reassert the relevance of the humanities, just as architects must reassert their role in the designed and built environment. These reassertions, informed by trans-disciplinary initiatives and catalyzed and mobilized by a shared sense of crisis, can help to clarify and distill the role of architectural history for the twenty-first century.

Notes

- ¹ Timberg cites US Department of Labor statistics and Carnevale AP, Cheah B and Strohl J (2012) *Hard Times, College Majors, Unemployment and Earnings: Not All College Degrees Are Created Equal*, Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, Washington, 4 January. According to the US Department of Labor *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2012–13 Edition*, architecture will have recovered to a level of 141,600 positions by the year 2020, a gain of 24% over numbers in 2009 but still 37% fewer jobs than the 2008 peak of 224,500.

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