

## REVIEW

# Modernity Beyond the West: A Review of Kathleen James-Chakraborty's *Architecture Since 1400*

*Architecture Since 1400*, Kathleen James-Chakraborty, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 516 pages, 287 illustrations b/w, 2014, ISBN: 9780816673964

Rixt Hoekstra\*

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With *Architecture Since 1400* another volume has been added to the list of authoritative surveys of architectural history published in recent years. With 30 bit-like chapters and some 300 illustrations, this book is an ambitious attempt to write a global history of architecture that focuses on the arrival of modernity. The central idea of this survey is the shift away from the Weberian approach that views modernization as emanating from the West. Instead, in this book modern architecture is rewritten according to a global approach that allows for multiple perspectives in a multipolar world. This decentring approach is also pivotal for other parts of the book. For example, there is the much-needed effort to include women in the canon. In addition, the author exchanges a stylistic history for a social history and combines this with a narrative that maps the agents of the built environment, thus complementing the narrative of the genius-architect with that of the role played by clients, patrons and critics. In this way, Lina Bo Bardi or Zaha Hadid not only take their place next to Le Corbusier or Brunelleschi, but in addition Eleanor of Toledo is mentioned as an influential sixteenth-century ruler next to her husband Cosimo I, and Hardwick Hall in England is now considered the outcome of the cooperation between the architect Robert Smythson and the landowner Bess of Hardwick.

James-Chakraborty's survey may be considered as a late outcome of the debate about the relationship between architecture and history that started in the decades after the Second World War. In fact, during the 1950s the first cracks in the stronghold of modernist historiography became apparent. Post-war historians like Jürgen Joedicke from Germany and Peter Collins from England took a more distanced stance towards what now appeared as the canon of modern architecture (especially Joedicke 1958 and Collins 1965). However, the real problematization of the grand narratives of modern architecture took place in the aftermath of the debate on the decline of orthodox modernism. The contribution of Manfredo Tafuri and the School of Venice to this process is well known; in addition,

as a result of the changing architectural-theoretical context of the mid-seventies, there was a new interest in broader cultural and philosophical themes. In particular, the shift towards post-structuralism and the study of Derrida and Foucault led to the insight that, in order to expose the hollowness of modernist ideals, history had to be dissected into parts rather than welded together into a grand whole. As was shown by developments in the historical sciences – for example, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) or Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) – the focus was now on the fragment as the study of a smaller historical unit, instead of broad synthetic accounts of history (Ankersmit 1989). As a consequence of these developments, the survey as historical genre became more or less suspect. The new ideal was that history ought to be an agent of disjunction where the emphasis was on analysis rather than on synthesis. This state of affairs also reflected the changed position of Europe in the world. It was now no longer considered the centre of the world: rather, it was, so to speak, but one tree in a whole forest. As a consequence, histories about the triumph of reason or the glorious struggle for emancipation were now considered to be only of local importance and for that reason not suitable for a meta-narrative.

The publication of new architectural historical surveys in the last few years signals in a certain way the return of this genre. That is, books like *Architecture Since 1400* or Jean-Louis Cohen's *The Future of Architecture Since 1889* can be seen as attempts to make the genre once more compatible with the major historiographical revisions of the past decades. Cohen, for example, uses Braudel's notion of multiple temporalities to break up the homogeneity of the epic tale of modernism into a series of contrasting and often conflicting experiences. James-Chakraborty seems to go even a step further: where Cohen still begins his history traditionally, with the Industrial Revolution, James-Chakraborty re-writes the history of modernization in the key of globalization, thereby changing its geographical constants. For James-Chakraborty, 1400 is a crucial year for the start of modernity: around this year, the Ming dynasty seized control of China, the palace city of Cuzco was created in present day Mexico, and in Florence the architectural competition

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\* Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Germany  
[titiarixt.hoekstra@gmail.com](mailto:titiarixt.hoekstra@gmail.com)

for the dome of the city cathedral was held. According to James-Chakraborty, what all these events have in common is that they represent a modernisation process that is characterized by an increasing amount of novel structures and an intensification of contact and interaction between geographically disparate cultures.

James-Chakraborty's book uses a well-known chronological framework to present a fundamentally updated and enlarged account of modern architectural history. The Italian Renaissance is now contrasted with very different experiences in China, or with divergent architectural developments in England, France, Poland and the Netherlands. The Baroque is discussed in Rome, but equally in terms of its Spanish and Portuguese heritage in the Americas. James-Chakraborty writes about Neoclassicism and the Gothic Revival but also about very different experiences in Edo Japan – present-day Tokyo – and in other Asian regions. The book concludes with a completely updated history of twentieth-century architecture, which departs, among others things, from the failure of the modern movement to capture the full impact of modernity on architecture. Significantly, *Architecture Since 1400* starts and ends with China's architectural history: from its imperial architecture around 1400 to the architecture of global cities like Hong Kong and Shanghai.

Global history emerged as a new field of study after the end of the Cold War and directly reflects the rise of new themes such as multiculturalism. What most global histories have in common is the wish to develop less Western-centric narratives and to come to a new understanding of the past that is not in any way restricted by national concepts. *Architecture Since 1400* fits into this trend: it fuses global history as a new field of study that is still in the process of defining its basic assumptions with the central notion of architectural history, which is the arrival of modernity. This leads to the main thesis of the book, which is that even though Europe has lost its central place in the world, the history of modernity still holds its value, albeit in a context that encompasses the whole world and no longer privileges Europe.

*Architecture Since 1400* is structured on the basis of a number of corrective insights that stem from this challenging statement. First, James-Chakraborty breaks with the assumption that a pre-modern corpus of architecture was defined by traditional architecture incapable of change, while the modern architecture of the Western world was marked by a rapid succession of styles. Instead, she depicts modernization as a complex process consisting of several modalities and tempi. China, for example, had an imperial system that remained relatively stable until the eighteenth century, resulting in the architectural refinement of tradition rather than the introduction of radical changes as was the case in Renaissance Europe. However, at the same time, Chinese architecture was not static: the development of the Chinese courtyard house, for example, was gradual, but real. Also, although Europe's architecture was characterized by a succession of styles, the great inventions did not always stem from this continent: the double-shell dome for example was used in present-day Iran and central Asia long before it was

employed in Renaissance Italy. Another assumption that is rejected in this book is that innovation moves from the core to the periphery and that at the edges of political and economical systems nothing goes on. Instead, in this survey the periphery is amply present, as in those countries in Northern Europe that resisted the Renaissance or in the rural villas and theoretical writings of Andrea Palladio in the Venetian countryside, away from the country's centres Rome and Florence. Relevant is also the way in which James-Chakraborty describes the rise of non-Western non-colonial modern architecture, not as an import product of the Western World to the exotic periphery or to teach ignorant natives, but as something that was desired by that very public, albeit for reasons that differed from the motivations and aspirations of the West.

Naturally, the ambitious undertaking of *Architecture Since 1400* also has its pitfalls. In a certain way by describing a modernization process that encompasses the whole world and goes back to 1400, the author inflates the notion of modernization in both a temporal and geographical way. James-Chakraborty is not alone in choosing this strategy: it is also present in, for example, Francis D. K. Ching's *A Global History of Architecture* (2011). In the notion of modernization that is thus created nothing much is left of its Enlightenment content, which associates modernization with such phenomena as the liberation of authoritarian rule, the exchange of the religious for the secular, or the division between public and private space as a fundamental ingredient of civil society. In fact, the risk of this strategy is that modernisation itself becomes a catch-all term that like a hollow container has lost its distinguishing analytical characteristics. It is a pity in this respect that James-Chakraborty does not define the term modernization in this book – nor, for that matter, the term architecture. Also, the question comes to mind if the global history of architecture does not encompass processes and ideals that are incompatible with modernization, or even resist this notion.

However, that does not alter the fact James-Chakraborty has written a valuable survey. The book offers an updated and revised understanding of the history of modern architecture; among others, it is of interest for those seeking an introduction into the complex history of colonial and postcolonial architecture or for those who wish to trace the presence of women in the history of architecture. Although the books' illustrations are not its forte – they are in black and white, and look rather dim – it has been published in paperback format, which is a plus for students.

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