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A Genealogy of Architectural History's Flattening: A Perspective from Post-History

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From its very beginning, architectural historiography tended to 'flatten' historicity in favor of a 'spatialized' discourse. This process was triggered by gradually emphasizing space over time, as becomes clear in examining this *longue durée*, from the 'barbarian' architectures of Quatremère de Quincy and Seroux d'Agincourt to the 'non-historical styles' of Banister Fletcher, and from turning peripheries into productive territories of architectural resistance in the theories on critical regionalism to shaping a global history of architecture. The focus on space changed the dynamics of the narrative from a vertical construction to an increasingly horizontal perception of architectural production through the ages. During its evolution, the historiographic discourse grew complexified through a twofold understanding of space, both in terms of doctrinal conceptualization (space being presented as the very essence of architecture) and in terms of a geographical expansion. Several threads wove the historiographical narratives in the succeeding works of architectural history; unraveling these begins with an analysis of the foundations of architectural historicity, questioning the role and place of conceptual models, such as the 'primitive hut', and schemes like the 'tree of architecture', moving to a gradual dismantling of its temporality through the shaping of a modernist historiography and, eventually, through the emergence of marginal historiographic territories. An indirect goal of looking at this flattening of history from an architectural history perspective is tackling the meaning of writing history today.

Keywords: architectural historiography; historicity; discursivity; post-history; modernity; after modernity



Introduction

A few months before the Berlin Wall collapsed, an article published by Francis Fukuyama in an American journal of international affairs questioned the end of history (Fukuyama 1989). He revisited the topic three years later in a book that became both famous and controversial: *The End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama 1992). Since then, the notion of post-history (Flusser 2013) has become current, especially for suggesting a frame for the multiple crises (political, social, ecological) disrupting our world today.

During the past few years, I have often wondered, how can history be written in the era of post-history? To analyze the possible challenges that such a seemingly paradoxical question might point to, this article proposes an introspective cut through the history of architecture as a discipline, thus offering a possible genealogy of the mutations it recently underwent. My goal is to look at what might seem a degenerative disease of writing architectural history, namely the flattening of its discourse, a process engaged almost from the beginning of the discipline. The tendency towards a ‘flattening’ of discourse — that is, reducing its historicity in the Hegelian sense, the idea of history as a mode of being in its happening (Marcuse 1987) — may affect all history writing in general, but in the case of architectural history it manifested earlier and more strongly, given the discipline’s particular attention to the successive geographical expansions of its subject matter. To put it differently, when considered in its long-term evolution, architectural history appears as a composite discipline that is constantly questioning its historicist epistemology (that is, the regimes of temporality concerning architectural objects and principles) through different causality issues. In the eyes of the first architectural historians, these latter issues, reflecting the physical and social connections of architecture with its specific site and community, differentiated it from the other arts. Such a determinism required, on the first hand, the situating of the discipline geographically (discussing foremost its centers), but also, on the other hand, eventually taking into account its different incarnations in various locations. I argue here that the flattening of history by architectural historiography is the direct result of this progressive expansion of the field of architecture, both in terms of geography (from ‘centers’ to ‘peripheries’) and objects (from high to low). I also argue that the progressive conceptualization of space, which accompanied the development of the discipline, was critical in this process of flattening history.

The chronological span of this argument is inevitably wide, covering modernity in its entirety, including its aftermath. This introspection of the *longue durée* is realized through revisiting a series of texts, many of them well known and some unjustly forgotten. Though such a broad perspective might trigger questionable shortcuts, it seemed essential to embrace its vastness, since I do believe that the

evolution of historiographical narratives is directly dependent on the evolution of the epistemological mindset associated with modernity (and further after modernity). Moreover, I made this choice because I am interested in the *process* rather than in its constituents — my aim is to follow the mechanics and understand not only *how* it happened but mainly *why* it happened. In offering this genealogical perspective, it is certainly not my intent to suggest a linear history of architectural historiography, as if the flattening process was the result of an explicit volition or as if it followed a straight path. Rather, I seek to investigate this process by presenting a series of perspectives, each of which offers a notable insight into how architectural history ‘flattened’. This investigation is structured in two distinct parts, articulated around the notion of historicity, which analyze its construction and, respectively, deconstruction in the historiographical discourse. A brief interlude on ‘peripheries’ constitutes the key for grasping this articulation.

Prelude. A Certain Sense of Space

The beginnings of architectural history as a discipline, in the late 18th century to early 19th century, were marked by the intertwining of two parallel doctrinal approaches. One approach was driven by the will of historicity, as Hegel (2004) imagined it, a need to build up meaningful master-narratives that were shaped according the ‘vertical’ ascension of time. The result was a territorially rooted history, spatialized through a geographical categorization. The other approach had theoretical backgrounds, following in the steps of the architectural treatises from the previous centuries. Though not explicitly referred to as such before the end of the 19th century, the main focus of this reasoning was space, conceptualized as the embodiment of the essence of architecture, and theorized through the humble but evocative figure of the ‘primitive hut’.

After a historic evolution dominated by the canonic rules of proportions (see Cohen and Delbeke 2018), architecture became a thing of space. From Gottfried Semper’s ‘visible enclosed space as such’ (2004: 247) to Siegfried Ebeling’s ‘pathos of spatial form’ (2010: 11), from August Schmarsow’s *Raumgestaltung* (1893) to Le Corbusier’s ‘masterly play of volumes’ (1923: 16), space became a central concept in theorizing architecture. Almost in parallel, the writing of its history integrated a similar approach to space, which was seen as a conceptual yardstick. Space defined simultaneously a contained room, a geometrically expressed volume, but also the accommodating site. This kind of concomitance between the discipline and the writing of its history was far from contradictory. As Hal Foster remarked when writing on the art field,¹ it aspired to demonstrate relatedly the autonomy of the discipline and its ‘connected’ history — namely social history for art historiography (in Foster’s words) and what I call a ‘rooted’ history (for architectural historiography).

In other words, this concomitant process implied a twofold conceptualization of space. On the one hand, space progressively became the central notion for understanding architecture, defining it as an object (*what is architecture*) and its limits (*what it is not*). This theoretical interpretation nurtured a deeply hierarchical vision of the historiographic narrative that was shaped around centers and canons. Therefore, it is important to analyze this hierarchy by also considering ‘peripheries’, as they play an intricate role in relation to the canon, reinforcing as well as contesting its supremacy. On the other hand, in the evolution of architectural historiography into an academic discipline, obeying the rules of historicity and taxonomy (see chapters 7 and 10 in Foucault 1966), its narrative progressively developed into an open territoriality, both geographically and objectually. Rootedness emerged as an essential way of addressing architecture through its historic evolution: a ‘horizontal’ territorialization attaching it to the soil that produced it, but which involved meanwhile a strong sense of hierarchy, given the importance of canons and their circulation from centers to peripheries.

Space became thus a key notion for comprehending both the epistemology (*what is architecture?*) and teleology (*what does it serve pragmatically and philosophically?*) of architectural thinking, turning its historiographic narrative unthinkable outside its spatial understanding: conceiving architecture was a space-matter (length, width, height), its scope was about producing space (from the minimal space of the shelter to the all-encompassing spaces for human activities), apprehending its evolution required a geographical exploration. The threads of the two discourses at its foundation — of theoretically redefining architecture and building up its historicity — overlapped, swirled together and wove the ‘grand’ historiographic narrative. And if the theoretical point was most often concealed under historical considerations, its input was instrumental for the making of this narrative, nurturing it as a subterranean flow and playing a central role in its flattening.

Historicity 1. Architecture as a Thing of Space

For architects, the central question was for centuries *what is architecture?* The interest in its historical and geographical variations only came about much later, being intermediated by the development of history and geography as two major disciplines for shaping the intellectual foundations of modernity. Before that, the concern was situated in the ideal archetype — in a Platonic sense — able to express the essence of architecture. Or, from the Western point of view, which prevailed in conceiving the autonomy of architecture, this ideal was embodied by the classical Greek temple, considered to be the ultimate model. Symptomatically, it was through this consumed example that space was first conceptualized.

Though tackled in architectural treatises through the centuries, the notion of space was never named as such in theoretical discourse. Space started to emerge as a concept in the 18th century, through different channels, particularly by the philosophical and aesthetical theories of the time, but it found its place in the architectural vocabulary only in the very late years of the following century (see Forty 2000: 256–275). A crucial moment for its architectural conceptualization was undoubtedly Abbé Laugier's interpretation of the 'primitive hut' in his *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753), a trope in architectural theory discussed since Vitruvius as the origin of architecture. What changed with Laugier's approach was the meaning attributed to it. Pictured as a simplified temple to which pointed the genius of Architecture illustrated in the frontispiece (**Figure 1**) of the second edition (1755), the 'rustic hut', to use Laugier's exact words, was no longer presented as a mere allegory of the origins, but as its very model 'upon which all the magnificences of architecture have been imagined' (1755: 11). 'Never was a principle more fruitful in consequences', affirmed Laugier: 'it is in the essential parts that all the beauties consist ... all the licenses ... in the parts introduced by need ... all the defects ... in the parts adjoined by caprice' (1753: 13–14; author's translation). If this principle explained a norm of procedure (Bergdoll 2000: 11–12), then Laugier provided a clear hierarchy in how one should understand architecture's different compounds, referring indirectly to a normative space. Because what was at stake in his revisiting of the 'rustic hut' was, first, the abstract conceptualization of space and, second, its normative role.

In terms of abstraction when considering the hut's constitutive elements, one should not be distracted by their representation as tree trunks — a symbol of primitiveness — but seize the fundamental principles of architecture: as if the trunks were lines, one should be able to discern here the sheer abstraction, architecture as space-producer. This simple, abstract construct embodies what Laugier called, in the introduction of his text, the 'spirit' of architecture:

we have various treatises of Architecture, which explain with sufficient exactness the measures and proportions which enter into the detail of the different orders. We have not as yet any work, which establishes in a solid manner the principles of it, which manifests the true spirit of it. (1755: iii)

Far from representing a rustic shelter, for Laugier the hut synthesized the essence of architecture, hence its normative nature. For Laugier, the canon of the architectural evolution of architecture was materialized by the perfect forms invented by the Greeks. These perfect forms — the *idea* of architecture — degenerated afterwards due to 'the barbarity of succeeding ages, [that] created a new system of Architecture, wherein



Figure 1: Frontispiece of Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture* (2nd ed., 1755). Collection Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Frontispiece drawn by Charles-Dominique-Joseph Eisen and engraved by Jean-Jacques Aliamet.

unskillful proportions, ornaments ridiculously connected and heaped together, presented stones as paper work, unformed, ridiculous and superfluous' (1755: 4).²

The paradigmatic role assigned to the hut was to be sealed, more than three decades after Laugier's *Essai*, in Quatremère de Quincy's *Encyclopedia of Architecture* (1788). The French architectural theorist wrote an entire article on the hut and also addressed it in the entry on 'Architecture'. He described the hut in terms of 'type' and 'inflexible rule' (1788: 386), the sole idea that could 'straighten all the depraved uses, all the vicious deviations' induced by blind imitation. He related the notion of 'type' to the notion of 'character', both implying — etymologically, but also metaphorically — the idea of imprint, of an active matrix, that ever engenders variations of form. By using this subtle correspondence, Quatremère suggested his belief in the importance of causality and predispositions. He thus translated the perfection of Laugier's 'rustic hut' into more than the ultimate archetype (model for Greek architecture, to begin with): the hut became the embodiment of the Western civilization, as it 'could not have given birth neither to the Egyptian architecture nor to the Chinese' (1788: 110–111). This cunningly ruled Eastern civilizations out of the canonic architecture, while implicitly questioning their character and, through it, the 'imprint of their genius' (1788: iv).

All through the 19th and 20th centuries, the history and theory of architecture constantly re-examines the hut, either per se or allegorically (Rykwert 1972; Dripps 1997; Sharr 2006). Its paradigmatic dimension, which ensured this exceptional fortune, was perceived as such less in terms of originating the long series of architectural artifacts and precisely because of its assimilation to a pure abstraction, the zero degree of space at the foundation of all further architectural thinking. It is in this sense that the hut embodied the essence of architecture, an understanding that would feed a significant theoretical development of the discipline, from Gottfried Semper to the modernists. However, its archetypal genericity was far from being inclusive: since architecture was henceforth understood as a matter of space, all the built forms unable to explicitly reveal its abstract conception would be seen as non-architectures (see Baydar 1998: 6–17).

Historicity 2. On Space, Differently: A Rooted Discipline

While architecture was thus theorized as a thing of space, the fledgling discipline of writing architecture's history faced a whole series of epistemological questions: How to write architectural history in the absence of preexisting methods and discourses? How to conceptualize it when its main object is an ideal model that serves as a (more or less) perpetual reference?

Quatremère admitted it: he aimed for 'universal knowledge' (1788: II), or, as he put it in the introduction to the *Dictionnaire historique* (1832: I): 'We would have desired to be

able to embrace ... the notions of architecture of all the times and all the countries'. But in the absence of other operative methods — 'abstract, chronological or geographical' (1832: I) — he confessed that the only way he found to put together a universal history was to assemble the principal elements into a dictionary. Though touching upon chronology in a certain measure, what his historical approach engendered was rather a cartography of the discipline. It is true that such a 'horizontal' view corresponded with the very structure of a dictionary, but it reflected, in the first place, Quatremère's understanding of architecture as an open geography. Indeed, he succeeded in extending the field of the discipline twice: once in terms of geography, by sketching a partial *oikumene*, and once in terms of doctrine, by enlarging the definition of architecture. In the introduction to the *Encyclopedia*, he clearly states his belief in an architectural history that embraces both the art of building, 'common to all the nations of the Universe', and the very art of architecture, specific to ancient Greece and further adopted 'by the entire modern Europe' (1788: iii). While his method was explicitly inclusive, it came with a judgement that was exclusive in nature, turning this extended field into a collection of unfit architectural examples. Quatremère dealt with this conundrum by adopting the Herderian belief in cultural artefacts being subjected to a series of influences: climatic, social, political, moral. His approach thus introduced two essential viewpoints: architecture was perceived as being ruled by determinism, regardless of its striving to attain the original idea; the meaning of architecture both as a discipline and an artefact could not be grasped outside a geographical representation.

Quatremère's writings, in spite of their complex structure and explicit will to 'form a body of *universal history*' (1832: i; emphasis in original), had nothing to do with historicity. Neither had Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764), a work to which the well-informed reader could have compared Quatremère's. Undisputedly, the Frenchman went beyond — theoretically, chronologically, and geographically — Winckelmann's vertical examination, which was limited to the study of the ancient Mediterranean, considering that all further examples were corrupted. However, Quatremère's cartography was made out of fragments and his chronology was reduced to a unique diachronic analysis, in the entry dedicated to 'Architecture', an analysis very much endowed to a theoretical interpretation.

The first attempt to introduce historicity in a history of architecture belonged to Jean Baptiste Seroux d'Agincourt's *Histoire de l'art par les monumens* (1810–1823).³ The sense of historicity stemmed out of Seroux's efforts to structure the entire narrative as a meaningful interpretation — his primary goal, as he noted, being to follow the thread of history left interrupted by Winckelmann (1810–1823: v). If his approach was centered on time, space played a crucial role as well. Seroux's work was articulated 'vertically' as a

succession of geographical developments, all described ambivalently as both a deviation from the initial canon and a different continuation of the idea of architecture (Figure 2). This complex structure was equally inclusive and exclusive. Inclusiveness was reflected in the Enlightenment's aspiration towards universal knowledge, mingled with a Romantic, patriotic impetus: the 'barbarian nations' who took on the interrupted thread of arts were certainly responsible for the deviation and decline of the ideal model, but they also formed the genealogical missing link of the first ancestors (1810–1823: iii, v, vi, 16, and following). Such a reading was made possible through the theoretical bias of rootedness, inspired directly by the biological taxonomy of the time, with Seroux replacing the notion of species with the architectural concept of typology, otherwise defined as a spatial construct. By doing this, he indefectibly related architecture to the soil that gave birth to it, using a vegetal metaphor. Like Quatremère, he pictured the ideal model as a seed growing in perfect soil, explaining its 'degeneration' through its transposition to poorer soils, which thus engendered wild herbs and weeds (1810–1823: 4, 16).

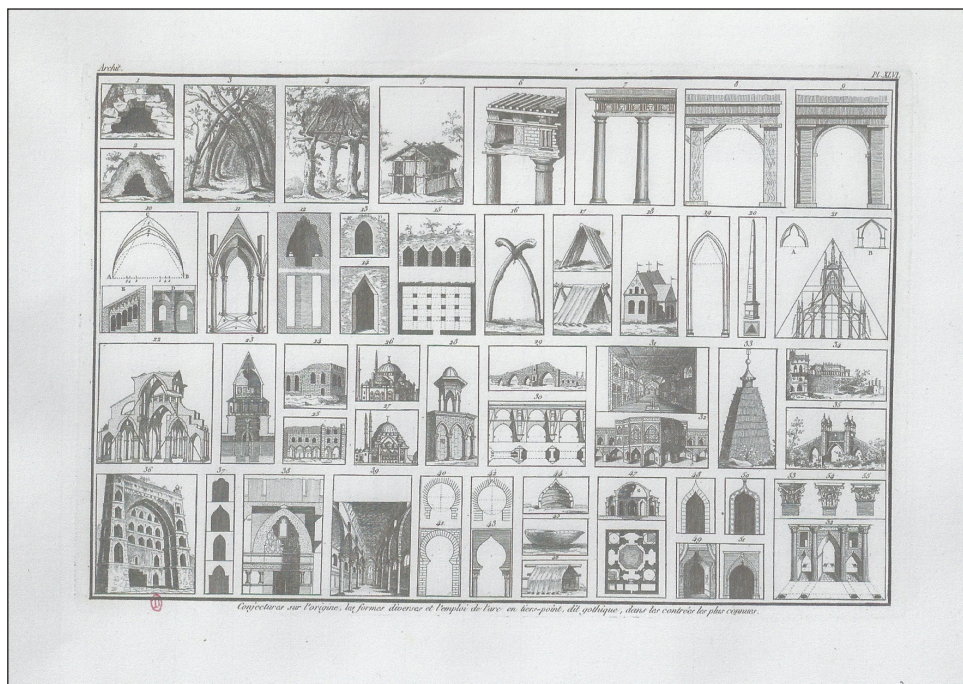


Figure 2: Illustration of Seroux's *L'histoire de l'art par les monumens*, 'Conjectures on the origin, the various forms and the use of the Gothic arch in the most known countries' (Seroux d'Agincourt 1810–1823: 48). Collection Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

This botanical metaphor was to achieve its masterful development in Hippolyte Taine's *Philosophie de l'art* (1865–1882), which installed determinism as a major factor in considering art. Its cornerstone, the triad *race-milieu-moment*, complexified the

existing taxonomic schemes in art historiography, while enhancing their exclusiveness. Aside from the Lamarckian model, largely influential, this theory had a lasting influence on the perception of art, emphasizing the primacy of Western (European) culture.

Biological models, referred to on theoretical and/ or ideological grounds, permeated the entire history of architecture of the 19th century. Theorists grew ‘architectural trees’ as chronological and geographical diagrams. Banister Fletcher’s ‘tree of architecture’ became, unquestionably, the most well known of all these. In *A History of Architecture for the Student, Craftsman, and Amateur, Being a Comparative View of the Historical Styles from the Earliest Period* (1896), Fletcher summed up one century of historiographical discourse: everything was there and a little bit more. If Fletcher’s book proficiently compiled the previous ideas, it also brought a significant plus, as it defined a certain possible historicity of architectural styles. This vision was already implied in the first editions but became perfected and enlarged in the fourth edition (1901), extending the accepted limits of historicity. Thus, the survey was completed by a ‘note on prehistoric architecture’ and, most importantly (‘the main addition to the letterpress’), by a large section on ‘non-historical styles’ (1901: v–vi). Inspired by Hegel’s differentiation between ‘people fully conscious’ of their role in history and ‘nations whose intelligence is but half awakened’ (2004: 2), the distinction between ‘historical’ and ‘non-historical styles’ clearly expressed for the first time the role of history in creating (geo)cultural hierarchies. Fletcher illustrated it by a ‘tree of architecture’ (**Figure 3**), presented for the first time in the fifth edition (1905), which improved the former botanical models by a clear representation of the causality ruling architecture: the roots of the tree symbolized the contextual influences described by Quatremère — geography, geology, climate, religion, social and political, history — while the branches imagined the architectural styles discussed in the survey. All the short, non-productive branches represented the ‘non-historical styles’ — Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Central American, and Saracenic — that Fletcher designated as ‘Eastern (sic) styles’ of ‘no interest’, ‘developed mainly on their own account and exercised little direct influence on other styles’ (**Figure 4**) (1901: 436). One could wonder if Fletcher’s tree was not inspired by the evolutionist concepts of the time, like Ernst Haeckel’s (1868) recapitulation theory or the orthogenesis theory of Wilhelm Haacke (Haeckel’s disciple) that was exposed in 1893, a few years before Fletcher’s *History of Architecture*. Like Haeckel’s human evolutionary ladder, displaying at one end personalities like Aristotle, Shakespeare, Goethe, Lamarck, and Darwin, and at the other ‘the Weddas, the Akkas, the Australians, the Dravidians, the Bushmen and the Patagonians’ ([before 1910]: 25),⁴ Fletcher’s tree reflected a teleological idea of architectural progress, with ancient Greek architecture leading to the top branch of American architecture.⁵

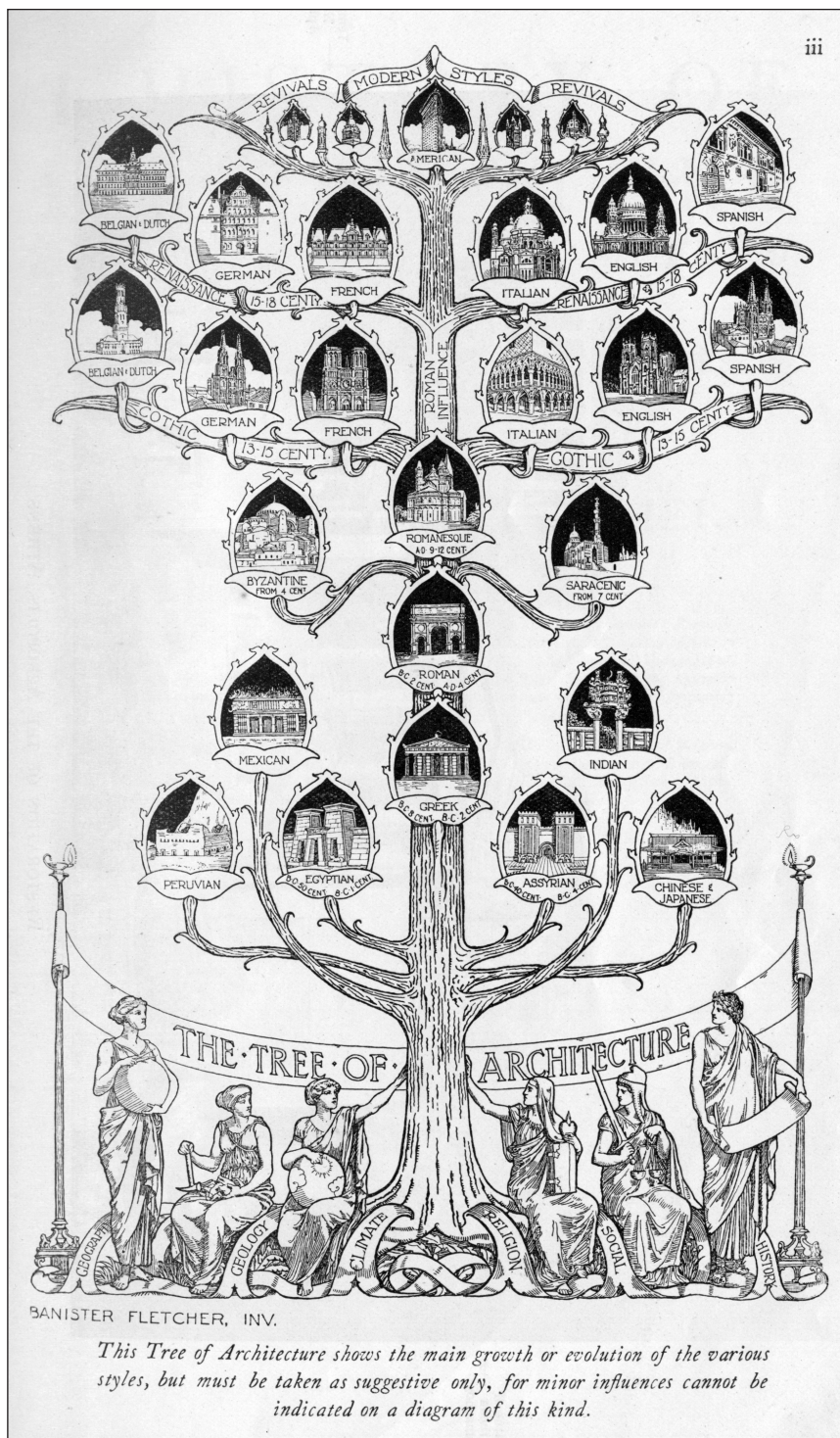


Figure 3: Sir Banister Fletcher's Tree of Architecture. This version of the design first appeared in the sixth edition of *A History of Architecture* (1921). Reproduced here from the ninth edition (Fletcher 1931). RIBA Collections ISBN: RIBA111570.

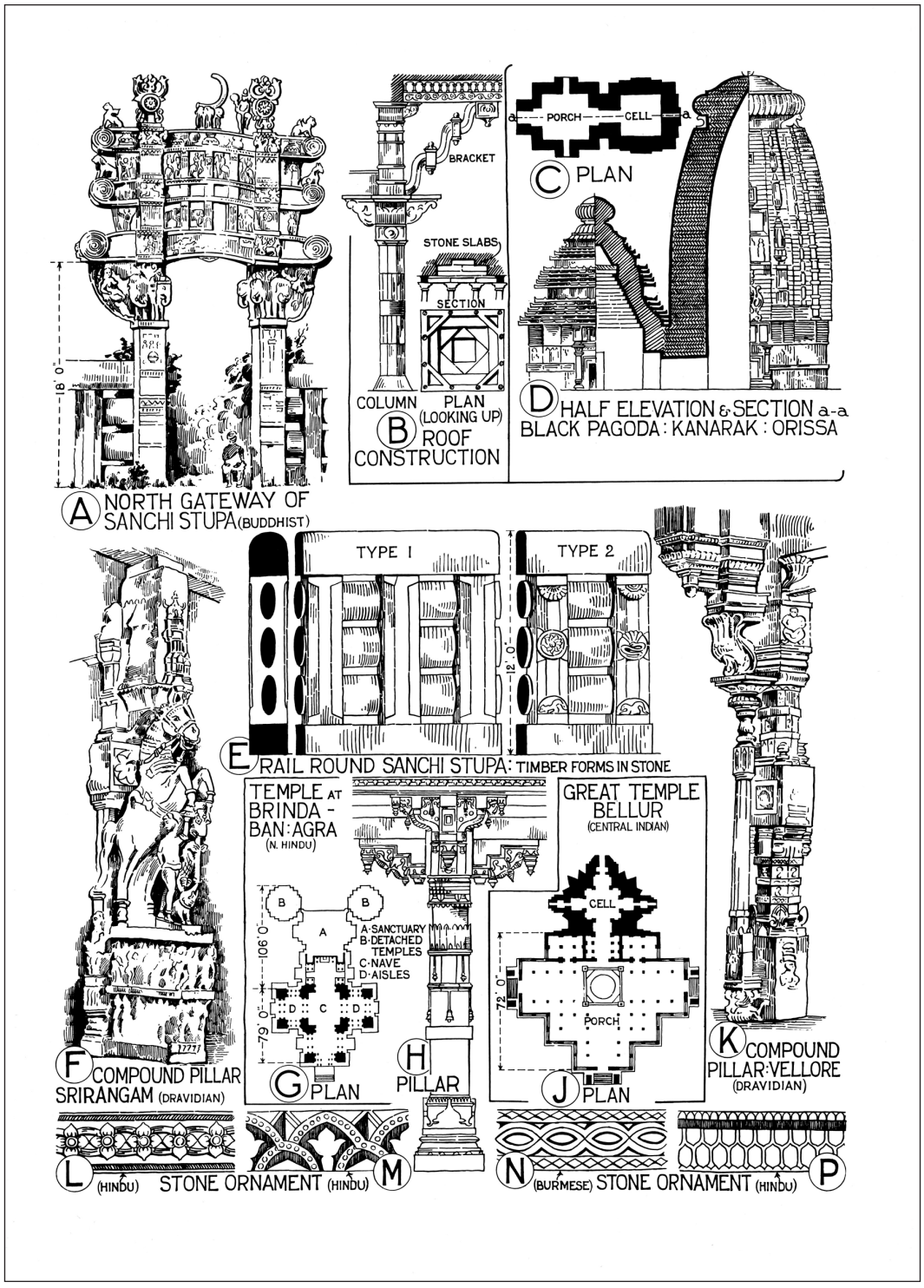


Figure 4: 'Indian Examples and Ornament'. Image illustrating the section 'Indian Architecture' in the fourth edition of Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture* (1901: 223). Reproduced here from the nineteenth edition (Fletcher 1975). RIBA Collections ISBN: RIBA100916.

Fletcher's survey became a model of spatialization and typologization of architectural history, opening a path to be followed. Spatialization was institutionalized as an architectural particularity in defining historicity, both in terms of geographical rootedness and of morphological telos. The spatial construct was turned into a discriminatory criterion differentiating historical and non-historical architectures: 'From an architect's point of view, these non-historical styles can scarcely be so interesting as those which have progressed on the solution of constructive problems, resolutely met and overcome, as was the case in Europe', wrote Fletcher, stressing that 'in India and the East, decorative schemes seemed to have outweighed any such problems' (1901: 438). He might have found inspiration — again — in evolutionism, which considered, like Haeckel did, certain ornamental features as a proof of atavism, a pervasive idea that would nurture the intellectual debate at the end of 19th century, from criminal anthropology to architectural theory (Canales and Herscher 2005). But before Adolf Loos published his famous 'Ornament and Crime' (1910), the opposition between a constructive mindset and a decorative predisposition became already a discriminatory principle in architectural historiography due to Fletcher's survey.

Beyond Historicity 1. Space Construct: Autonomy Reloaded

Almost a century later, starting with the second half of the 20th century, in the midst of modernism's crisis, the weight of history, and particularly its historicist expression, was pinpointed as one of the main causes of architecture's turmoil.

Trying to find a valid explanation for the crisis, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner wondered, in an article entitled 'Modern Architecture and the Historian or the Return of Historicism' (1961), if the historians themselves were not to be blamed.⁶ In fact, he blamed the historicization of the discipline, which had formerly been authored by practicing architects who had endorsed the role of the historian. If Pevsner's concern was relevant for the turmoil troubling the architectural milieu at that time, it also revealed what appeared as a rupture between art history and architectural history. The second parted ways with the first mainly in its focus on space (the constructive mindset) as its central operating concept. This perspective of the architect, be it by training or by endorsement, triggered the undeclared yet consumed divorce between the two disciplines, the idiosyncrasy of architectural history being increased through the strong hold of modernism, driven by the influence of CIAM's networking and MoMA's discourse on 'International Style'.

This hold claimed that autonomy of architectural historiography had (almost) everything to do with the conceptualization of space. While at the end of the 19th century,

space started to be deconstructed in the arts, particularly in painting, in architecture it became the core of the discipline's autonomy. With August Schmarsow's theory on *Raumgestaltung* (see Schwarzer 1991) paralleled in practice by Adolf Loos's *Raumplan* (see Colomina 1996: 232–281), space was finally conceived as an epistemological abstraction, a fundament for all architectural theory. This achieved the gestation phase announced by Laugier's rustic hut and propelled a reformulation of architectural principles, leading to the theorizing of modernism.

Though apparently there was no visible connection between rustic huts and the austere facades and pure geometry of modernist architecture, the connection was not only metaphorical but entirely real. Behind Le Corbusier's 'masterly, correct and magnificent play of volumes brought together in light' (1923), there was his experience of vernacular, particularly during his 1911 *Voyage d'Orient* (2002), repeating in his own way Semper's fascination with the *Ur-formen* of the Caribbean hut. Behind the *Haus am Horn*, conceived for the first Bauhaus exhibition, in 1923 in Weimar, was Walter Gropius's work on the Sommerfeld pavilion (1920–1922), which served as a manifesto for the Bauhaus workshops (see Bergdoll and Dickerman 2009: 40–61). Writing for *Der Holzbau*, Gropius explained that modernism perceived itself as a continuation of the primitive idea: 'A new era also needs a new form ... Wood is the building material of the present ... Wood has a wonderful capability for artistic shaping and is by nature so appropriate to the primitive beginning of our newly developing life' (Gropius 1920; quoted in Bergdoll and Dickerman 2009: 44).

Primitiveness (Odgers, Samuel, and Sharr 2006), a concept that had already fueled the artists' imagination, taught the architects a lesson of 'authenticity' (Heynen 1999; 2006). Modernists praised the latter as a core value, which brought them closer to the essence of the original idea and which reflected its unspoiled nature. It is from this perspective that their attachment to primitiveness should be understood. Picturing (implicitly) the filiation of the primitive cabin was an updated version of the *Bon Sauvage*, in which they saw the 'bare truth'. Nakedness (of the human being) came to be associated with the stripped modernist compositions. No wonder that Farkas Molnár sketched Georg Muche, the architect of the *Haus am Horn*, and his wife sitting naked beside a reduced image of the house (**Figure 5**). No wonder, either, that Bernard Rudofsky, when designing a villa on the Mediterranean coast for an 'uninhibited woman' (that he drew naked), quoted William Morris: 'How can people expect good architecture as long as they are dressed like that?' (1938).



Figure 5: Farkas Molnár. Georg Muche and wife, in front of the Haus am Horn. Etching, 1923. Collection Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.

Primitiveness denoted simplicity, in the sense given by the 18th century treatises. And straightforward, unpretentious solutions to the 'exact needs' of Man were specified by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1804) when writing on the 'shelter of the poor' (1804:104–106). Hence the interest that a number of modernists — to quote again Le Corbusier and Rudofsky, but also Marcel Breuer, or the GATEPAC group — had for vernacular architecture. Not regionalism, which they abhorred — following Loos's distinction between embracing fashionable motives and using methods and materials related to their site (see in particular Loos 1913) — but the simplicity and 'authenticity' of the vernacular. But more than for these key figures, vernacular became the privileged object of analysis for numerous architects in the peripheries, from Scandinavia to the Balkans, from the Northern coasts of Africa to South America, who sought in it a means by which to remain rooted while aspiring to build for their time, in pace with modernist principles.

Whether in its conceptual projection or in its vernacular incarnation, in these accounts space was understood as being more than an encapsulated volume, by integrating time, in terms of perambulation (the *Raumplan* theory) or sedimented memory (vernacular architecture). Appropriated from the field of mathematics and physics, the space-time connection was turned into a tool of theoretical analysis and historiographical method (Giedion 1941). This appropriation, which complexified the tridimensional spatial construct, founded the myth of modernism while weakening the hierarchical values of historicity.

Interlude: Low against High

It would be impossible to entirely grasp the reasons and the significance of the mutation undergone by architectural historiography after 1940 without considering the prominent influence played by folklore, seen as a domesticated face of primitiveness. Debates on high and low, elite and popular, etc., were structural for modern culture (Foster 2002: 3).

When MoMA proposed in the early 1940s that Rudofsky create an architectural exhibition, the Austrian, who was a keen aficionado of primitiveness, suggested a show on vernacular. His offer, initially rejected, ultimately came to fruition in 1964 (Scott 2000). Vernacular had become a respectable object, not only in terms of practicing architecture but also of writing art history. Hence, this interlude highlights the importance of folklore studies in art history in the first half of the 20th century and its lasting effects on architectural historiography. This in turn allows us to connect the two sections composing the second part of my reflection on the flattening of architectural history.

George Kubler remarked in *The Shape of Time* that ‘after 1900, folk arts, provincial styles and rustic crafts were thought to deserve equal ranking with court styles and metropolitan schools under the democratic valuation of twentieth century political thought’ (1962: 13). From the perspective of a ‘history of things’, which his study aimed to trace, he was certainly right. However, the situation was more complex than that, since other artefacts, such as the architectures of ‘peripheries’, had a similar fate. With the emergence of ethnography and anthropology in the 19th century, these marginal territories, which had been excluded from any historiographical narrative, were finally addressed — in the will to embrace a greater picture — in terms of natural resources and ‘rustic crafts’ (to paraphrase Kubler), the latter being eventually perceived as natural resources as well. From an architectural perspective, these territories were places where the evolution of architecture was thought to have stopped long ago, lands of ‘non-historical styles’. When describing the Balkans in his *Géographie universelle* (1876), the French geographer Elisée Reclus noted that ‘wide areas of the ... peninsula are still as little known today as Central Africa’ (see Lorain 2011: 25).⁷

How to tackle history in the absence of historicity? How to address Europe in its marginalities — north, south, and east — when these territories were not included in the grand discourse and barely studied by their own scholars? Switching to folklore in order to grasp the culture of the margins was to become a historiographical method. That was about tactics, as proved the Austrian Josef Strzygowski, one of the most assiduous historians of peripheries in the first half of the 20th century, who struggled to define a comparative approach founded on transfers and circulations, in order to study what he called the ‘civilization of the North’ (IICI 1935):⁸

One cannot form a scholarship on the North by employing [the] usual methods for the simple reason that there are no monuments or written sources to testify for it. ... We hence need new methods ... we need to seek for means by which to allow the pursuit of the becoming of the forms beyond stone architecture and preserved monuments ... Beside the written sources, we should take into account the ... oral tradition, as researched by the national ethnography ... and we should substitute the descriptive method ... by the comparative method, the only one able to retrieve lost testimonies.

Strzygowski might have been inspired by methods in human geography, a discipline developed at the end of the 19th century, whose founding father, the French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache, reacted against the ‘positivism of the historicizing history’ (Ricœur 2000: 189). Human geography valorized notions like ‘milieu’ (changing

Taine's racist perspective), 'lifestyle', and 'everydayness', forging a comprehensive understanding of the inhabited space that was entirely neglected by the history of architecture. All of this nurtured methodological attempts in the interwar years to resolve the crisis of historicity, like the French *Ecole des annales*, which reconceptualized the writing of history through a spatial counterpart. This approach 'slow[ed] down the pace of time' (2000: 189),⁹ while broadening the epistemological territoriality of its narrative. Moreover, all these prepared the path for a different understanding of the concept of space in terms of place, thus replacing its abstract dimension by an affective perception of the inhabited experience. Only after Martin Heidegger's influential lecture, 'Bauen Wohnen Denken' (1952), further elaborated in the writings of Christian Norberg-Schulz and the doctrine of critical regionalism, did the notion of 'place' become instrumental in architectural vocabulary.

To go back to the interwar years, the method of spatialization —in terms of both geography and epistemology, as already employed in Strzygowski's approach — responded also to the League of Nations' geopolitical inclusiveness, a policy fulfilling the scope of its foundation in the aftermath of the First World War. It was in this context that the folklore studies were promoted as a cohesive tool by the cultural organism of the League, the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (CICI, Commission internationale de coopération intellectuelle), the forerunner of UNESCO. Writing to his Romanian friend, fellow art historian George Oprescu, secretary of the CICI from 1923 to 1930, Henri Focillon emphasized the notion of cohesion, presenting it as an absolute duty: 'you were right to speak about the unity of the folk arts [*art populaire*]. The only reason we had to stir the entire Europe was to make clear this idea' (Focillon 1992: 58).¹⁰ Several major cultural events echoed this policy of the League, such as the Congrès international des arts populaires (Prague) and the XIIIth Congrès international d'histoire de l'art (Stockholm), both organized in 1933 with the specific aim of appeasing nationalist discriminations in the art history discourse. The 1937 International Exposition in Paris, which brought together major and minor cultures through its theme of 'art and technology in modern life', endorsed a similar strategy. The exhibition framed folklore in various ways, including the architecture of the Regional Center, one of the chief attractions. In a France ruled by the Front Populaire, addressing folklore (*art populaire*) targeted, beyond the harmonized dynamics of high and low cultures, a social interconnection: a common culture of the people, peasants, and workers alike (see Popescu 2016).

There was a strong political meaning in all these superposed connections. In the year of the International Exposition, GATEPAC's architectural journal, *A. C.*, revealed them in another way in an issue dedicated to 'revolutionary questions', by tackling the

bond of inhabitant/habitat ('Per una societat millor...', 1937). The editorial displayed three photos (Figure 6) depicting a Black African, a peasant, and a worker in front of their habitat, a triad of social/cultural stances questioning the meaning of inhabiting the world. By stressing architecture's crucial role in building a 'better society', the editorial conveyed a symbolic message about architecture, identifying it with its primitive essence, its continually renewed authenticity, and its social engagement. A tremendous expansion of the architectural field was thus activated, comparable with Quatremère's considerations, which implicitly stated that architecture was not about history, but rather it was always about understanding it from the present perspective.

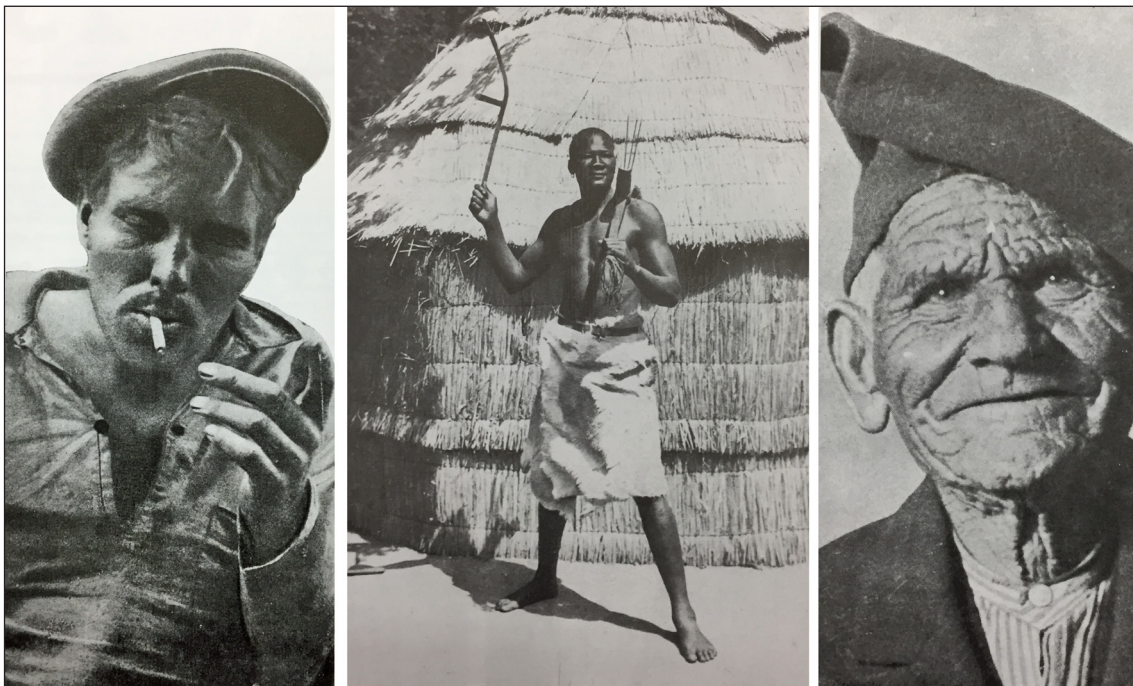


Figure 6: Worker, primitive man, peasant: three photos illustrating the connection between inhabitant and habitat in the editorial of A.C.'s issue 'Revolutionary Questions ('Per una societat millor...', 1937).

Beyond Historicity 2. Modernist Views: An Eternal Present? Or a New Tradition?

Essentiality, authenticity, social engagement, present-ness: all these matters were addressed, in one way or another, by modernist historians. Their approach to writing history changed many things, from the perception of their object of study to the withdrawal of their discourse from the realm of art historiography. Motivated by the need to establish the autonomy of architecture, demanding specific operating methods in terms of thinking and of practice, this discourse was mainly shaped by 'real'

historians who were formed as such, like Sigfried Giedion and Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, to cite two major figures of (modernist) architectural history.

Both studied art history, both under Heinrich Wölfflin, becoming specialized in the early modern, with dissertations on the Baroque. However, when writing on modern architecture, more precisely on modernism, they both somehow eluded the rules of historicity: to paraphrase Ricœur, they replaced history with memory (2000: 181).¹¹ Both could have said ‘I was a witness’, as they knew directly (or almost so) several of their protagonists and assisted in (or received first-hand feedback of) the important debates of the time. In doing so, they were no rule-breakers, because since the second half of the 19th century architectural history was written by ‘witnesses’, many of them architects endorsing the role of the historian and often of the theorist. Pevsner and Giedion followed in these steps, emphasizing the teleological orientation of their precursors.

Pevsner’s and Giedion’s discourses were unmistakably acts of authority: whereas in the 19th century teleology set the principles for structuring a general historiographic discourse, in their case it served to meaningfully frame modernism. Their approach inverted the sense of historicity: if Pevsner’s *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936) and particularly Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (1941) addressed the past from the perspective of the present, they did so with the specific goal of clarifying the latter. Through their approach, they succeeded in deactivating, at least partially, the historian’s anxiety of being caught up by the swirl of time, a torment that has haunted the discipline since its beginnings — ‘modern history was knocking at the door while I was writing ancient history’, noted Chateaubriand in his *Discours historiques* (1831) (see Hartog 2003: 141). Both Pevsner and Giedion, each in their own way, unfolded time and subjected it of the current moment. Giedion made it very clear: he wrote about a new tradition. All the editions of *Space, Time and Architecture* published during his lifetime began from the perspective of the present (1941; 1962a), a presentism that contaminated his entire approach. According to his biographer, the young Giedion founded his vocation on the belief that history is a mirror of the present, acknowledging in the first page of his published dissertation, ‘Looking at a previous era is like looking at a mirror that can only reflect the features of the observer’ (Giedion 1922; quoted in Georgiadis 1993: 15). If ever Giedion ceded to the historian’s anxiety, it was only because the present might not follow the ‘new tradition’: the introduction to the fourth edition, released in 1962, was entitled ‘Architecture in the 1960s: Hopes and Fears’.¹² Paradoxically enough for a history book, the ‘fears’ mentioned in the title were nothing else but a historicized form of history — the same that Pevsner addressed in his 1961 essay on the ‘return

of historicism'. Giedion alerted his readership already in 1945 to the severe crisis undergone by history, unable to go beyond 'its pragmatic purposes', '[y] readily available on the shelves, like tabulations of tensile strength' (Giedion 1945: 198).

Also in 1961, the same year as Pevsner's article, Hannah Arendt published a seminal text on the modern age, highlighting its hope that history would 'replace the concepts of traditional metaphysics' (1993: 15). Together, the two texts delivered an almost diametrically opposed understanding of the drive of historicity — Arendt's explored 'the modern break in tradition', while Pevsner's deplored the instrumentalization of history. In a certain measure, Pevsner's discontent was connected to Arendt's explanation of the Western tradition of political thought as being initiated by Plato's teachings and ending with Marx's declaration that 'philosophy and its truth are located not outside the affairs of men and their common world but precisely in them' (1993: 17). Modernist architectural history reflected Marx's position, its engagement with the present and the belief that it can and should fix the wrongs of the past. This belief engendered not only a flattening of history but also a purging of part of it, the part which did not serve to clarify the present day, embodied in the (righteous) aspirations of the 'new tradition'. Pruned history served to trace the pedigree of the present.

Giedion called that the 'hidden unity, a secret synthesis' (1941: v). This synthesis, inspired by the scientific theories and the artistic avant-garde of the early 20th century, resulted from the inextricable connection of space and time. If art and architectural history were about this connection, their entire historicity was but a repetition, in different contexts and circumstances, of the same dynamics. Once the dynamics became clear, historicity lost its vectorial interest, because what was at stake in the historiographic discourse was no longer time, but an eternal present — a fluctuation between beginnings and endings, to paraphrase Spyros Papapetros (2012), whose study entirely occupied Giedion's last years. Appreciated by Walter Gropius as 'probably the most universal and the most mature of his works' (Gropius 1968), his final three volumes, *The Beginnings of Art* (1962b), *The Beginnings of Architecture* (1964), and the posthumous *Architecture and the Phenomena of Transition* (1969), were dedicated to the 'pattern of human life' in terms of 'constancy and change' (Giedion 1962b: xix). By founding his discourse on the almost messianic notion of 'eternal present', Giedion erased the verticality of time replacing it with an all-encompassing entity: 'present, past and future are not chopped off from one another but merge into one uninterrupted fabric' (1962b: xx). This entity is the hidden synthesis, the swirl of space-time as illustrated on the cover of the typescript of 'Space, Time & Architecture', which Giedion handed over to Harvard University Press in 1939 (**Figure 7**).



Figure 7: Cover of the typescript of *Space, Time & Architecture* delivered by Giedion to Harvard University Press, 1939. Collection gta Archives / ETH Zurich, Sigfried Giedion.

The ‘all-embracing quality of any art is how man experiences space’, stated Giedion (1962b: 6) — a comprehensive spatialization that dissolves the role of time, projecting everything in the rarefied sphere of abstract ideas where present is the only conceivable temporality.

No More Historicity? Instead of Conclusions

Observed in the *longue durée*, the discourse of architectural historiography might appear as paradoxical: the result of the intertwining of two almost simultaneous ways of conceptualizing space — as a theoretical abstract concept and as an unfolding geography growing gradually global — stirred by an exclusive idea while aiming at an inclusive scope. One might consider that its flattening occurred because of this paradoxical conjunction.

From this perspective, Giedion’s final trilogy could be understood as an attempt to solve this conundrum. Though largely forgotten, if not utterly ignored, this work traced, in a metaphoric and fragmentary manner, the paths that would continue to be followed by architectural historiography in the ensuing decades. As argued in this article, from the focus on the sense of tradition and the connection with the site urged by critical regionalism to the geographical mapping of a (illusory) global history of architecture, there was an uncontestable spatialization of architectural history which continues to progress.

Today, in the extended field of the discipline, more wide than ever geographically and doctrinally, historiographic discourses compete and overlap. The legacy of Quatremère and Seroux — new objects, new territories — is reflected in this unprecedented expansion. Many of the new objects and territories of study — ordinariness, informality, poverty, natural and human provoked catastrophes — were hardly, if ever, considered before, attesting to the uncontestable process of demarginalization going on. All these new objects and territories of study demand renewed if not entirely reimagined methods, especially since today’s history is more and more a history without historicity. It is a history of memory as opposed to the history of the archive, the fundament — according to Ricœur (2000: 183) — of all historical epistemology that turns the narrated story of *here* and *now* into history. It is the ‘anonymous history’, already invoked by Giedion in 1945, when he ascribed the crisis of history to the incapacity of historians to create ‘tools and methods that might fit their research into the broader pattern of life’ (1945: 198, 199). Moreover, it is a history which turned criticality into an epistemological foundation, dismissing the modernist teleological compulsion and deconstructing narrative of all sorts.

How to write history in a context that is shifting, not only because of the mutations of our society, but also due to the will to address the things differently and to address other things that history used to do? As time is hardly an object of exploring the new topics, for diverse reasons including the lack of archives, space prevails and methodology becomes more imaginative, an eager search for hybridizations, borrowing tools from other fields (sociology, anthropology, political sciences, etc.). This reconfiguration inevitably changes Michel Foucault's multi-vocal history — what the philosopher called a 'general' history, as opposed to a 'global' history (1969: 18–19) — into multi-vocal stories, closer perhaps to Karl Popper's 'piecemeal' method meant to fight the holistic dictate of Hegelian historicism (2002).

Does this flattening of historicity have anything to do with the rise of a narrative turn in social sciences (Goodson and Gill 2011), and to its allowing big data to integrate the methods of (anonymous) history? Speaking of big data, is the recent interest in atlases, graphic representations of geographical transfers, and critical mappings yet another sign of history's flattening?

What shows this undeniable emphasis on space in recent (and not so recent) historiography? Does it indicate the need for a different epistemological understanding? Is history henceforth unable or unwilling to deal with time? Is this because historians, even those who do not agree with Fukuyama, situate themselves in a post-history context? But, if we accept that we have stepped into post-history, is then history still history? Speaking of anonymous history, Giedion considered it as 'an insight into the moving process of life, com[ing] closer and closer to biological science' (1945: 199). Such a declaration is uncannily close to biopolitics (Agamben 1998), a reminder that today's historiography on its related topics is an attempt to repair the transformation of the subject into an object.

I leave open this exploration of master- and meta-narratives in architectural historiography, with the firm belief that our writing of history today requires a consistent reappraisal in order to be able to better grasp its new objects. In our after-modern condition, we should remember François Lyotard's words: "“reality” being that which provides proofs for the scientific argumentation, as well as results for the juridical, ethical, political prescriptions and promises, one masters all of these by mastering reality' (1979: 77). If history (as a discipline) has stepped out of history, then it needs to be reimagined.

Notes

- ¹ Foster's analysis of the 'conceptual vicissitudes' of art history in the late 19th century provides an interesting parallel with the architectural historiography of the same period, namely the conundrum of writing history in between 'formal autonomy' and 'social-historical imbrication' (Foster 2002: 83–103).
- ² The English translation rounded the edges of Laugier's harsh critique in the original: 'La barbarie des siècles postérieurs... fit naître un nouveau système d'architecture, où les proportions ignorent, les ornements bisarrement configurés & puérilement entassés, n'offroient que des pierres en découpures, de l'informe, du grotesque, de l'excessif' (Laugier 1753: 4).
- ³ Seroux delivered the first fragments of his work in 1783, from his exile in Rome, but the several volumes were published beginning in 1810.
- ⁴ Haeckel speaks of the 'psychic life' of human beings. While praising his contributions to evolutionary theory, the translator stresses the dangers of addressing 'superiority and inferiority', hoping that the 'evolutionist morality, of the future mankind, will certainly avoid [them]' (Haeckel [before 1910]: 9, 'Préface du traducteur').
- ⁵ American architecture was adjoined to the tree only from the sixth edition (Fletcher 1921).
- ⁶ When discussing Pevsner's use of historicism, Adrian Forty (2000: 199) relates it to the growing popularity of the term due to Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*, published in 1957. However, Pevsner was, most probably, influenced by the German lineage of the concept, starting with the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel.
- ⁷ Reclus quotes the French historian Guillaume Lejean and the Hungarian ethnographer Felix Kanitz.
- ⁸ The booklet gathered four (geographical) points of view: Henri Focillon on the Mediterranean culture, Strzygowski on the North, Rabindranath Tagore on the East, Gilbert Murray on the West.
- ⁹ Ricoeur quotes the French historian Fernand Braudel, one of the major representatives of the *Ecole des Annales*.
- ¹⁰ Translatable as 'folklore', '*art populaire*' is a larger term, addressing the culture of both peasantry and the working class.
- ¹¹ Speaking of archived memory, Ricoeur questions its connection to history, exploring how 'declarative memory' exteriorizes itself as evidence.
- ¹² The French translation uses the word '*dangers*', which increases the anxious dimension (Giedion 2000: 13).

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