
EDITORIAL

Mere Style?

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Introduction

In a recent conference session, a young scholar declared that she was looking at her subject matter – the architecture of the New York Five, if I remember correctly – not merely as style, but rather as a complex nexus of cultural and material conditions. The audience nodded knowingly. To 21st century architects and architectural historians, style, it seems, stands for superficiality, formalism, and obsolete periodization; a grand narrative past its sell-by date.

Wittingly or unwittingly, the conference speaker placed herself in a long tradition. To reject style(s) was a favourite pastime for 20th century architects and architectural historians alike. From Hermann Muthesius to Rem Koolhaas, style has been associated with lies, deceit, and masquerade. According to Muthesius, modern architecture had to break free from the chains of style, replacing a stifled *Stilarchitektur* with a 'living building art' (1902: 67). 'The "styles" are a lie,' proclaimed Le Corbusier in 1923 (2007: 147), a verdict repeated ad verbatim some seventy years later by Koolhaas in his *S,M,L,XL* glossary, in an entry squeezed in between 'stupid' and 'suicide' (1995: 1188). Ludwig Mies van der Rohe warned not only against recycling old styles but also against seeking new ones, since 'even the will to Style is formalism' (1923: 1). Enjoying a brief recovery during 1970s and '80s postmodernism, style was soon rejected with renewed vigour – just look at Mark Wigley's vehement defence of deconstructivist architecture against accusations of being a style (1988).

If modernist architects drove style out of architectural practice, historians followed suit, chasing it out of the history books. Few self-respecting architectural historians use style as their ordering principle any more. Instead, we write histories of types, materials, mediations, constructions, uses – anything to avoid the s-word. In a recent debate on how a new general history of Norwegian architecture might be structured, the organizers stated that their foremost ambition was to get away from the art historians' 'style-histories' in order to give a truer account of architectural structures and processes. The ambition is in no way unique. Even though the matrix of epochs and styles survives in some architectural history survey courses, students are soon taught to distrust it. If style plays any role at all in contemporary education, it is as a kind of scaffold: an unsightly structure to be dismantled as soon as possible. Style, as Georg Kubler forcefully stated, is 'a word to avoid' (1979: 163).

A student of architectural history in the early 21st century, then, has every reason to treat style with suspicion. To deal with architectural style appears to be the exact opposite of a cultural, contextual, or theoretically informed approach to architecture. From a historical perspective, however, the seeming opposition between culture and style is puzzling. When the term – borrowed from classical rhetoric – entered architectural parlance in the mid- to late 18th century, it had all to do with culture. For Weimar Classicists such as Goethe and Schiller, style signified the ideal essence of culture, purged of individual mannerisms and raised to something universal (Goethe 1789; Schiller 1793). This was the way August Wilhelm Schlegel used the term when he defined style in his 1802 Berlin lectures as 'the voluntary submission to an artistic principle' (2007: 266) – a sense still echoing a century later in Georg Simmel's thought-provoking definition of style as 'the unburdening and concealment of the personal' (1998: 216). And while the 18th century's absolute idea of style soon gave way to the 19th century's radically historicised and relativised concept, it was still deeply culturally embedded. For Gottfried Semper for instance – perhaps the most energetic theoriser of style in the 19th century – style was the 'Übereinstimmung einer Kunsterscheinung mit ihrer Entstehungsgeschichte, mit allen Vorbedingungen und Umständen ihres Werdens' ('the correspondence of an art-object with its genesis, with all the pre-conditions and circumstances of its becoming'; 1884: 402). Style, for Semper and his contemporaries, was the fingerprint of the zeitgeist, pinpointing the correlation between cultural conditions and artistic expression (Hvattum 2013). No wonder late 19th-century thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche used 'culture' and 'style' more or less synonymously, defining the former as the 'unity of style in all the expressions of the life of a people' (1983: 5). In its 19th-century sense, style was an attempt to grasp the relationship between life and form, or, to put it slightly differently, between cultural conditions and formal, spatial, and material practices. As Alina Payne reminds us, 'culture was the other side of the style coin' (2012: 157).

The tension between an absolute and a relative notion of style lived on throughout the 19th century. Its perhaps most precise articulation is found, as Martin Bressani explores further below, in Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc's famous entry on style in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture*, where he proclaimed that 'there is *style*; then there are the *styles*'. The 'styles' are epochal characteristics that 'enable us to distinguish different schools and epochs from one another'; 'style', on the other hand,

is ‘the manifestation of an ideal based on a principle’ (1990: 231–232). Le Corbusier upheld a similar duality, for while denouncing ‘the styles’ as a lie, he celebrated Style – in singular and with a capital S – as ‘a unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch’ (2007: 147). The dichotomy still lingers. In an *El Croquis* interview a few years back, Jacques Herzog dismissed any mention of style with respect to Herzog & de Meuron’s work, but insisted nevertheless on describing their architecture as an embodiment of the *zeitgeist*, i.e., as Style: ‘All of the desires and tastes of a moment taken together create the spirit of the time, the very notion of *our time*. ... Architects must be able to speak the language of their time’ (Kipnis 1997: 8). Style lives on, it seems, if sometimes under different names.

This special issue of *Architectural Histories* started as a Society of Architectural Historians conference session in Glasgow in 2017. I proposed the session out of an equal sense of curiosity and frustration. Curiosity about how the concept of style has functioned in architectural discourse since its introduction in the 18th century, and how it came to take on so many near contradictory meanings along the way. Frustration with the reluctance to discuss style in contemporary architectural history – as if the fact that we no longer necessarily share the historicist notion of epochal style should prevent us from examining its function in periods that did.¹

The essays in this issue do not shy away from such examination. Caroline van Eck – a pioneer of style studies with books such as *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts* (1995) – studies the dynamics of stylistic transformation in Napoleonic France in the essay ‘The *Style Empire* and its Pedigree: Piranesi, Pompeii, and Alexandria’. She locates in the *Style Empire* a poetics of appropriation and transformation in which past styles are fused and transformed in an almost ‘Alexandrian’ manner. ‘Alexandrianist art’, van Eck tells us, ‘is an art determined by a poetics of appropriating, recreating and transforming the past, preferably by showing how layers of the past can be imposed on each other.’ Demonstrating how this poetics manifested itself in Piranesi’s hybrid designs and in Percier and Fontaine’s *Maison Beauharnais* in Paris, van Eck presents a compelling alternative to the standard history of historicism.

Sigrid de Jong’s forthcoming essay presents another thought-provoking reading of enlightenment historicism, namely the reappraisal of gothic architecture in 18th-century France. Looking particularly at Jacques-Germain Soufflot’s 1741 lecture, ‘Mémoire sur l’architecture gothique’, in which he analyses Notre Dame de Paris by means of an imaginary walk, de Jong uncovers an as it were ‘a-historical’ tradition for understanding and appropriating historical style. In contrast to Goethe’s historicising eulogy to Strasbourg Cathedral, Soufflot and his French contemporaries developed something like an anti-historicist historicism in which the gothic was inscribed into a universalising aesthetics.

In his entry on style in the *International Encyclopaedia of Social Science* from 1968, Ernst Gombrich warned against the ‘physiognomic fallacy’ – that is, the assumption that one can judge the cultural level of a period or a people by

looking at the style of their art and architecture. Instead, he recommended students of style ‘return to the lessons of ancient rhetoric’ (Gombrich 2009: 160). That is indeed what Martin Bressani has done in his essay ‘The Performative Character of Style’. Focusing on the theoretical work of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and some of his lesser-known contemporaries, Bressani explores how 19th-century style theory attempted to come to terms with the creative act itself; ‘to grapple’, as he puts it, ‘with humanity’s very “shaping power.”’ He uncovers a concept of style that is closer to performance than physiognomy, echoing the original meaning of the term in classical rhetoric. In my own forthcoming essay I take a similar point of departure, but instead of looking particularly at the performative aspect of style, I look at the concept’s complex transformation in German 19th-century thought, from Goethe and Schlegel to Semper. The architect Friedrich Eisenlohr plays an important role in this story, encapsulating the shift from an idealist to a historicist concept of style.

Epochal style may today seem like an outmoded model for thinking about architectural development, but it was once a radical conceptual innovation. In her forthcoming essay, Petra Brouwer investigates style as an ordering tool for an entirely new genre of architectural history writing: the handbook. Emerging in the 1830s and reaching its popular peak with works such as James Fergusson’s *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* (1855), the handbook’s style matrix would shape the conception both of architectural history and contemporary architecture for generations to come.

As the essays in this collection make clear, style is a controversial and ambiguous concept, signifying different things to different people, in different places, and at different times. Never was it more controversial than in early 20th-century Germany, where the fervent search for a new style paralleled an equally vehement rejection of style altogether. Deborah Asher Barnstone examines some of the German style debates in the 1920s and ‘30s, looking at, for example, the first issue of the Werkbund journal *Die Form: Monatsschrift für gestaltende Arbeit* (1922), which was dedicated in its entirety to the question of ‘der Zeitstil’. With contributions from seminal figures such as Peter Behrens and Hans Poelzig, the issue gives a condensed glimpse into the modernist ambivalence towards style.

Whether looking at style in the form of Alexandrian metamorphosis, perceptual theory, performance, or taxonomy, the essays in this collection show the centrality of style to modern architectural discourse and practice. For centuries, style was a sophisticated way of dealing with meaning in architecture and a subtle vehicle for thinking about architecture’s referentiality, historicity, and mimetic capacity. And while it may have lost its credibility as a historiographic tool in contemporary architectural history writing, style remains a profoundly important historical concept. Far more than a scaffold, style penetrates the very core of modern architecture.

Of all the good reasons why we should continue to think and talk about style in architectural history, perhaps the most powerful was put forward by James

Ackerman half a century ago, in an otherwise fiercely critical essay on style. The concept of style certainly has all kinds of problems, Ackerman admitted, but that should not make us avoid it. In fact, *not* investigating style might make us fall prey to style history's most reductive assumptions:

Although we cannot work without a theory of style, and although we continue to speak of classical, baroque, or painterly forms, we have allowed the systems that give meaning to these terms to slip into the unconscious, where they operate without the benefit of our control, as the barrier against new perceptions. (1962: 230)

Failing to problematise style – letting it 'slip into the unconscious', as Ackerman puts it – might paradoxically contribute to cement outdated notions of style, allowing them to lurk as unquestioned prejudice in our teaching and research. I would even go a step further: Without understanding style – the way it has been used and the way it has been thought about – we cannot understand modern architecture. Instead of nodding indulgently at the young historian's reluctance to speak of the work of the New York Five as style, then, perhaps we should encourage her to do just that.

Note

¹ If style has suffered from bad press in recent years, it has never been entirely abandoned. In aesthetics and art theory, style has been the subject of renewed interest lately; see, for instance, Ina Blom, *On the Style Site* (2007). The edited collection of Caroline van Eck, James McAllistar, and Renée van de Vall, *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts* from 1995, was vital in bringing style back into focus, building on previous efforts such as Berel Lang's *The Concept of Style* (1979) and seminal essays by, for example, Meyer Schapiro (1953); James Ackerman (1962); Friedrich Piel (1963); Ernst Gombrich (1968); and Nelson Goodman (1975). More recently, style has become a point of overlap between architectural history, anthropology, and archaeology, see for instance Caroline van Eck, Miguel John Versluys, and Pieter ter Keurs' essay 'The Biography of Cultures: Style, Objects and Agency' (2015). Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood's *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010) offers, among many other things, fine insights into the workings of style. In architectural history of the 19th century much has also happened since Wolfgang Herrmann published the collection *In What Style Should We Build? The German Debate on Architectural Style* in 1992. Martin Bressani, in his recent monograph on Viollet-le-Duc (2014), tackles the issue of style with renewed vigour, as does Alina Payne in *From Ornament to Object* (2012). See also Germann (1973); Hager and Knapp (1977); Bergdoll (1983); and Hvattum (2013, 2017).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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