

Basson, Dr Steve (2003) The angel of death: the non-progressive subject of architectural history, in *Progress: The 20th annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, pp. 17-21, Sydney, NSW, 2-5th October, 2003. Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, Sydney.

The Angel of Death: The Non-Progressive Subject of Architectural History

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Abstract

For architectural history, progress represents the conceptual authority that ties the past to the present; that allows each age to act as the natural outcome of what preceded it and in anticipation of what would follow; and that secures a logical, continuous and trans-historical vision of architecture's historical being. But what can be said to lie in the wake of these progressive drives across the landscapes of architecture's past is a trail of destruction, realized through a linear sequencing of periods subsumed to a predetermined order of existence denying any autonomy of voice or conditions of architectural identity, purpose and rationality. It is in the terms of what Benjamin referred to as the storm and violence of progress, Bergson of the absurdity of teleology and Nietzsche of the congenital defects of the *aeterna veritas*, that to speak of progress is to embrace a history of pure ends, an architectural past that always presupposes our present and a future conceived through the blind lens of infinite perfection. It is by drawing from a diverse range of theoretical sources and perspectives that the following paper seeks to critically explore and reframe the idea of architectural history and progress. In particular, this comprises an introductory outline study that begins to question the traditional space of architectures historical subject through a range of theoretical works that inform an alternate historical dynamic of fragmentary, random and terminal moments of past architectural possibility.

Prologue

Built upon a smooth levelled plain surrounded by a ragged and brooding wall of mountains, a vast architectural metropolis emerged from the dark shroud of night. Rigidly ordered, the city that came into view with the light of dawn spread out from a centre of modernist forms moving chronologically towards those of the ancient world on its outer edges. At the heart of this urban mass was a square

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around which the creators of this realm returned with the break of day to tasks that had ever been focused on maintaining a rational sense and experience of this architectural landscape that spanned from the temporally near to far. Here, through the time honoured practices of observation, interpretation, writing and drawing, they upheld the lucid, familiar and tangible qualities of their architectural terrain born out of time and mind as a spatial reality open and accessible to all.

Later in the day, a man came running into the square crying out “History is dead! And we have killed it!” Whilst pausing for breath all went silent around him. Looking up he called out “Why labour as you do, have you not heard? History is dead! And we have killed it! The historical realm of architecture that we have for so long constructed and refined from unique insular origins, aesthetic forces of production, high points of heroic perfection and lows of tragic decline, and from a continuous line of various and successive periodized stages of development is no more than a parody. Our efforts have all been in vain, for this historical space that pronounces on the legacies and heritage of architecture is not the past, but a pale imitation of it. The past, however, is not so easily fooled or tamed by such reflections. Like the fabled realm of the Minotaur, it is filled with false, haphazard and misleading passageways, dead ends and traps that lie ever in wait to seduce, confuse and overthrow the unwary viewer of time. Against this, the thread of historical reason that has guided us through the dark labyrinths of time lies cut and in ribbons as the outcomes of our historical dreams recompose into a nightmare of historicized distortions and obscurations born from a sense of transhistorical norms, reductive modes of inclusion and exclusion, and a perceptual regime that denies, effaces and in the end, terminates the very things we thought ourselves dedicated to giving voice, exemplifying and preserving. History is dead! And we have killed it!”

Having finished, the man stared about him seeing faces of bewilderment and shock turn to anger and hate. Surprised and then saddened by this reception, and amidst a now rising tide of hostility and denial, he spoke out once more “No! You have not heard! It is still too early! You are not yet ready!” With that he departed as he had come. As twilight fell across the purity of the city, the work of the day gradually wound down in preparation for the next. In the distance a runner could be seen heading back up into the mountains and the shadows of night and chaos.

Introduction

Pevsner once wrote an 'age without architecture is impossible whilst human beings inhabit the world'.¹ What was meant by this pronouncement upon the ageless properties of architecture was not so much what was impossible as rather unthinkable, given an historical reality that portrayed the unique conditions of its subject as a continuous idea permeating the minds, practices and spatial forms of every era; as an unbroken language of thoughts, actions and material signs wholly recognizable and recoverable to the gaze of later historical observers; and as a linear course of events that marked out a progressive journey through time.

But what is it that is so unimaginable? Is it to conceive an age possessed of buildings but not architecture whose absence, once observed, would upset the grand sweep of architectural history? Might it be to renounce the trans-historical phenomenon of architecture that still clouds the way we view and employ its historical subject, identity, surfaces of emergence and temporal relations? Then again, is it to discharge our allegiances to a history infused with its own self-sufficient and privileged order of ideas, outcomes and instincts that flow paradoxically along a continual and unitary course of time, divided into autonomous and static segments of architectural expression? Or, is it perhaps to embrace the chimeras of what Tafuri referred to as the non-historical or anti-historical by denouncing the architectural traditions of the historically regular, recurrent and certain for an unnerving, threatening or nihilistic sense of the fragmentary, ruptured and terminal?²

Such questions touch upon the traditional sanctity of architecture's historical subject, scope and organization. As alternate possibilities, they counter the legacy of a logical and deterministic sense of a past that is neither neutral nor innocent. What resides within the traditional historical space of the architecturally known and familiar is imbued with deception, rupture and death. Then there is the past, ever in view but never present. To speak of such possibilities is also to recognize that what is important for any understanding of architecture's past conditions of being is to focus not so much upon what we see as rather with how we see. At the same time, such questions are not new as demonstrated through

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the figure of Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history'.³ In this vision, the past is revealed as a wasteland destroyed in the cause of progress by harnessing history into an expression of teleological forces, determining the course of human events and driving it blindly into a future of illusory promise and mythical perfection. Here, set against a distorted past, the angel of history transforms into the angel of death, presiding over the carnage of a past denied its own voice or contextualized conditions of possibility. Against this 'storm' of progress, Benjamin notes further that any critique of progress must be founded on a criticism of progression itself, on the very conceptions of a linear, continuous and unified order of periodizations and ideas upon which the conventional landscape of history still rests.⁴

The following paper is directed in response to Benjamin's question of progression. This is not, however, aimed at strategies for resolving or restoring the historical space of architecture to any realm free of doubt or anomaly. Nor does it seek to chart out an entirely new vision for the architectural space and subject of history. What is of concern here is what is represented by the progressive idea of history for the architectural subject, what problems are inherent to this model and what possibilities this suggests for a history of architecture released from the chronological treadmill of progress. In these terms, this paper comprises not so much a finished product as rather an introduction to further work and a discussion that starts to address the complexities and uncertainties of an architectural history no longer bounded by any rational and deterministic horizon of progressive time. What also informs the thrust of this discussion are a series of critical perspectives that stem from architectural, historical and philosophical disciplines of theoretical enquiry that in combination begin to open the insular space of architectural history to the possibilities of other established readings and critical modes of historical engagement and reframing.

The Self-referential Gaze of History

The Age of Reason gave birth to a history of reason. But more than this, Enlightenment ethos defined the parameters for another way of conceptualizing and engaging with the past: an emergent perspective whose reality for the historical subject of architecture was promoted through ideas expressive of Winckelmann's periodized continuum of art and architecture,⁵ Condorcet's evolutionary road to

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perfection,⁶ and Hegel's developmental sequence of forms and articulations of human self-realization.⁷ From the many surfaces such as these, architecture established the perceptual authority to speak of its historical being as the property of a logical and continuous order of ideas, actions and purposes. More especially, history could be conceived of as endlessly flowing along a single course of time and as an evolutionary journey, combining chronological progression with the rational progress of events. This same historical reality continues to animate our sense of the architectural past and vision of a sequentially periodized, trans-historical and progressive order of forms. The sweeping chronological vistas of Fletcher,⁸ Pevsner⁹ and Jordan¹⁰ exemplify this inculcated historical horizon of architectural continuity and linear development. When Conway and Roenish spoke more recently of architectural history as an instrument to build a better future,¹¹ they betrayed a continuing fascination with the promise of progress and a vision of history that, drawing from Teyssot, describes a smooth evolutionary path conforming to a progressive linear development.¹² For architecture, the historical possibilities of the modern age and its *grand recit* of time remain an ingrained reality of the present.

But can we still believe in such a reality? We may of course choose not to question the historical veracity of progression, the architectural limits of continuity or reliance upon a successive order of periods whose individuated moments of being exist as both a direct outcome of those ages that preceded them and an anticipation of those eras that would follow beyond the ontological and epistemological boundaries of their own timeframe. Likewise, we can refuse to expose history as a terrain of guiding principles and essences retrospectively attributed to the purposes of architecture, or enter into any critique of a realm governed by the doctrine of teleologies and a present conceived of as a direct and determined product of the past. To leave unquestioned the presumptions of the linear, continuous and progressive, however, means preserving the products of an illusion and the dreams of an historicist vista speaking of the immediacy of seeing and knowing, the lure of direct experience, and the retention of an idealized historical domain in which the viewer and subject of view can meet within a mutually inclusive space of correspondences and affiliations. Only through the laws and dynamics of the historically orthodox can the uncritical observer be certain always to discover the chronological depth and unity of their architectural heritage; their reality; themselves.

On the other hand, if we were to begin to doubt what has to date comprised an object of faith, we would learn to recognize that history in its conventional form is a construct that can never be the past itself, only ever a representation manufactured from the perspective of the present. Nietzsche once described those who employed a model of themselves, their own contemporary ideas, beliefs and value systems as the standard by which to read and measure the past as congenitally defective.¹³ Benjamin saw all historical spaces as consumed by presences of the now.¹⁴ Next to these, Foucault declared history devoid of any meaning or, at least possessed of no meanings other than those imposed by ourselves.¹⁵ By accepting these constraints and their implications, we must start to re-think our perceptual engagement with the traditional conditions of historical possibility and the deployment and interpretation of the architectural subject within it. Merleau-Ponty noted that the world is not what we think, but what we live through.¹⁶ But we cannot in any sense live out the past. Each age, like the contained and insulated realm of Plato's cave, defines the reality of a particular and internalized order of knowledge, perception and experience.¹⁷ Against this, as observed by Derrida, we have no language or form of logic other than our own to construct the meanings and values of earlier ages.¹⁸ By extension, the architectural forms of the past lie outside of what spatial experience is for us, or that inform the rationalized conditions of our architectural knowledge and purposes of production and meaning. To ask of the past to speak to us in its own terms, as through the roar of Wittgenstein's lion, is thus to invite incomprehension via the distance that separates us from the world of experience that underpinned their language and circumstances of spatial possibility. To conceive earlier ages as both totally accessible and explicable to the gaze of history is to ignore, again borrowing from Wittgenstein, that the past and present constitute two incompatible spaces in time, devoid of any shared sense of experience, definition or judgement.¹⁹

What such considerations disclose is a ruptured sense of time and thought. To overcome this, however, and maintain the fantasy of history as a progressive formation, is to excise from view the raw edges of such gaps by rendering insignificant or unseen anything that would destabilize the purity of an evolutionary and ahistorical vision of architectural time. Thus, as touched on by Benjamin: "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably".²⁰ From belief, perception surrenders to both an instilled order of distinctions and guidance of the historical eye towards signatures of the architecturally acceptable and unacceptable,

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rational and irrational. Here, in respect to what Nietzsche saw as the ideological play of predominances and withdrawals, the idea of progress transforms into an ideology of deficiency, as would any history claiming a totality of definition, meaning and continuity abstracted from a selective range of possibilities.²¹

It is through the drives and colonizing influences of the progressive will that architecture has inherited a deceptive space of history. Out of this, we can lay claim to the possession of a predictable and logical structure of periods and movements spanning from the ancient to the modern and the essence of a universal or timeless idea, found to unify and direct each individuated mode of architectural production as an expression of architecture's transhistorical presence. What we can also take with us from this model is a sequentially periodized and categorized history of false totalities and unities, whose progressive imperatives solidify a vision of past forms isolated from their actual, wider and more dispersed array of socio-cultural relations investing the architectural outcomes of each age. The reward of such loss and conformity to the temporal omnipotence of an historicist gaze is a condensed organization of architectural thought, forms and practices that respond not to the past, but to a perspective conditioned to react to the rational and epistemological expectations of the present. The historical realm of inclusions and exclusions suggested here exposes the partisan features of surrendered objectivity and what Bergson referred to as an idea of history that represents nothing more than an arbitrary and self-fulfilling dream of hindsight.²² We confront an historical vista awash with intrusive presences of the now and meanings born of contemporary invention and congenitally defective horizons of description and interpretation. Here we also encounter an historical gaze that polices and regulates the primacy and coherency of its progressive vision through a perceptual regime denying visibility and life from any non-conforming moment of architectural being. Here too, we meet the figure of history's angel of death.

The Will to Another Historical Truth

There is, however, nothing inevitable about the progressive perspective of time: there is merely habit. And habits can be broken. But in order to break and overturn our traditional obsessions with history

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will require a radical, if not to say heretical re-conceptualization of architecture's past. Such a possibility would not entail a unitary or continuous sense of architectural being, but an horizon of multiple realities and terminations that promise no haven of return or certitudes of origin, truth and progress, those old staples of historicist and heritage doctrine. What is also asked of this other, is not the destruction of history and time but, as suggested by Foucault, their transformation into a totally different form of time repudiating any realm of metahistorical deployments, ideal significations and indefinite teleologies.²³ To enter into another engagement with the architectural subject of history thus calls for re-thinking our association with its traditional conditions of legibility, periodization and continuity.

To remove ourselves from the treadmill of progress, is to leave behind the ideal of history as the horizon of a single story, of a narrative that charts out the heroic march of architecture across time. It would also distance us from a discourse that has for too long taken upon itself the authority to speak on behalf of the past, to determine meanings and to judge by heaping praise or condemnation upon the architectural works and movements of prior ages. Such a move would recognize the problem of imposing values, motives and meanings in order to generate some artificial order of legibility. The historical condition of the Renaissance will not be served by consigning all architectural and cultural relations to the sweeping generalization of 'rebirth' as though, as a scurrilous expression of *zeitgeist*, this absolutely describes the intentions and purposes of everything produced over the period. Equally, to raise one age or style of architecture above another, to engage in aesthetic or moral verdicts is to leave unquestioned the authority upon which such judgements rest, unless one subscribes to the Olympian vantage and progressive superiority of the present. Outside of such prescriptions there can be no rulings of value, singular meanings or hierarchy of forms and eras, only an historical field of architecture that stands beyond the reaches of good and evil. In this space, by contrast, architecture's past conditions of being would have to embrace what Vattimo called a realm of multiple stories, histories and truths.²⁴ Here the task of history would also entail, as suggested by Kipnis, avoiding the temptation to introduce or propose any order of meaning that was new, true, conserved, reversed or even meaningless, but to do battle with the very 'meaning' of architecture.²⁵ To speak of the historical other is to refer to a space of suspended judgements where architecture can be restored to those frames of reality informing its own individual moments and discursive conditions of legitimacy and meaning.

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In this same historical domain of the other, architecture's past would become a subject of fractured epistemologies. As Teyssot reminded us, in respect to Foucault's *The Order of Things*, cognitive transmission must be counted a problematic condition of historical relationships.²⁶ Instead, knowledge retreats from any platform of the eternal to reappear as a product grounded within a particular and contextually specific field of discourse, of those orders of practices, beliefs and institutional organizations that legitimate what can be seen, said or known. In this historical terrain, the transhistorical subject splinters into a multiple array of differentiated and individuated epistemological regimes and orders of architectural rationality. Of concern for this focus is not what links one age to another or how we can all think the same things, but what empowered and made it possible to think in a particular way about architecture within the discursive bounds of a given time. As a result of this, not only would any linear picture of time dissolve, but so would the tyranny of architectural typologies, that eighteenth-century invention of classificatory and regulating regimes. To re-engage historically with architecture's past, is to acknowledge that, as demonstrated by Foucault on the subject of prison design in *Discipline and Punish*, built forms do not respond over time to any evolutionary schemata.²⁷ Instead they represent divorced identities that express differing needs and conceptions of spatial organization and function. The dark dungeons of the *ancien regime* did not lead to the exposed cells of inspection and behavioural control that would follow. Likewise, to speak of the Medieval and Baroque church form is not to encounter any commonality of religious or cultural expression made manifest through different stylistic programmes. They represent two separate constellations of religious authority and theological, cosmological and human reality. The former comprised a literal vision of heaven on earth. The latter constituted a theatrical melange of mediums designed as a mechanism to reinforce faith over the logic of reason and doubt.

What is then implied, if briefly, out of this underlying field of discursive terrains is a transitory and contextually non-transferable sense of architectural knowledge and rationality. Here, moreover, the old automatic assumptions of historical legibility, periodized succession and progress still haunt architecture's historical gaze across the landscapes of its past founder. What this promotes is an engagement with time as has always been; not a space manipulated to read as a logical construction of

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laws and forces as dreamed up through the excesses of historicist self-seduction, perceptual denial and narcissism, but an unfettered domain promising nothing but possibilities, multiple realities and a random array of emergences and terminations that define a fragmented architectural subject of history.

Conclusion

The focus of this discussion concerned the idea of architectural history in relation to the progressive realities that continue to impact upon the way we perceive and engage with architecture's past. This also began to consider the implications of re-thinking an architectural past released from an historical legacy promising certitude and reassurance through an essentialist play of universal, teleological and absolute truths, by calling upon a more dispersed vision of indeterminate, discontinuous and extinct moments of architectural being. This question of reorientation and break away from a tradition that adheres blindly to a periodized, successive and continuous calendar of events and styles is crucial for our current understanding of architectural history. But such breaks or revolutions in thought and perception, as noted by Bourdieu, represent something more than a simplistic methodological reversal.²⁸ They require a profound and deep-felt conversion that shatters the structures and illusions of normalized thinking and action. To cross the perceptual Rubicon of architectural history means, therefore, being prepared to jettison any taste for the historically conventional by opening up to another and wider space of history that draws on differing orders of reality, division and transmission of ideas. It is towards the goal of a shift allowing a fundamental reorganization and redefinition of the architectural subject's conditions of historical possibility that this discussion was focused and with informing the task of future work.

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Notes

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- ¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976, p. 16.
 - ² Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and Histories of Architecture*, St Albans: Granada, 1980, p. 6.
 - ³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1973, Harry Zohn (trans), New York: Schocken Books, pp. 257-258.
 - ⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 261.
 - ⁵ J. J. Winckelmann, 'The History of Ancient Art, 1764,' in Eric Fernie, (ed), *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, Phaidon Press, London, 1995, pp. 70-76.
 - ⁶ Michael Baker, *Condercet: Selected Writings*, Michael Baker (ed), Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976.
 - ⁷ G W F Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, T M Knox (trans), Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967.
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 - ¹¹ H Conway & R Roenisch, *Understanding Architecture: An Introduction to Architecture and Architectural History*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 30.
 - ¹² Georges Teyssot, 'Heterotopias and the History of Spaces,' *Architecture and Urbanism*, David Stewart (trans), 121(October 1980): 79-100. p. 80.
 - ¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, Marian Faber & Stephen Lehmann (trans), London: Penguin Books, 1994, p. 14.
 - ¹⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 259.
 - ¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*, C. Gordon (ed), London: Harvester, 1980, p. 114.
 - ¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge & K Paul, 1962, p. xvi
 - ¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, Desmond Lee (trans), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987.
 - ¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass (trans), 1978, p.280
 - ¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G Anscombe (trans), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968, p. 88e.
 - ²⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 255.
 - ²¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 166-167.
 - ²² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, New York: H Holt & Co, 1911, p. 39.
 - ²³ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in Paul Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader: An introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, p. 77.
 - ²⁴ G Vattimo, 'The End of Modernity, The End of the project?,' in Neil Leach (ed), *Rethinking Architecture*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 149.
 - ²⁵ J Kipnis, 'Twisting the Separatrix,' in K M Hays (ed), *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000, p. 710.
 - ²⁶ Teyssot, 'Heterotopias and the History of Spaces,' p. 80.
 - ²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.
 - ²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, p. 192.