

Perchance to Dream: Architecture and the Conflict of Historical Perception.

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ABSTRACT

For history, architecture remains both a property of the universal and trans-historical and subject of a unified and coherent structure of chronological progression. As part of this traditional and privileged framework of periodized and continuous succession, architecture has retained for itself an historical identity expressive of the eternal, romantic and heroic. But time has itself moved on, leaving behind what once constituted the certitudes of historical perception and analysis. The old objects of exemplification and origin have evaporated, the heroes have become mortal, continuity has surrendered to rupture, and the singular ideals of truth and reality fragmented. And yet, seemingly indifferent to the problems of the meta-historical and metaphysical, architecture persists along its own path of historicist discourse and through this, subsumes all acts and ends of built form to an order of undifferentiated motives and needs that transpose the events of the past into an illusory history of the same. Here, history becomes expressive of a dreamed reality and as a result, a terrain of critical contestation. The following discussion will consider this conflict in relation to the conventional perception and use of architecture's historical subject.

Introduction

Plato once asked, 'isn't dreaming simply the confusion between a resemblance and the reality which it resembles, whether the dreamer be asleep or awake?'¹ If so, cannot the same be said of architecture's traditional view onto the past and a terrain of subjects that are seen to belong to a continuous and deterministic course of time; to periodized and immutable categories of iconic and exemplary form; and to an horizon of universal and trans-historical qualities of being. For what such a perspective invokes is a vision that, whilst rendering to the gaze of the present an architectural past that is legible, familiar and participatory, offers a mode of historical engagement that will remain incapable of ever fully discerning the actual depths and diversity of architecture's prior conditions of possibility. From this position one can begin to speak of an historical legacy that derives from mistaking a limited reflection of architecture's past for the past itself and as a result, the product of a meta-narrational dream that, once recognized for what it is, contests the authority of those conventions of historicist sensibility that have for too long permeated the critical rigour of architectural history and heritage.

Such questions of how we perceive history in its general and traditional form are, of course, not new as demonstrated just over a century ago by Nietzsche who, in particular, through his *Use and Abuse of History*, addressed the contradictions of logic and displacements of reason that underpinned historicist conceptions of historical reality especially in relation to what he referred to as 'monumental' and 'antiquarian' modes of histori-

cal thought.² Of crucial concern for Nietzsche were those views of history that were dedicated to neglecting what for the past and present was contextually dissimilar; of treating time as a singular whole expressive of the same imperatives and needs; and of history as a domain infused with a metaphysics of the progressive, universal and eternal. According to Nietzsche, such patterns of historical thinking and inclusion of such relationships represented the product of a malignant fever.³ Indeed, for Nietzsche, such delirium-based hallucinations are the foundation of any history that 'veils and subdues' the past by smoothing over the 'sharp angles' of time for a uniform and stable vision of chronological perfection that binds the past and present into a shared and undifferentiated space of reality.⁴ Given the persistence of such traditional historical perspectives, there is still much to learn from Nietzsche as also from Benjamin, in respect to the exposure of historicist conventions that brush against the grain of history, and Foucault who cautions us against the 'metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies'.⁵

Such lessons that span the last hundred years are also essential for challenging the predominance of those contemporary perceptions of architectural history and heritage that still uphold the implausible for a chronological impression of the homogenous and continuous; that spurns the incongruous for a fantasy of shared experiences and beliefs; and that derides the disturbing and unfamiliar for an accessible and comprehensible vision of prior architectural forms. Any deep understanding of the contextual diversity and perceptions of prior architectural identity and purpose will not,

however, be advanced through an artificial synthesis and narrowing of architecture's historical subject towards any trite state of the same that eerily echoes our voices, lives and sensibilities. Nor will this be achieved by empowering the products of malignant fevers to act as temporal barometers of truth from which to measure and condemn the architectural and urban possibilities of the present. The past represents no site of eternal return or mechanism of timeless truth to decide the contemporary fate of the built environment. Rather, what is required for any meaningful and critical will to historical knowledge is to awaken from the logic of historicist dreams and their confusion for the architectural actualities of the past itself: that vast horizon of prior being that so excites the endless possibilities of imagination, but which of itself in any absolute sense, is never present.

What arises here is of concern to a traditional way of viewing the past and what this implies for our historical understanding of architecture. What this also touches on is not opposed to history, but a question of countering the shortcomings of such conventional views and their roots in the nineteenth century. Through such questions, therefore, the space of architectural history as it is still largely perceived transforms into a contested terrain. The nature of this conflict, as informed in particular by Nietzsche, but also Benjamin and Foucault, will be explored as a work in progress through a critical interrogation of how we interpret and utilize the architectural subject of history in relation to a particular perspective that has surrendered to an historicist reality or dream vista of the past.

I

The nature of architectural history as it is still recognized today was forged out of the complexities of a nineteenth century steeped in both the objective promise and mystery that history appeared to offer the contemporary identity and values of the era. Kant gave expression to this particular space of historical possibility through ideas that spoke of humanity's progression across time as part of a natural order of imperatives towards the perfections of reason and civilization.⁶ This same question of history as a terrain of universal reason and deterministic purpose was followed later by Hegel who gave articulation to a temporal metaphysics of time through which each era, as part of a linear and teleological structure of development, could be shown to reflect the degree to which it had realized its own essential conditions of self-conscious identity or objectified spirit (*zeitgeist*).⁷ Here, history could be read as a realm of deterministic agency against which the ideas, actions and products of humanity could be gauged in terms of ends that represented progression towards a current or future point of perfection. As an outcome of these same conditions of historical idealism, the past could also be seen as possessed of privileged sites of origin, of a range of ideas and artefacts whose emergence represented their greatest

moment of truth and purity. From this perspective, Winckelmann could conceive of a past filled with exemplary forms of art and architecture, of monuments, drawn in particular from the ancient world of Greece and Rome, that constituted legitimate models of historical adoration and emulation based on their qualities of timeless perfection.⁸

Born from the contradictory polarities of past and future ideas of perfection was a concept of architecture that founded its contemporary reality and particular progressive stage of development upon the recovery of prior exemplars of architectural form. Thus the various strands of nineteenth-century historical idealism appeared through architectural discourse in the guise of revivalism and a profound sense that the past, as an indispensable terrain of inspiration and remedy, was inextricably bound to the identity and advancement of the present. From this background, the likes of Goethe, Ware and Elmes could extol the architectural virtues of the classical world.⁹ It was also from a similar position of veneration and perceived dependency upon architecture's past that Camillo Sitte in the latter part of the nineteenth century could speak of the Acropolis as an architectural exemplar impossible for any other age to surpass whilst equally proclaiming that 'we must never relinquish the memory of works of such an elevated character, but should constantly be inspired by them as our ideal in similar undertakings'.¹⁰ The nature of these pronouncements were set in contrast to a contemporary world seen to have deviated away from the 'true' values of ancient architecture.¹¹ It was, however, by following the ruthless logic of privileging the past over the present as an unimpeachable source of perfection that the contemporary era of the nineteenth century could conceive itself in a state of crisis by having failed to preserve the elevated character or values of prior architectural exemplars. From this same stance, architectural revivalism could with authority speak on the interrelated conditions of historical reverence, loss and revitalization. But of course, the idea of revivalism for architecture was not restricted to neo-classical models of Greek or Roman origin alone. The Gothic revivalist movement was equally seen to fill an absence and provide a remedy for a perceived malaise especial to the contemporary landscapes and values of architecture. Set against what might be termed the dark satanic mills of industrialization and indeed neo-classicism itself, Gothic revivalism looked to the recovery of other historical qualities which Ruskin saw as belonging to the higher moral nobility of an architecture that derived from the underlying religious principles of Christianity and an aesthetics reflective of the soul and spirit of human dignity and liberty.¹²

For nineteenth-century architectural history, however, embodiment of the ideal historicist possibilities of progress, continuity and revival came at a cost that touched directly on the way the present relates to the past and the critical use and percep-

tion of historical subjects. Nietzsche saw the question of historical veneration in any obsessive form as leading to the dangers of instilling a belief that 'it is too late to do anything better' and with this, a rationale consigning the present to a permanent state of passivity and retrospection.¹³ From the perspective of Foucault, all that can be expected to derive from any overt adoration for things past is a 'cheap form of archaism' that draws from imaginary forms of past happiness that did not in fact exist.¹⁴ Of far greater concern for the rigour of historical engagement was the capacity of nineteenth-century architectural history to frame and identify what represented the continuous and familiar within any given subject of architectural merit. Nietzsche described this as the ability to overlook the nature of difference.¹⁵ In more specific terms, this refers to a particular mode of perceptual engagement that modifies or removes from sight anything that would otherwise devalue the purity and perfection of an iconic subject of historicist exemplification. As Nietzsche demonstrated, the object of nineteenth-century history was to elevate what was great, moral and eternal from the perspective of the present. The historical perspective of architecture was no different. What can then be said to unfold from any architectural condition of historicist engagement is a discourse that refuses to recognize the contradictions and ruptures that underlay each or any idealized figure of architectural exemplification and as a result, fails to acknowledge what is different and particular to the epistemological and ontological context of prior architectural forms. By way of example, it was by being closed to what was actual to the past identity, purposes and meaning of earlier architectural forms that, in the era of revivalism, Greek architecture could artificially rise as an exemplar of liberty and democracy above other relations that spoke of slavery, sacrifice, infanticide and an elite male electorate. In the same way, Gothic religious models of architectural revival escaped exposure as spaces expressive of social and cultural prejudice, of mass torture and execution of dissenters, and an ideology centred on death and the prescribed rites of cannibalism. The cost of speaking to what is great, moral and eternal in architecture along with what is worthy of restoration is to ignore what was actual to the past, obscure what might appear disturbing to the sensibilities of the present, and encompass what is perceptually retrospective, archaic and illusory.

II

The question of contest that surrounds architecture's historical terrain of history and historicist perceptions onto the past is not concerned with countering the necessity of history itself, but with how we should critically engage and think about the built forms of the past. Thus as Nietzsche noted:

We do need history, but quite differently from the jaded idlers in the garden of knowledge, however grandly

they may look down on our rude and unpicturesque requirements. In other words, we need it for life and action, not as a convenient way to avoid life and action, or to excuse a selfish life and a cowardly or base action¹⁶

For the idlers in the garden of knowledge, Nietzsche identified those super-historical men of the nineteenth century who, steeped in the lore of historicist reality, were unanimous in a belief that the past and present were one and the same and part of an eternally recurrent set of values and ideas that were immutable.¹⁷ But is only by adapting, ignoring and perverting what was especial to the constitution of prior architectural subjects that such claims can ever be made on behalf of a trans-historical picture of architectural history. Here there are also to be found cowardly and base actions that stand behind architecture's historicist dreams of the past: cowardly because of a lack of courage to open the gaze of history to all that informed and gave meaning to the contextual being of prior architectural forms and base, in relation to a perception that centred not so much on an obsessive love for all things past as upon a deeply held hatred of all things present. Nietzsche conceived this as the hidden engine of historicist discourse masquerading as an extreme regard for the past.¹⁸ Foucault observed that 'there is in this hatred of the present or the immediate past a dangerous tendency to evoke a completely mythical past'.¹⁹

A belief in the continuous and trans-historical properties of architecture can be said to have rendered the substance of nineteenth-century architectural history a mythical construct. And it was certainly as an outcome of this that the various architectural products of historicist and revivalist thought brought into being forms, whether neo-classical or neo-gothic, that represented no more than the empty shells of forms bereft of what rendered them contextually possible in their own time and alien to the urban and architectural conditions of the present. What can also be said to emerge out of the demands of such discourse for architecture is the laughter that should come from recognizing what Nietzsche saw as the nonsensical passion for adopting the costumes and foreignness of the past, of the carnival and buffoonery of trying out, trying on, taking off, packing away and most of all, studying costumes.²⁰ It was perhaps this same laughter that Benjamin understood in relation to historicism's flair for costumes and seeing the past as charged with the time of now.²¹ In any case, perhaps we should reserve some laughter for that age and the perceptual content it poured into venerating prior architectural subjects; into the revival of borrowed and abused fashions of architecture's past; and a fetish for the empty clothes and styles of past architectural forms vacant of the bodies and lives that inhabited them? And should not amusement greet any historical desire that satisfies itself by rejecting what com-

prised the lives and actions that gave meaning and purpose to the nature of past architecture or that denies architectural history its own will to life and action by constraining it towards a conception of time that is always deterministic, continuous and the same.

Against this background, when encountering the visual realm of Pugin's *Contrasts*, we see emerge the passion of a profound hatred for a contemporary world of architecture that had failed the tests of continuity and reverence as charted out through a series of oppositional images that on the one side portrayed the industrial and neo-classical blight of the present and on the other, the mythical power of what might be achieved through the maintenance or reintroduction of Gothic architecture.²² It is, however, as a jaded idler within a garden of architectural knowledge that we enter the panoramic vision of *The Architect's Dream* (1840) by Thomas Cole.²³ It is certainly here that we find fulfilment of architecture's historicist dream of a linear and successive course of time that flows from Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Gothic forms to the present. Here, the contemporary face of architecture within this era of revivalist discourse is made manifest through those same prior forms, which by way of exchange, serve as mirrors for the architecture of Cole's own era. But like Pugin's *Contrasts*, a question of critique is played out across this image. This is expressed through the greater intensity of dawn light washing over the façade of each Greek temple and the swarms of individuals who are depicted travelling towards and congregating before each of these larger-than-life structures. By way of distinction, on the left of the picture, stands an isolated and modestly scaled Gothic church, set predominantly in shadow and devoid of inhabitants. The idealized subject of classical perfection is critically contrasted against the darkly shrouded visage of the medieval structure that can be read, from the rising sun behind its spire, as attempting to block from view the 'true' light of Western architectural origin. But such dreams are not the stuff of historical context or contemporary deliverance. Lost through the historicist dreamscapes of nineteenth-century architectural perception, as Nietzsche can still teach us, are merely a series of illusory contortions of time and mind that lead only towards the recovery of a disembodied terrain of second-hand thoughts, learning and action and from this, a plan of action for the present where the dead can only ever end up burying the living.²⁴

III

From the perspective of the present, the shadows and problems of nineteenth-century historicism may seem a long way from the manner by which we critically engage today with the nature and significance of architecture's prior subjects. Then again, how far have we really moved away from such dreams and abuses of architecture's past? Are there not still to be found tendencies that seek

to compare the past with the present as though they belong to a similar space of social and cultural possibility; to assume a trans-historical realm of architectural continuity and progression; or to draw from the past various eternal truths to resolve the perceived problems of a present that has lost touch with timeless traditions and essences of reality? Rather than being released from the shackles of historicist necessity, the twentieth century saw Arendt proclaim the current blurring and demise of public and private space a result of failing to uphold the ancient Greek conception and use of these realms.²⁵ Similarly, Mumford despaired of the vast dystopian hives of the present and loss of those necessities of city life and space that were once met through sites such as Jerusalem, Athens or Florence,²⁶ whilst Rowe and Koetter called upon Imperial or Papal Rome as a model for re-establishing the true values of urban life and counter to the perceived errors of contemporary urbanism and architectural design.²⁷ The dead hand of the past is still seen here as a valid means to steer the course of current architectural conceptions and determine the nature of its legitimacy.

Next to these issues of comparison, the explicit recovery of past architectural ideas as an instrument of contemporary remedy is also to be discovered as an active feature of current historical discourse. This was certainly exemplified by Perez-Gomez who, following the themes of Husserl,²⁸ declared a deep crisis surrounding traditional modes of architectural meaning and purpose.²⁹ The particular anxiety for Perez-Gomez was the loss of an older sense of poetical and symbolic relationships with humanity and nature that drew from the so-called essential qualities of the living-world (*lebenswelt*). Here, science and technology are deemed the culprits of architecture's contemporary decline with alleviation founded on reintroducing those lost orders of existential or phenomenological engagement and through them, the establishment of a more authentic mode of architectural possibility. This same encounter with an underlying hatred of the present, of loss and revivalism as a tool of contemporary salvation would later be revisited and supported by Vesely.³⁰ In addition, there is also the question of what historically underpins the authority of architectural heritage, whose very *raison d'être* concerns the solidification through built form of direct links between the past and present, of architecturally framing the memories and experiences of prior times as though such forms can transcend the transitions and limits of language, belief and practice, as if we can directly participate and relive the conditions and nuances of their past, as though we are historically the same.

The present has still to fully escape from an architectural horizon of historical perception that relies on the futility of comparisons between the past and present; that seeks to draw illusory lines of continuous or trans-historical qualities of experience, belief and purpose; that discern in the space of

prior ages the seductive promise of eternal truths to resolve the perceived crises of the present; and which continue to confuse the products of historical or heritage imagination for the actualities of the past itself. Against this, architectural history must begin to stand above the fault lines of meta-narratives and metaphysics, beyond the lures of romantic vistas, and detached from the flawed potential of historicist dreams that will always endeavour to overcome artificially the pressures of discontinuity and incongruity that underlie the chronological terrain of architecture's past. Instead, we must learn, as Foucault informs us, that history is not about uncovering the lost secrets of the timeless and essential, but with exposing the secret that there are no essences or that what essences are perceived are a product of 'alien norms'.³¹ Nor is history, as Hirst notes, an instrument by which to respond to the challenges and changes of the present 'nostalgically, by seeking to re-build the classical city or to restore the democratic polis'.³² There is nothing inevitable at work here, against which the question for architecture and any meaningful will to historical knowledge becomes one of resistance to any conventional sense of historicist reality. And if resistance, then the task becomes one of recognizing the limits of traditional historical engagement and what underlies its various distortions of temporal perception. But as Nietzsche said, such a step 'cannot be won by dreaming', but 'must be fought and wrestled for'.³³ In particular, it must be replaced by an approach to history, that according to Foucault, must take 'sides against those who are happy in their ignorance' and which 'encourages the dangers of research and delights in disturbing discoveries'.³⁴

Conclusion

The focus of this discussion was concerned with the nature of how we perceive and critically engage with the historical space of architecture. Of particular interest, were the problems associated with a nineteenth-century model of historical reality that still informs how we currently interpret and utilize the architectural subject of history. This discussion, however, was not directed towards any given solution as rather at what is implied from adherence to the conventions of such a model and the need to contest this terrain of historicist tradition in order to re-think and confront the architectural past as it was and not as we would like it to be, free from the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'.³⁵ The concerns of this discussion were therefore aimed at challenging the dream relations of a temporal horizon that espoused the homogeneous and certain, that promoted trans-historical experiences and truths, and saw time as a repository of ideal forms and concepts to inspire and refresh the present. Set against this and in support of a more rigorous will to historical knowledge, what this paper calls for is further debate on the nature of historical perception and an acceptance that, as Benjamin reminds us: "The nour-

ishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed".³⁶

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, (trans) Desmond Lee, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p. 70.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, Indianapolis: Bobb-Merrill Company Inc, 1976.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p.4

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 14, 38

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn (trans), New York: Schocken Books, 1973, p.257; Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in Paul Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader: An introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, p.77

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *On History*, Indianapolis: Bobb-Merrill, 1975.

⁷ G W F Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, T M Knox (trans), Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967.

⁸ J J Winckelmann, "History of Ancient Art, 1764," in Eric Fernie (ed) *Art History and its Methods: a critical anthology*, London: Phaidon press, 1995, pp. 70-76.

⁹ J J Winckelmann, 'History of Ancient Art, 1764,' in Eric Fernie (ed) *Art History and its Methods: a critical anthology*, London: Phaidon press, 1995; Isaac Ware, *A Complete Body of Architecture*, London: Gregg International, 1971; J. W. Goethe, *Letters From Italy*, (trans), W H Auden, Elizabeth Mayer, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995; James Elmes, *Lectures on Architecture: Comprising the History of Art from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1971.

¹⁰ Camillo Sitte, *Camillo Sitte: The Birth of Modern City Planning*, (trans), (ed), George R Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins, New York: Rizzoli, 1986, p. 150

¹¹ Camillo Sitte, *Camillo Sitte: The Birth of Modern City Planning*, p. 143

¹² John Ruskin, 'The Nature of the Gothic,' *Culture and Society in Britain 1850-1890*, (ed), J M Golby, Oxford: Oxford U P in association with the Open University, 1992, pp. 168-177.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, pp.19, 49.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge, and Power,' *The Foucault Reader: An introduction to Foucault's Thought*, (ed), Paul Rabinow, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, 239-256, p. 248.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 14

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 3

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 11

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 17

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge, and Power,' p.250

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, R J Hollingdale (trans), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 101

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* p.261

²² A W N Pugin, *Contrasts*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1969.

²³ Thomas Cole, *The Architect's Dream*, in Rolf Toman (ed), 'Neoclassicism and Romanticism, Cologne: Konemann, 2000, 318-479, p. 350.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, pp. 72, 17.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978, p. 38

²⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, London: Penguin, 1961, p. 11

²⁷ Colin Rowe & Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT P, 1976, p. 107

²⁸ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1970.

²⁹ A Perez-Gomez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT P, 1983.

³⁰ Dalibor Vesely, 'Architecture and the Conflict of Representation,' *AA Files*, 8 (1985): 21-38.

³¹ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' p. 78.

³² Paul Hirst, 'Variations on a Theme Park - a review,' *AA Files*, 25 (Summer): 97-98, 1993, p. 97

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p.55

³⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' p.95

³⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*,

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p.263