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THE HISTORY, THEORY AND CRITICISM OF ARCHITECTURE

Papers from the
1964 AIA-ACSA TEACHER SEMINAR

edited by

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with a foreword by

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THE M.I.T. PRESS
THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY 1970

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HISTORY AS A METHOD OF TEACHING ARCHITECTURE

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The conclusions of this seminar are not going to remain Platonic. We shall try to apply them in our schools, starting with the Facoltà di Architettura of the University of Rome, where for the past year I have occupied the chair of architectural history.

Let me tell you something about my school. The Facoltà di Architettura at Rome is not very important, but the influence of Rome is still relevant. The school is housed in a lousy building up on the hill of Valle Giulia, in a sector of the city where the majority of the foreign academies are located. If it were a good school, if it were to be renewed according to the principles that we shall work out here at Cranbrook, it could carry weight in the architectural world.

Well, what is the story of this school? Briefly, it was first reactionary, then Fascist, and finally "empirical," so to speak. It started in 1921 on academical lines; during the Mussolini period it went "monumental" in the most vulgar meaning of the word. Then, after the last war, it adopted the sort of attitude that many architectural schools have; courses were multiplied, a lot of people were invited to visit the school, a terrific number of things were done without any unifying thought, all in the belief that when you don't have an idea you can conceal the fact just by multiplying the instruments. But in Rome this system did not work. Last year, the students occupied the school for forty-two days and nights—forty-two! It is a long time—simply in reaction against it. Under the pressure of this occupation, which brought about a one-day strike of the whole university, new professors were called to Rome—one to fill the town-planning chair, the second to fill the design chair, the third to fill the history of architecture chair.

We started to remake the school. We made a plan for its transformation. The battle lasted almost an entire year, from November, when I entered the school, until last Wednesday.

Only last Wednesday, the faculty council (that is the council of the full professors) approved a motion which said that *the teaching of architecture should be based on the historical method*. Actually in Italian it says *metodo storico-critico* because there is no history without criticism.

Here we come immediately to the central problem of this seminar. Let us recognize right away that our problem is not how to teach history of architecture, theory of architecture or architectural criticism but *how to teach architecture*. That is what our schools are for, and we have to find out how to teach architecture with a method that is less empirical, less approximate than those adopted up to now.

How has architecture been taught up to now? I am not going to give you a history of architectural education. However, we can say that three methods have been employed. The first, starting with the Renaissance, was the *bottega* method. A young man who wanted to be an architect would select a master, would go to work and learn in his *bottega* or office. In all the schools where you have few students and a great personality among the teachers, this method still continues. Is it good? Perhaps it *was* good, but it does not work any more. It is the typical method of the *élite* school, while we have to face the problem of mass-education. I remember that when I was at Harvard, Gropius had about twelve students in his master course, and he used to say that they were too many, that he couldn't follow twelve students. In Rome, in the five-year course, we have 2,500 students. Perhaps you can divide the school into two or into three, but you are not going to solve the problem, which today is mass-education as against *élite*-education.

There is another drawback in this method. To follow a master is not really a guarantee that you are going to get his process, and not merely his results. We have seen people who have been for years at Taliesin or in Mies van der Rohe's school, and very often they did not get the process at all. They got the results; they became little Wrights, little Mieses.

And then where are the masters, where are the great personalities today? Around 1940 an American boy could select his master more or less as a boy of the Renaissance could select a master among many important painters. You could go to Harvard if you liked Gropius, you could go to Chicago to follow

Mies, you could select Wright and go to Taliesin. But this "heroic" period of modern architecture is coming to an end. It looks as if the new generation is not producing heroes, perhaps because we are not asking for them anymore, because the hero-system of teaching architecture is by now rather obsolete. We are looking for a scientific method.

As for the second system of the past—you know it only too well. It is the academic system, the Beaux-Arts. History was taught as "styles," phenomena were reduced to rules. Design teaching was also directed towards a style, and so it could easily meet history. Out of the meeting between this kind of history and this kind of design teaching the theory of architecture was formulated with its idols of proportion, symmetry, dynamic composition, rhythm and so on. The theory made the school perfectly coherent, with the perfection of a tomb. It resulted in the death of history, and the death of original creativity. I said that it resulted in them. But it would be better to say frankly that it results in them, because many of our schools are still run on the Beaux-Arts system, only with less coherence.

The modern movement in architecture produced a crisis in this system. And at this point we have a big episode, one that is well known but should be constantly present during our discussions because it is the most significant and dramatic fact of the last decades. I refer to the Bauhaus.

In the Bauhaus we find a marriage between the modern movement in architecture and modern pedagogy. That is, people were to learn not by listening to lectures from the professor, but by doing things themselves. Learning became an active proposition. But what about the teaching of history? As you know, Gropius threw it out of the Bauhaus curriculum. Why? With a few exceptions—and perhaps those were not available in Weimar and Dessau—the architectural historians were all more-or-less reactionary. They thought that architectural history stopped at the end of the eighteenth century. They conceived historical phenomena as "styles" and therefore, if they had to include the modern movement in their history courses, they would simply add one more style to the variety of the past. This was the traditional, Beaux-Arts, reactionary way of interpreting history, and Gropius was fully justified in rejecting it. But he made a mistake. Instead of stating that he could not have

history courses because there were no good modern historians around, he constructed a funny theory according to which history, especially at the beginning, would have a negative influence on the architectural student, would influence him too much, would paralyze his creative impulse. This was the tragedy. It meant the failure not only of historical and critical teaching, but also of the possibility of finding a modern method of teaching architecture. The baby was thrown out with the bath-water. Given the fact that there was nobody around to teach history of architecture in a modern way, instead of trying to stimulate young historians they decided not to teach history. So you had, on one hand, the past left to the reactionary historians; on the other, the modern movement with no historical perspective—that is, up in the air. No integration, no history, old styles on one side, the modern “style” on the other. The new pedagogy had no influence on the history courses.

Here is the drama. From the time of the Bauhaus until this seminar at Cranbrook, nothing has been done to overcome the gap, the gulf between the teaching of history and the teaching of design. You will agree that our schools are going on without a real unity of approach: we have design courses, based on empirical methods, and we have history courses which remain academical no matter who is teaching. Sure, I know, we are all excellent teachers of history, fully permeated by the modern movement and by the modern art criticism. Our classes are crowded with students. They listen to our lectures with enthusiasm, because we open to them big panoramas; we are able to show that even a Greek temple, even a Roman basilica or a Baroque church is a “modern” building if you see it with modern eyes, if you “read” it with a contemporary spirit.

This is all very well. But the effect of our courses on the drafting-boards is practically non-existent. The gap is still there. A good history professor will have, no doubt, a positive influence on the cultural atmosphere of the school, but his direct impact on the method of producing architecture is still very small. Given the fact that you cannot have a coherent school of architecture unless you reach a real integration between history and design, we have reached the nadir.

In the meantime we have more and more schools. Everybody is looking for teachers, chairmen, deans. In Italy, at least twice

a year we receive an invitation to come to the United States to head some important American school of architecture. You cannot expect to find big personalities to lead all the new schools of architecture of the world. And then, as we have seen, the *bottega*, the hero-system is dated by now. We must find a new method, which you can apply even with average teachers, just as you could apply the Beaux-Arts system wherever you wanted.

For a whole year in Rome we have been discussing a third system of teaching architecture, a system based on the historical method, and therefore totally different from both the *bottega* and the Beaux-Arts systems. It is the fascinating hypothesis of a new school of architecture, of a Bauhaus pregnant, so to speak, with historical—that is to say, scientific—consciousness.

In order to explain this hypothesis, we have to consider some of the basic premises of the contemporary philosophy of art. If we are going to build new schools of architecture, we have, first of all, to be in line with modern aesthetics. There are at least three basic concepts that we should always keep in mind.

First, we should remember that the idea that art is something purely intuitive, irrational, something that has to do only with feelings, is outdated. Art is a conscious act, a process which can be controlled and verified throughout. You can teach the process in a scientific way with the methods of modern scientific research, which are not static and mechanical but give ample scope to hypothesis, to the unknown, to the creative spirit.

Secondly, there is the consideration that so-called works of art are not always of a creative nature. In point of fact, a great many works of art, even very famous works of art, are of a critical nature. You can use words to write a poem, or just to tell a story, or to criticize an event. It is the same with painting. You can sing and you can speak. Modern art criticism has been able to show that many painters were really not artists but critics, great critics who used the medium of painting instead of the medium of words to express not their feelings but their ideas. And it is the same with architecture. In the best cases, our students will be good critics who will express their ideas in architecture, through building. The creative genius is rather rare in any century, and schools are not for geniuses, or at least not for them alone.

Thirdly, we should recognize that in the very few, exceptional works of art that are creative, there is a process that we can grasp and demonstrate and verify, just behind the lyrical or poetic aspect which appears irrational. A few years ago, we had a most interesting debate about Dante in Italy. It was obvious that Dante was a poet, but it was equally evident that the *Divine Comedy* was not made up only of poetry; it has a logical, planned, conscious structure. Could the two things be divided? A great Italian philosopher, Benedetto Croce, tried. He wrote a book entitled *Poetry and Non-Poetry in Dante*, in which he separated the verses which could be considered true poetry from those which were clearly the expression of conscious thought. Well, this method of analysis did not work. You could make an anthology of poetical passages of the *Divine Comedy* but, in doing so, you would kill the *Divine Comedy*. One cannot separate, even in the greatest creation, what is lyrical from what is not. They are indissolubly fused. You cannot understand the creative parts of the *Divine Comedy* without considering, at the same time, its critical parts. The irrational and the rational are dependent upon each other.

From these three basic discoveries of modern aesthetics came modern historical research. The method consists of entering into the work of art, of reconstructing the process of its making in order to understand why the artist does what he does and not something different, and especially to understand how he corrects himself and why. The most revealing studies of poetry are those which examine the corrections the poet made in his various manuscripts. Here he is substituting one word, there another. Why? In every case, you can demonstrate the reason, what he is changing, why he is putting in something that was not there before. With architectural sketches, it is the same thing; you can use the method with drawings by Michelangelo or sketches by Frank Lloyd Wright, and you can grasp every phase, almost every moment of their creative process.

Well, here we are at Cranbrook, not to find out how to teach history of architecture—for in six days it is doubtful whether you can learn how to become a good historian if you are not one already—but to find out how, being excellent historians, we can contribute to the building of good schools of architecture. We know that the hero-system of teaching is finished. We know

that the Beaux-Arts system is outdated. We know, out of the Bauhaus experience, that design teaching has to meet modern pedagogy. And finally we know that history courses, in our schools, when they are well done, arouse the enthusiasm more than any other course, in spite of the fact that they have little relevance on the drafting boards. Our problem therefore is difficult but, at least, clear. We have to find a system of teaching design with a historical method, so as to achieve a complete coherence, almost a fusion between history courses and design courses—a cultural integration such as we had in the Beaux-Arts, only the other way around, of a modern, dynamic, open, scientific kind. That is what we have to achieve. How?

Let us consider, for a moment, our history courses. We have rejected the idea of “styles,” that is of history as something static and dogmatic. We are able to show to the students that every great monument of the past is “modern.” We make no distinction between history, theory and criticism because we know that you cannot have history without a theoretical approach and without critical involvement. Finally, we know that history is an active process, as it is concerned with the identification of the dynamic process through which a work of art comes to life. There is no longer any gulf between history teaching and modern pedagogy, no longer war between history and the modern movement. If Gropius had to organize a Bauhaus today, would he admit history courses?

I believe that he would, or at least that the contents of our courses and our intentions would incline him to do so. But the instruments we use might make him hesitate. Our instruments are obsolete. We are trying to do a modern history with the old instruments, writing and speaking. The real obstacle we meet in our attempt to teach architecture by a historical method derives from the fact that we are teaching history with only words. Words are not the means the architect uses for his work, and the challenge for us, in the next few years, will be to find a method by which historical research can be done with the architect's instruments. Now, we know that a critical essay can be produced by painting, as in the case of the Carracci, as in the case of the great majority of modern painters. Is there any reason why the same could not be done in architecture? Why not express architectural criticism in architectural forms instead

of in words? Is it impossible? In Italy we are starting to experiment. We are still at the very beginning of this kind of research, but the way we are following is the right one.

When I was teaching at Venice, until last year, we tried to invent this new kind of criticism—architectural criticism expressed with architectural instruments. We concentrated on Michelangelo's architecture, in view of the celebrations of this year. Every time we had a critical thought to express, a real idea about Michelangelo, we tried to manifest it three-dimensionally. The results of this work, done over three years by the students at Venice, can be seen in the great Michelangelo exhibition in Rome, at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Via Nazionale. Some photographs of the critical models we prepared can be seen in the January 1964 issue of my magazine *L'architettura: cronache e storia*. We are far from satisfied with this experiment, but I think that it is valuable insofar as it demonstrates that architectural criticism or architectural history can be "written" in another way than with words.

If the experiment is carried on, perhaps our goal of an integrated architectural culture, and therefore of a good, modern school of architecture, is not too far off. If history uses the instruments of design, the reverse is also true: Design is going to use the instruments of history and criticism more and more. What the students of our schools resent more than anything else is the superficial, empirical, anti-scientific way in which their designs are criticized. How does the design critic express himself? Too often in the vaguest way: "Rather nice. A bit weak here; perhaps you could put more tension on this side. Why don't you make this part of the building more fluent?"—all that kind of baloney. We have thrown out the old, academical grammar and syntax, but having failed to replace them with new grammars and new syntaxes, open and dynamic, we find ourselves empty-handed. At this point, however, the new historical method comes to the help of the design courses, just as design methods come to the help of history. If history is now able to reconstruct the creative processes of the builder of a Gothic cathedral, or of Brunelleschi, or Bramante, or Wren, it is also able to follow, to control and to test the process of architectural creation. The method for understanding an old building and for criticizing a new one in the very process of creation is the

same. If design criticism at the drafting-tables is going to become scientific, it must adopt the historical method in the new, active, operative sense which has been underlined. Otherwise, design critics will continue to be prima-donnas expressing, with poor words, their feelings merely. The good design critic today, with the new science at his disposal, cannot but be a historian, just as the good historian is the one man who can understand and verify the inner process of a design. Design, in fact, is going to be taught in the history courses or (better) in the history laboratory; and history is going to be taught at the drafting-tables. This is the challenge for all of us. We have to merge history and design courses, renewing the methods of both.

If we are able to achieve this goal, we shall not only have a school as coherent as the Beaux-Arts (upside-down); we shall also keep what is good in the *bottega* method of teaching, putting it at the disposal of mass-education.

What I mean is this. Many masters are dead; a student cannot go to their offices. The masters who are alive can accept only a few students in their offices, and they don't have the time or the will to explain their processes. But the new historical method can explain them. We can teach Wright better than Wright. We can teach Le Corbusier better than he could. We can explain the break from the Villa Savoye to Ronchamp, while Le Corbusier, in homage to the myth of coherence, would deny that there is a break. In other words, merging history and design, renewing history with the dynamic design approach, and design with the new historical method, we can achieve an integrated culture, and have a school for the masses without renouncing the benefits of the *bottega* and of the Beaux-Arts.

I could stop right here. Indeed, I have spoken much too much. But if you have invited me to come from Italy to Cranbrook, it must be because you want to know everything I know. In fact, I don't know much more than I have said; I put in front of you problems, not solutions. I am here to learn, and to have you judge what we are trying to do in Rome.

Let me conclude by referring to the questionnaire that was sent to all the speakers at this seminar. Among other things it asked: Is contemporary architecture a legitimate subject of historical research? A most incredible question! It is obvious that, without historical research, we are going to waste the

heritage of the modern movement, to continue to rediscover modern architecture every morning, to play at being the vanguard instead of creating an architectural language for modern architecture's maturity. I can give you an example of the state of our knowledge where the modern movement is concerned. Two weeks ago I was in Florence for the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, which is dedicated this year to Expressionism. The musician Roman Vlad had decided to perform the opera *The Nose* by Dimitri Shostakovich, which was written in 1928. It was not an easy task. Believe it or not, neither the music nor the words of this opera written in 1928 could be found. Roman Vlad found an act in Moscow, but only one. Then he heard that somebody might have another act in Vienna, and he was lucky enough to find it. But some parts were still missing, and the Communist party had to put political pressure on the Soviet Union to get them to dig them out. No archaeological research is so difficult. The documents of our own time are dispersed or destroyed, especially those concerning Expressionism. The conspiracy against Expressionism started before Hitler and continued after Hitler. In Expressionism Germany was looking at herself in the mirror. Very few people liked this image before Nazism, and very few after. Even now, Germany prefers not to look in the mirror, but to accept a neo-International Style tendency in a neo-capitalist American version. Brecht? Sure, something you can admire and put in the archives . . . Mind you, it is an international conspiracy as was proved at the symposium "Architecture 1918-1928: from the Novembergruppe to the CIAM," organized by the Department of Art History and Archaeology of Columbia University in May 1962, for at that too everybody tried to run down Expressionism. Among architects, I mean professional architects, ignorance is supreme. After the crisis of the so-called International Style, they are going back to plasticism, doing experiments which are infinitely less courageous and valuable than those done more than forty years ago by the Expressionists. Modern architecture, in this respect, is going back, not forward.

What is happening in Europe is happening also, I am afraid, in the United States. Here we see the dilapidation of the Chicago School buildings, and the dilapidation of the heritage of Frank Lloyd Wright. What's wrong with us? It is historical

consciousness that is lacking in our culture, and therefore lacking in our teaching of architecture. I don't know which is the cause and which is the effect. It is not important. Our duty is to struggle at one and the same time for an integrated culture and for a scientific method of teaching architecture.