Space, time, and architectural history

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Architectural history is not art history. Of course, the origins of architectural history as it is practised in the academy today lie both in art history and in the practice of architecture itself. Architectural history has long been suspended as a sort of stepchild between the two. On the one hand, it has had a shadowy presence in art history departments where it was subordinated to the history of painting. On the other hand, architectural history has often provided a service in architectural schools, a service sometimes not even seen as necessary, but in any case always viewed as secondary to the practical training in the studio. For that and other reasons, the discipline of architectural history has struggled to achieve autonomy. The rise of the preservation and cultural heritage industry has introduced yet another pressure, or ‘client’. But over the last few decades the discipline has been transforming itself into the cultural history of the built environment, embracing questions that arise from a curiosity about the relationships between culture, society, and design that have little or nothing to do with the standard art historical motivations for architectural history. The hagiographic monograph dedicated to the individual architect, the nationalistic defining of styles, the polemical justification of particular movements in architecture have long been staples of writing in architectural history and there are still forces at work to produce them. But the growth of the field as an autonomous area of inquiry has been, somewhat ironically, dependent on questions generated from outside the closed circle of the architects and patrons served by art historical approaches. The intellectual pursuits that make this an interesting topic have come to depend on methods and problems defined outside architecture.

A revolution in thinking about the relationship between objects and their makers has already taken place, as seen in the expansion of art history to include visual culture and the cultural history of the visible. The move has been from construing the past as a series of stylistic waves, with the art historian’s task that of taxonomer classifying visually, or of biographer explaining
individual creativity, or of interpreter of monuments, to posing questions about the relations between objects, their makers, their users, and the relationship of all of those to social processes. Art history and perforce architectural history have for decades now been contending with that liminal, border location between the cultural and the social, that difficult to theorize location of making meaning that observes the human imagination caught in the web of conflicting social processes that constitute cultural change. As Fredric Jameson has put it: "It is now the cultural production process (and its relation to our peculiar social formation) that is the object of study and no longer the individual masterpiece." This is a transformation that has been evolving for the last thirty years as the humanities and social sciences have resituated themselves under the impact of such writers as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz, Julia Kristeva, Edward Said, Hayden White, and others. While literary theory has consistently been the first field to respond to the methodological challenges of these others, other fields such as anthropology and geography have also reconsidered their premises. Few fields have escaped from the self-examination and self-reflexivity this intellectual revolution has engendered. As I have argued elsewhere:

The result has been a shattering of the project to construct large-scale explicative narratives of history and culture. Instead, the focus has come to be on the contingent, the temporary, and the dynamic, on processes rather than structures, on hybridity rather than consistency, on the quotidian as well as the extraordinary, on the periphery as well as the centre, on reception as well as production. Culture has come to be viewed as symbolic practice, productive of concrete expressions that can be mined to reveal their codes, making explicit both their agency and their contingency.

Art history has moved away from its preoccupation with documentation, connoisseurship, and biography towards the history of the image construed broadly to encompass globalization, media, and popular culture. Architectural history has similarly shifted its sights from a focus on the individual architect and architectural monument to include vernacular architecture, the architecture of everyday life, and the ordinary landscape. The production of the built environment, and its imbrication with the social fabric, has replaced the more exclusive concerns with the heroic biography of the architect and the assumption of a historical perspective within the professional discourse of architecture. Instead, the life of the built environment, its reception, and its social functioning during and after construction have come under study, allowing investigations of such issues as gender, class, and colonialism. While aesthetic and formal issues have not been cast aside, they are viewed as socially contingent, the result of cultural dynamics that the historian aims to reveal in their complex interworkings.

An audience still exists for the monograph dedicated to the oeuvre of a particular architect, tracing the development of ideas and forms in the light of biography. However, the more interesting questions about architecture and its history are being posed by historians exploring problems and not styles: issues such as the nature of public space, the construction of nationalism and regional identity, changing conceptions of domesticity, the experiential history of architecture, and the broad problem of representation with all that it entails about understanding relationships between the viewer, the viewed, and the view-maker. The focus is on the work that architecture does within culture and society, rather than stylistic taxonomies and canonic developmental schemes. Architectural history has come to examine the historical circumstances that produce meaning and the social and cultural processes that continue to generate meaning in a site.

The influences on architectural history from outside the field become evident if we examine space as an analytical term in architectural history. For much of the twentieth century, architectural history, and most particularly the history of modern architecture, was permeated with discussions of space. In 1957 Bruno Zevi wrote: "space is the protagonist of architecture."8 The birth of architectural history as a field of inquiry occurred simultaneously with the discovery of space as an analytical term in the work of August Schmarsow and others.9 This conception became central to the way modernists defined architecture and the way the historians of modernism defined architectural history. Siegfried Giedion, writing in the polemical Space, Time and Architecture on the basis of his 1938–9 Charles Eliot Norton lectures, worked within this Swiss and German visual tradition to introduce modern architecture to several generations of scholars and architects.5 While this was a book whose main purpose was to explain how the architecture of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe expressed the self-consciousness of the era through a new conception of space, in fact, Giedion articulates here and elsewhere the basis for an entire history of architecture grounded on the history of space.9 Despite all the varying factors that influence architectural design, and he cites economic, political, social, and technological factors, Giedion argues that architecture is an organism unto itself with an autonomous line of development. He writes of "architecture as an enterprise with a continuous and independent growth of its own, apart from questions of economics, class interests, race, or other issues."10 That line of development, he claims, can be understood as consisting of a series of space conceptions.

Giedion’s bold attempt to create a grand narrative has a clear genealogy, which in part makes explicit in the introduction to his book with its acknowledgement of Jakob Burckhardt and Heinrich Wölfflin. Of course, the scheme of identifying eras that express themselves consistently in all areas of human endeavour is a Hegelian conceit that was commonplace in the nineteenth century. What is interesting here is that Giedion places space at the centre of his history—an idea that has its roots in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder’s attempts to identify the characteristic visual
nature of each art form, but more relevantly is related to the nineteenth-century German project of understanding how the mind comprehends space—the psychological approach to the experience of vision that leads to August Schmarsow’s theory of architecture as a spatial creation, the first full articulation of a theory identifying architecture as the shaping of space.  

Giedion’s focus is the new space conception he identifies with modernism. Breaking with the space conception of Renaissance perspectival space, he claims, this occurs first in cubist painting, parallels the scientific insights into relativity, but finally gives rise to an architecture based on the interpenetration of moving horizontal and vertical planes, the play of enormous forces held in equilibrium, the simultaneity of vision from above and below, inside and outside, introducing time, the fourth dimension into the perception of space, thus creating what Giedion identifies as space-time.

The formalism of this position was countered by Bruno Zevi, who, like Giedion, made space the centre of his call for a new architectural history, but who was also more interested in space 'as concretely experienced' rather than as 'abstractly imagined'. 12 This experiential emphasis brings Zevi closer to Schmarzow who, as Mitchell Schwarzer has written, evokes 'a predication for the vital space over the silent form, the space whose contours are shaped by the demands of human life'. 13 For Zevi, 'the specific property of architecture—its feature distinguishing it from all other forms of art—consists in its working with a three-dimensional vocabulary which includes man... Architecture,' he writes, 'is like a great hollow-out sculpture which man enters and apprehends by moving about within it'. 14 Space, internal and external, must be experienced through dynamic motion of the body; it can only be grasped through one’s own movement through it.

Zevi complains:

A satisfactory history of architecture has not yet been written because we are still not accustomed to thinking in terms of space and because historians of architecture have failed to apply a coherent method of studying buildings from a spatial point of view.

But the kind of history he projects after all is based on a Zeitgeist scheme very similar to Giedion's: the aim of 'showing how the multiplicity of factors which make up history have acted in concert to give rise to various conceptions of space'. 15 Both Giedion and Zevi envisioned an architectural history that would place space at its centre, but neither was able to explain the motor of change from one space conception to the next and neither created a narrative model that acknowledged the 'factors' each recognized as intrinsic to architectural development: the economic conditions, patronage, life-styles, and class relations. Their basic model remained one of reflection and expression: architecture is the reflection of the age, the expression of the space conception. In this historiography space is passively shaped.

A more sophisticated view of architecture that places space at its centre can be found in William MacDonald’s eloquent account of Roman imperial architecture, which brilliantly integrates the social, the technical, and the aesthetic. MacDonald demonstrates that ‘What the palaces, the Markets, and the Pantheon show above all else is the mutation of the concept of monumental interior space’, its ‘transcendent characteristic’ being ‘its space-shaping, space-boring quality’. 16 Here space becomes both a reflection of society and a tool of communication. The ‘Roman stewardship of all antiquity and the imperial hope for one inclusive society,’ MacDonald writes, ‘... were proclaimed by an architecture of splendid interior spaces’. 17 He meticulously defines for us the formula for Roman design: its axes, symmetries, and vaulted terminal volumes. He demonstrates how space was manipulated so that the observer was guided towards ‘a large and well-lighted architectural volume from which the natural world was excluded, where enveloping and radically focused surfaces suggested permanence, stability, and security’. 18 He explains how the decoration, the linings of nonstructural materials, deprecated the mass and weight of the structural solids so the impression of a seamless envelope of space was increased while the play of light on the marble and other materials ‘brought to life the purely spatial reality of the architecture’. 19 MacDonald describes the sensory implications of this design. He writes of a kinaesthetic sense alerted and instructed by the decoration as well as by the primary architectural forms. ‘The vaulted style, with its relatively seamless continuity of surface, its tendency to rhetorical persuasion, and its capacity to call up a strong sensation of fixed and ordered place, reflected both the claims and the realities of imperial society’, he writes. 20 It reflected those realities and the vaulted style became an imitation of the state, a tangible metaphor for its traditions and its claims to universal sovereignty. 21 We are taught, through this reading, to see the expressive nature of architectural space, its sources in tectonic structure, decorative form, axial planning, and billowing vaults, its coercive, controlling effect on the observer, and, above all, through all these, its role as maker of imperial ideology. Pure spatial reality is the reality of an architectural perception, akin to Giedion’s premise of architecture as an enterprise with a continuous and independent growth of its own. The historian’s role is then to read and interpret closely the message that spatial reality bears.

In recent years, however, that notion of space as passive and reflective has been radically challenged in sociocultural critiques launched outside architectural history. Sixty years after Giedion, the most provocative discussions of space, the space of the built environment, have not only come from outside architectural history, they have to a large extent ignored what the field has to offer. These discussions of space are taking place in geography, cultural studies, literary theory, gender studies, and postcolonial studies. There has been a vast outpouring of books dealing with the space of the built environment.

Not since around 1900, when, as Stephen Kern has described, space became a focus in sociology, philosophy, and science, as well as painting and
of space research have appropriately put into question the history of visuality, but with the unfortunate consequence that close visual analysis has itself become suspect.

In these schemes, as in Giedion's, the advent of perspective plays a pivotal role as the key to an age, as a scopic regime in Martin Jay's term, or as a 'visual ideology' in Dennis Cosgrove's, who defines perspective as a technology of power that turns the visual field or space into a commodity. In this view, perspective becomes the means to critique modern rationality in Harvey's account, perspectivism conceives of space as abstract, homogenous, and universal, useful for merchants and landowners, for the absolutist state, and for the bureaucratic state. For others, it is Cartesian spatial ordering or Galilean extension of space that become the basis of a critique of modern or Enlightenment rationality. In these definitions, space is viewed as a tool of surveillance, control, segregation, and surveying in aid of ownership and oppression.

This distrust of perspectival and Cartesian space is further generalized as a distrust of the visual, the aesthetic, and of representation altogether. Martin Jay's account of the anti-ocular strain in French thought of the twentieth century explicates the various straws of this criticism of vision's complicity with political and social oppression through its application to spectacle and surveillance, its illusions that distract attention from social relations and control. The representation of space is an illusion, in service to power and then with an eye to distorting from realities, covering up, misrepresenting, not simply in the propagandist sense, but thwarting recognition of the system at work, naturalizing what has been constructed to sustain oppression. The aesthetics of urban design and architecture are viewed primarily as part of an ideological armamentarium that represents power while providing a veneer of beauty that conceals oppressive relations. Such beauty is suspect: illusory, seductive, false, and misleading, a bearer of ideology. We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us,' Soja writes, 'how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology. Order and harmony are called into question as tools of oppression, whereas indeterminacy, flux, and hybridity become markers of liberation.

It follows then that the visual experience of the built environment, what the American historian William Mac Donald called the 'spatial reality of architecture', is given scant attention. There is a virtual absence of reference to the formal qualities of architecture in the new literature on space. When Foucault, in a much-cited interview, refers to old age homes, prisons, and motels, there is never a mention of the shaping of the space as designed, the impact of the forms as aesthetic, as built, or the lived experience of space that has been shaped. There is rarely a close-up view of the workings of an individual building. Indeed, like this essay, most of the recent writings on space are not illustrated. But, even when an author like David Harvey writes...
a well-illustrated account of the imbrication of nineteenth-century Paris’s spatial and political history, he does so without reference to the main contributions of architectural historians to the understanding of how the buildings of Paris operated within the social fabric.49

At this point, it becomes evident that architectural historians have a lot to learn from the questions being posed in other fields, but, at the same time, they have much to offer in return. First, the lesson for architectural history is to ask the question: what is the cultural work that architecture does? The interpretive function of the historian who regards the built environment as a text or picture allows the symbolic and representational to be seen, but not processes. So what happens when the passivity of ‘symbolize, represent, and reflect’ is replaced with active verbs such as ‘transform, perform, inform’? What happens when architectural history begins to look at those spaces that are indeterminate, rather than looking only at the places of order, or find the indeterminacy in places of order as they are used, distorted, reinvolved with meaning? How can the often ambiguous but provocative theories be translated into case studies that allow the examination of how space is socially produced so that the dialectical relationship between the material and the social is the focus, not simply the relationship of the mental to the material? How can topics be defined that explore the experience of architectural space in life through history?54 While studies inspired by spatial theory have privileged topics on gender, class, post-colonialism, and race, there are many social processes at work, often only visible in microhistory, in the specifics of the tensions that define a particular society, changing roles in family life, patterns of land ownership, methods of doing business, patterns of consumption, any of which can make concrete and evident some of the larger problems of state formation, capitalism, formation of class identity, and the commodification of space that are worked out through spatial design.

Eve Blau’s study of housing in Red Vienna starts with a pertinent question inspired by Lefebvre and Sora: in what way can architecture (and by extension architectural space) be ‘instrumental, operative, and strategic’?55 This question leads her to analyse the experiential quality of space through which space itself became an active social and political agent, not simply the bearer of a particular political ideology. It leads to the investigation of how a specific set of architects developed spatial concepts and how these were then instrumental and then experienced. Such work can only be achieved by means of the most thorough empirical investigation. Suffice it to say that, through the specific analysis of architectural practice in Vienna, the spatial configuration of the city and its building typologies, this episode in architectural history, which was written out of Giedion’s grand narrative of modern space conception, clarifies with precision how space was invested with meaning. While informed by theory, the conclusions could only be reached by means of the most thorough empirical investigation, not by theory alone.

In the book *Dominion of the Eye*, Marvin Trachtenberg explicates the planned nature of trecento urbanism in Florence. By measuring piazza...
geographers, anthropologists, and literary theorists who have been writing about space, cities, and architecture, and should be contributing in essential ways to the transdisciplinary discourse of space. This will be easier to accomplish if the field sheds the narrow and parochial purviews of traditional art historical concerns, if its queries are defined in terms of the cultural and social work that architecture does, and if the centrality of the visual language of architecture is emphasized.

Notes

Previous versions of this essay were presented as the Plenary Talk, Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, Toronto, April 2001, at the Erste Architekturhistorische Landtag, Niederlande, Architekturhistorisches Institut, January 2004, and at the symposium Mediating Architectural Heterotopia, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, March 2004.

1 In the United States the Society of Architectural Historians was established in 1940 but did not separate from the annual meetings of the art historical disciplinary societies, the College Art Association, until 1957. For an American perspective on the history of the discipline, see Elisabeth R. MacDougall (ed.), The Architectural Historian in America: A Symposium in Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the Society of Architectural Historians, Washington DC, 1990.


4 Nancy Stieber, 'Architecture Between Disciplines', Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 62: 2, June


10 Giedion, Space, Time and Architecture, 22.


12 Zevi, Architecture as Space, 23.

13 Schwarzer, 'The Emergence of Architectural Space', 55.

14 Zevi, Architecture as Space, 22.

15 Zevi, Architecture as Space, 22.

16 Zevi, Architecture as Space, 73.


18 MacDonald, Architecture of the Roman Empire, 167.

19 MacDonald, Architecture of the Roman Empire, 167.

20 MacDonald, Architecture of the Roman Empire, 167.

21 MacDonald, Architecture of the Roman Empire, 172.

22 MacDonald, Architecture of the Roman Empire, 179.

23 MacDonald, Architecture of the Roman Empire, 181.


28 A number of sources discuss space from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: for urbanism, see Maria Balshaw and


30 Lefebvre, Production of Space, 38.

31 Lefebvre, Production of Space, 129.

32 Soja, Postmodern Geographies, 126.

33 Soja, Postmodern Geographies, 127.

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Visuality and architectural history

Belgin Turan Özkaya

Architecture is not only the built form; it encompasses diverse conceptual, representational, textual and spatial practices. In recent decades the ‘linguistic’ and ‘pictorial turns’ have made us all aware of that much larger and complex terrain that architecture covers. Alongside being the more readily visible act of making built environments to house human activity – in other words, a spatial practice – architecture is also a discursive and visual practice that embraces ‘word’ and ‘image’.

One central, if intermittent, architectural ‘practice’ that is purely discursive is the architectural treatise, which was often produced with the sole intention of conveying architectural ideas, and which had become increasingly pictorial in time. In the case of buildings, on the other hand, their reception is often fashioned by accompanying texts and discourses generated concurrently or afterwards, mostly in the form of architectural criticism and history. The task of a critical architectural history is not to oppose such discourses and narratives to a pure physical/spatial immediacy, the possibility of which is suspect, but rather to reveal the mechanisms that engender them and privilege certain discourses and narratives over others, hence to make it possible to think differently; to develop other discourses, other narratives that defy the dominant ones. While being self-reflexive about its methodology, assumptions and biases and querying itself and its boundaries with interdisciplinary tools, critical architectural history, I argue, should also engage with conventional forms of architectural historiography. It is evident that new perspectives, theories and methodologies coming from different disciplines do transform architectural history by providing new theoretical and methodological tools and new objects of study. But the individual architect and architectural object, canonical or otherwise, hence architectural monograph, do not just disappear. The question is how to write ‘non-operative’, non-complacent histories that are not complicit with marketing strategies of architectural practice that favour certain architectures over others.

The spread of architectural ideas, discourses and narratives that had accelerated after the invention of printing, as is very well known, gained huge

36 Harvey, Condition of Postmodernity, 254.


38 Soja, Postmodern Geographies, 6.

39 Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’.

40 David Harvey, Paris: Capital of Modernity, New York, 2003. Missing from the bibliography of this book are works by such authors as David Van Zanten, Katherine Fischer Taylor, and Christopher Mead.

41 For examples of such work, see Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, Architecture of the Everyday, New York, 1997; Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (eds), Understanding Ordinary Landscapes, New Haven, CT, 1997.


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