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Review by: Diane Ghirardo

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Books

Francis D. K. Ching, Mark M. Jarzombek, and Vikramaditya Prakash
A Global History of Architecture
Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2007, 816 pp., 31 color and 1688 b/w illus. \$75, ISBN 978-0-471-26892-5

It takes moxie to write a survey (much less to review one) because reviewers and readers endlessly carp about what the author failed to include or about presumably erroneous interpretations. The appropriate questions instead concern what is covered, and how effectively, because each example inevitably must stand for many others. In a book with the ambitious title *A Global History of Architecture*, not even eight hundred pages offer adequate space for everything. At this point, *A Global History* virtually owns the territory for world architecture: there really is little competition in terms of breadth and historical depth. The closest competitor, *Buildings across Time: An Introduction to World Architecture*, as I indicate below, lacks comparable depth even if its many color illustrations are superior.¹

Not only does *A Global History* own the territory, it pulls off this audacious task with panache, intelligence and—for the most part—grace. The book also could hardly be more timely. In 2004, the National Architectural Accreditation Board (NAAB) altered the history requirements for all accredited architecture programs in the “student performance criteria” in two ways.² The first increased the level of comprehension students must achieve from “awareness” to “understanding,” while the second raised the standard of comprehension of non-Western architecture to a level com-

parable to that of Western architectural traditions. Historians cheered this salutary development, but anxiety about how to accomplish this goal soon surfaced. One approach follows the trajectory outlined in *A Global History*, which essentially involves reconfiguring the traditional survey course to integrate architectural developments throughout the world in ways that appropriately recognize the accomplishments of many different cultures.

The text spans some 5,500 years, with early forays far deeper into the mists of history. The authors outline their approach in the preface. Viewing architecture as a cultural production, they focus largely on structures of a certain scale, complexity, and symbolic significance. Domestic buildings and the architecture of the every day figure only occasionally; future authors can certainly address these topics in companion surveys. Framing architecture as a cultural production means placing the buildings within their cultures and addressing issues such as patronage, use, and meaning while giving significant attention to a discussion of their formal and technological features. The authors also aim to avoid merely accumulating local histories—although they do offer excellent examples of purely local events—and rather attempt to provide a nuanced account of the intersections of local, regional, continental, and intercontinental developments.

Because of a resolutely global perspective, they elect to divide the book along a time line, beginning at 3500 BCE. Until 1500 BCE the chapters cover one thousand years, but as the book draws closer to the present, the timeline narrows to four hundred years, then two

hundred, one hundred, and finally the period since 1950. Slicing through history in this fashion allows them to frame contemporaneous developments throughout the globe in unison, in turn casting in high relief both similarities and distinctive differences. Each chapter begins with a brief overview of the period under discussion and the chief features of each geographic or cultural zone followed by separate discussions of the individual cultures and their primary or most exemplary constructions.

How does this work? Let us take the year 1000, which the authors extend back to the ninth century and forward to the end of the eleventh (pp. 323–74). The first thirteen pages cover the emergence of Rajput kingdoms in the Indian subcontinent, with detailed discussions of the Solankis temples and their complex wells; the Chandella Rajputs and their tantric Chausat Yogini Temple (mid-ninth century), among other later ones, followed by discussion of treatises such as the *Vastu-Shastras* and the Lingaraja Temple; and finally an explanation of India’s Jains and their temples at Mt. Abu, the Cholas in the south, and the Vijayalaya Cholisvaram and Rajarajeshwara temples. Four pages cover China’s Song Dynasty, the Yingxian timber pagoda, and the Liao dynasty’s tombs and monasteries. For Japan, the authors single out Pure Land Buddhism and the Phoenix Hall near Kyoto. Contemporaneously, the Seljuk Turks occupied a swath of territory from the coast of Syria to deep in present-day Afghanistan, erecting structures such as the caravansary of Sultan Han in Kayseri, the Great Mosque of Isfahan, and early madrasas in Turkey and Syria. In the

meantime, the Fatimids in Egypt were settling Cairo and building places of worship such as the Aqmar Mosque, while the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties in Spain and Morocco constructed mosques in related styles.

Most instructors familiar with the traditional Western architecture survey will recognize the Byzantine churches in Armenia and Turkey and the Ottonian churches in Germany, particularly Speyer Cathedral, St. Michael in Hildesheim, and the Abbey Church at St. Foy. What may cause surprise is that only five pages document these examples, followed by five treating Norman cathedral- and castle-building campaigns, compared with the thirteen pages covering developments in India. The chapter concludes with two pages on pilgrimage churches from Jerusalem to Santiago de Compostela, three on Italian city states and the baptisteries in Parma and Florence, one each on Scandinavia, Russia, Capadocia, two on the Mayan complex at Uxmal, and one on the earth mounds of Cahokia in the United States. In short, broadly conceived “Western” architectural traditions received at best twenty-one of forty-nine pages. Shifting the perspective allows the authors to illustrate how other cultures saw periods of enormous creativity in building that the customary focus on the West tends to occlude, and that is precisely the book’s most significant accomplishment.

By contrast, *Buildings across Time* overwhelmingly focuses on Western architecture and periodization according to cultures and nation-based eras. Of 567 pages, even counting generously, fewer than two hundred pages concern non-Western cultures. Thus, the authors devote twenty pages to India, thirty to China and Japan, twenty-five to “Islamic,” and nineteen to pre-Columbian. While the book is superb on these terms, I am persuaded that the slices of time proposed in *A Global History* provide a richer learning experience for an introductory-level course.

The merits of the authors’ approach emerge most tellingly in the section dedicated to 1600, at 128 pages the longest in

the book. Noting that the old and new economies coexisted throughout most of this period, the authors also document that the chief European beneficiary of wealth from the New World was the city of Rome. After careful discussions of the designs of Michelangelo, Borromini, and Bernini, as well as the Escorial and the Banqueting House in London, the rest of the chapter—surprisingly for teachers of the traditional Western architecture survey course—addresses the extraordinary buildings of the Dogon in Africa, Japan, China, the Moghuls, India, Persia, and elsewhere in the Asian part of the Eurasian continent. Although precise links among cultures related to buildings are difficult to document, this period saw an outpouring of major and innovative works of architecture throughout Eurasia. The authors raise questions about the unusual and apparently unprecedented monumental building campaign that stretched from Korea and Japan to Spain and France. They also speculate on the ways cultures transmit their architecture across such vast distances, and again, they illustrate the lively, innovative, engaging, and often more numerous accomplishments outside of the traditional west.

After 1600 the time slices narrow, and for most readers, the buildings become more familiar. As elsewhere, the authors appropriately seek exemplary structures rather than comprehensiveness, and though I could make arguments for many other structures, they demonstrate convincingly the appropriateness of their choices: that is to say, their examples are entirely appropriate for inclusion in an introductory-level survey course. A selective but appropriate bibliography for each chapter, a full index, and wonderfully clear illustration credits round out the text. The authors have also augmented the book through Wiley’s website where additional materials, including documentation and updated bibliographies, appear. A work in progress, over time the website will contain much material that would have swollen *A Global History* to mammoth proportions. Finally, teachers have access to an instructor’s manual through Wiley

and additional materials reserved for them on the book’s website.

Now for the carping. There is little enough of this, and the authors invite readers to notify them of errors, which is precisely what I will do. But allow me to note a couple of problems. While the writing in most of the text is clear and often especially elegant in descriptions of technical or formal elements, the passive voice surfaces with alarming frequency; I counted no less than six instances in one short paragraph (see p. 73). Since we try to drum this out of student work, it helps to do the same in our own. Ching’s drawings and plans strikingly document many of the structures discussed, augmented by photographs, but reading the pale, sans serif typeface on thin paper was exasperating for aging eyes, to say the least, and I nonetheless yearned for higher quality photographs. Finally, perhaps the most substantive concern: given that so few women surface until the twentieth century in an architectural history of monumental structures, one could wish that the authors had seized the opportunity to problematize gender issues as they concern recent architects whose work they incorporate into their study, such as Le Corbusier and Eileen Grey, and with respect to patronage and the role of the female client, Gerrit Rietveld and Trude Schroeder and especially Mies van der Rohe and Dr. Edith Farnsworth. I can hardly overstate my enthusiasm for resizing outsized heroes and recognizing unsung heroines.

DIANE GHIRARDO

University of Southern California

Notes

1. Marian Moffett, Michael Fazio, Lawrence Wodehouse, *Buildings across Time: An Introduction to World Architecture* (London, 2004).
2. The four criteria directly related to architectural history include Western architectural traditions, non-Western architectural traditions, local architecture, and regional architecture; other criteria concern research and writing. For more details, see the NAAB website, www.naab.org.