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Architectural History or Landscape History?

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As an accident of its historical development, architectural history suffers from captivity to analytical assumptions that were invented in the nineteenth century to justify the claims of the architectural profession. This paper questions the utility of several of the elementary categories of architectural history, including the assumption of aesthetic universals, of the individual work as the unit of analysis, and the distinction between creator and audience, and proposes a "landscape" approach to architectural history that acknowledges the multiplicity and fragmentation of environmental meaning.

ANY HISTORIAN WHO TEACHES IN A PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL IS FREquently led to question the relationships among history, architecture, and design, and particularly the tendency to write the history of the third as though it were the second. The problem is not the now familiar, and relatively easy, one of inclusion and exclusion, raised twenty years ago by advocates of "history from the bottom up." In fact, most historians make some attempt to confront this issue. Rather, the difficulty is much deeper and more elusive, for it lies with fundamental assumptions about the nature of building and the best means of studying it. In this respect, architectural historians since James Fergusson and Louisa Tuthill, particularly those of us who have studied the contemporary architecture of our own eras, have accepted in principle the design profession's account of architectural invention as a master narrative of the creation of the human landscape. As a result, we have been content, by and large, to act as the public relations branch of the profession.

This model dominates architectural history for specific historical reasons having to do in large part with the mutual dependence of historians and architects in the early years of both professions. Until the mid-nineteenth century, histories of architecture were written primarily by architectural designers concerned with locating their works within the broad stream of tradition. In the late eighteenth century, this intellectual endeavor merged with a somewhat different project, that of legitimizing architects as professionals, as a group with a socially acknowledged niche in the commercial economy. Sociologists of the professions have described a common path to this end that many professions followed. It involves the complementary strategies of defining a distinctive realm of expertise and of devising a mechanism for limiting entrance to its practice.[1] Aspiring architectural professionals' efforts to define a common ground are evident in the architectural handbooks that were published in such profusion beginning in the eighteenth century. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the technical and aesthetic information presented in these books sustained two lines of argument, aimed at intersecting audiences of self-improving builders and would-be architects of many backgrounds. One line asserted the superiority of current fashionable practices, while the other sought to codify an underlying core of knowledge that constituted the architects' characterizing expertise. The books' authors sought to discredit or, more often to coopt, craft practice by depicting it as a form of local knowledge subordinate to the universal knowledge or "science" of the professional. Histories of architecture, usually based on Vitruvius', became obligatory segments of these handbooks, supporting the writers' attempts to delineate a normative standard of design within a realm of comprehensive professional expertise.[2]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was evident, at least in the United States, that these architectural writers had been unsuccessful in describing an architectural science that could be distinguished empirically from the nonarchitect builder's. They shifted their intended audience from the craft worker to the client, and began to claim categorically different qualities of judgment from the craftsman's. The familiar eighteenth-century concept of taste was called to account for these differences in judgment. But eighteenth-century architectural writers had assumed that taste was inherent in an elite and had gone on to address their treatises to an upper-class audience. For the aspiring professionals of the nineteenth century, the elite status of taste was important as a rhetorical undertone, but their explicit argument was that taste was a personal quality of middle-class identity—"the attainment of correct principles in the formation of opinions"—achieved through specialized education.[3] Taste was manifested as architectural decorum, the knowledge of what to do in which settings, the ability to chart the right path between too much and too little. In short, the discipline of architecture was to be socially defined and socially exercised.[4] This would serve the second aim of controlling entry to the profession.

Thus, by the middle of the nineteenth century, English-speaking architects had defined a professional identity based on technical expertise, historical tradition, and aesthetic judgment, all derived from systematic professional education (although they have never been able to command universal public assent to this definition). What was legitimate in architectural history fell within the architect's realm; what was not encompassed by professional architecture was illegitimate.

Neither the appearance of nonarchitect scholars of architectural history in the mid-nineteenth century nor the subsequent professionalization of history did much to change the fundamental rationale of the history of architecture as a justification for professional architectural design. Scholarly architectural history, practiced by people who were themselves middle class, accepted the profession's self-interested paradigm.

This is not to say that architectural historians have simply parroted the profession's claims. In their own eyes, historians are driven by their own models of artistic creation. Traditionally, historians seek to evaluate and celebrate the expression of individual sensibility within identifiable traditions. The architect's works are triangulated within a relatively narrow lexicon of forms, a limited universe of visual references, and clear patterns of training. Biographical progression organizes the creative growth (and decay) of individual careers; monographs on architects typically use the implicit structure, "and then he did." Framed in this way, careers may be fit into artistic genealogies to map a "line of progress," in Alan Gowans's phrase, that constitutes the official history of architecture.[5]

But the concept of the artist has been useful to the architect as well, and in the architect-historian discourse it has fused with the architect's socially useful concepts of science and taste, leading historians to treat the success or failure of the profession in the marketplace as a problem in cultural hierarchy. In short, the history of architecture as we have written it, whatever our differences of detail, is the story of the progress of the profession envisioned as the uncertain triumph of high culture over low.

The categories of high and low as we understand them are another eighteenth-century contribution to architectural history. The Enlightenment reconstructed traditional ideas of history and beauty.[6] Eschatological concepts of history as a march toward ultimate, absolute judgment, and rhetorically similar Renaissance concepts of universal beauty, by which all works were measured by the same standard, were not so much abandoned as remodeled in the eighteenth century.[7] Human history was reimagined as noncyclical and nonteleological, and human culture as pluralistic and multivalent. Although confidence in absolute principles was shaken, the idea of the universal was preserved but relocated to the human mind and spirit. Rather than treat the beautiful as an absolute standard against which the particular could be judged, it was set apart as something transcending the particular. The universal was sheltered, that is, within the notion of timeless expression, comprising the highest and best that humanity could achieve. It was distinguished from a fragmented, temporal, low culture that was meaningful only in particular times, places, or social settings. While this new aesthetic attitude condescended to the low, it gave it a new visibility in the landscape. Rather than dismissing the low as the simple negation or absence of culture, the failure to measure up to the absolute standard, the new aesthetic conceded legitimacy to the low as a foil for the high.[8]

In the professionalizing architects' and historians' paradigm, the low was the product of local knowledge, of the craft tradition. It included the ordinary, the regional, the humble—what we might call the vernacular. The high, the realm of the timeless and universal, was ensconced among the monumental constructions of the elite and their professional allies.

On the face of it, recent scholars of the vernacular reject this model of architectural history. Monument- and architect-centered studies, they argue, focus on too little of the human-made environment.[9] In addition, they are too formalistic, and worst of all, they adhere to hierarchical, top-down models of creation that do violence to cultural and historical processes.[10] Stripped of their moralistic rhetoric, these arguments define the disagreement between scholars of the vernacular and those of the high style as one of differing understandings of the social relations of architectural production: Who makes architecture, under what conditions? How are architectural ideas created and disseminated? Who defines the meaning of architectural form?

In raising and responding to these issues, historians of the vernacular strive to account for whatever does not fit the canon and seem to denounce hierarchies of high and low. At bottom, however, the study of vernacular architecture is deeply and inextricably entwined with that of high architecture; they are part of the same discourse. While vernacularists have challenged the traditional scope and methods of architectural history, they accept its governing assumptions. Like the art history of architecture, the study of the vernacular is built on the positivistic analysis of discrete examples and well-defined collections of buildings to illuminate the social structures, cultural values, and patterns of learning and living among relatively small groups of builders. In exceptional structures like Bacon's Castle, Taos Pueblo, or the Fairbanks house, vernacular architecture even has its own canonical monuments. Rather than denying or even supplementing the high culture, therefore, histories of the vernacular complete it, confirming its transcendence.

These models for understanding the history of architecture assume three central concepts—aesthetic universals, the individual work (whether building, ensemble, or urban plan) as the unit of analysis, and the distinction between creator and audience—that derive from the professional imperatives of the nineteenth century discussed earlier in this essay. Yet these conflict with analyses of the creation of artifacts and expressive works current in most other humanistic disciplines.

In those other disciplines, most notably literature, the canon has come under fire for its dependence on that belief in the universal and the transcendent that survived the eighteenth-century introduction of relativistic perspectives.[11] Universals presume norms of perception, and the burden of nineteenth-century architectural discourse was to demand a normalization of perception, under the rubric of cultivation of taste, as a prerequisite for the success of professionalization Of what value is the architect's taste if only a few recognize its superiority? As the Philadelphia architect Thomas U. Walter observed, "Artists alone, with all the skill and judgment of a Phidias, a Raphael or a Michelangelo, could make no head against the crudeness of uncultivated taste." He concluded that "it is undoubtedly desirable that every one should acquire some knowledge of the elementary principles of Architecture, of its historical associations, and of the general laws that govern it."[12] These assumptions are still embedded in architectural history. If the progress-of-the-profession or -architect narrative that most historians of the high style adopt depends on a notion of universality, so, perversely, does the narrative of resistance to high culture that students of the vernacular inherited from social history. The latter sees high culture as a relatively monolithic, hegemonic entity that equally monolithic lower class or ethnic cultures struggle against for survival.[13] In either case, normative experience of the physical environment is presumed. Yet the weight of twentieth-century understanding of psychology, class, and culture militates against any such belief in normative experience. To relinquish the possibility of the normative, however, requires that we also abandon the corollary notions of high and low culture, except as social or historical artifacts.

The focus on the builder or the designer is equally suspect. Obviously there are people who control the construction of individual buildings and many more who do not. But the historian must seek a more subtle understanding of the landscape than the subject/object relationship between creator and work permits. The builder/user distinction fixes the historian's attention too closely on the issue of intention. It makes little difference whether intention is framed in terms of artistry within a great tradition or, as vernacularists prefer, of building within received cultural categories and socioeconomic relations.[14] Both offer overly constricted interpretations of the human landscape, for several reasons.

First, if there is no normative experience, no builder can be certain that his or her work will have a specific meaning, be used in certain ways, or be assigned a given value by its public. Even the architects of early nineteenth-century prisons and other institutional buildings, whose tasks were relatively limited and whose purpose was explicitly coercive, were unable to do so. Once introduced into the landscape, the identity of a building and the intentions of its makers are dissolved within confusing patterns of human perception, imagination, and use. Consequently, the meaning of a building is determined primarily by its viewers and users. This process of creation goes on long after the crew leaves the site; it never stops. Every structure contains several different buildings as imagined by different segments of its public. None of these is necessarily consistent with the others, nor do any of them bear any necessary relationship to the intention of designer, builder, or client.[15] Yet so much of architectural history is directed toward identifying the pure form, the original condition, the architect's intention. How relatively unimportant these are!

This is the simplest criticism of intention. A second is that while architectural history, like most studies of the material environment, focuses on the eye, we experience the landscape through all our senses, and the evidence of our senses, or rather the categories that we use to interpret it, is rarely internally consistent.[16] Our ears, noses, and sometimes even our fingers and tongues make connections, associations, and interpretations that may differ drastically from those our eyes suggest. While our eyes isolate the building as a unit of analysis, the other senses organize the landscape differently. To put it another way, each of the senses may perceive a different landscape in which the individual building is irrelevant. Our experience of the material world is thus a complex, multisensory, constantly changing tangle of relationships that cannot be captured on mylar or film.

Finally, designers account for few of these social, perceptual, or imaginative phenomena in their planning; it is unlikely that they could. As a result, the landscape, ostensibly the object of intention, ricochets back on us in unexpected ways. Most of what is important about architecture is *un*intended. Designers, like other users, become the objects, as well as the subjects, of their own and others' work. Thus, there is little point in separating designer and user, or in singling out individual works. The act of architecture is one gesture in an endlessly recursive articulation of the individual and the landscape. It is a landscape that is created more by construing than by construction.

How, then, might architectural historians respond to these criticisms of their working assumptions? One way would simply be to defend the traditional view of architectural history as the interpretation of intention expressed within recognized aesthetic and intellectual traditions. The complement of this in vernacular architecture studies is to explicate typological specimens as manifestations of widespread social and craft patterns. From this first point of view, other approaches to the built environment may be valid, perhaps even important, but they are not architectural history. I argue that this position, however carefully defined, is untenable. The categories of high and low, of art and intention that it embodies, are artifacts of professionalization in Western commercial society. As artifacts they have beginnings and histories and are appropriate topics of historical inquiry. When historians take on the profession's narrative, however, these categories are absorbed into our own analysis and escape scrutiny.

A second strategy, more commonly employed of late, might be to set architecture into a context, by bringing the concerns of one of the branches of architectural history to bear on the other. For instance, one might apply vernacular socioeconomic or cultural analysis to high culture or, more rarely, high-culture concepts of artistic creation to the vernacular. But neither of these offers a satisfactory path to a new architectural history, because studies of the vernacular and the high style are so deeply entangled; both preserve the problematic structure that we have seen plagues the approach discussed in the previous paragraph.[17]

An example from art history will illustrate the problems of contextualization. T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life*, which applies a Marxian perspective to nineteenth-century Parisian painting and urbanism, attempts to illuminate the fissures of class, gender, and politics in Second Empire Paris. Yet Clark's radical politics cannot lure him outside the mandarin canon of nineteenth-century French art. In an astonishing footnote he assures us that none of his argument is intended to challenge accepted aesthetic hierarchies, much less the premise of artistic greatness![18] Thus, Clark shares the deep allegiance to the individual work, to the creator's intent, and to the categories of high and low. Contextualization is limited by the desire to leave the implicit social categories of more conservative art and architectural historians intact while claiming to question them. Under such circumstances, it is little wonder that even the most radical historians feel compelled to fence off some reserve, however small, within which to shelter a canon (a body of works of supreme, universal value), however drastically some might wish to reorganize it.

Consequently, I prefer a third strategy, one that would imagine not simply a more inclusive or more contextualized architectural history, but a fundamentally different one. This different architectural history accepts as its unit of analysis the entire *cultural landscape*. Of course, this history takes into account builders and buildings, but it is concerned with construction only on the way to construing. Its focus is the human experience of its own landscape, rather than the relationship of maker and object. It attempts to encompass as many modes of perception as possible and, equally important, the mental categories through which perception is interpreted. The landscape history of architecture is rhetorical as well as sensual: anthropologists and literary theorists have shown us that construing is conditioned by the verbal lenses through which we perceive the material world.[19] Thus, a working definition of *cultural landscape* emphasizes the fusion of the physical with the imaginative structures that all inhabitants of the landscape use in constructing and construing it. Since there can be no normative perception, the human environment is necessarily the product of powerful yet diffuse imaginations, fractured by the faultlines of class, culture, and personality.[20] It cannot be universalized, canonized, or even unified.

Admittedly, it is more difficult to write about the cultural landscape as I have described it than to make the more straightforward kinds of architectural histories that we are accustomed to write. Yet I think that it is necessary. The boundaries among the humanities are dissolving as scholars of many disciplines examine the relationships among human experience and the generation of meaning. The landscape is one of the central concerns of these new humanists. Architectural historians, who have always been concerned with the built environment, can make their best contribution to our era's interdisciplinary ferment by relinquishing our linguistic, conceptual, and sometimes literal partisanship of one segment of the building population and rethinking our basic analytical units. Such a course would be true to history and true to the landscape, if not to architects. But they can take care of themselves.

Notes

1. Magali Sarfati Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 9–10, 14–18, 131–139; Kevin Dougherty, "Professionalism as Ideology," *Socialist Review* 49 (Jan.-Feb. 1980): 160–175; Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976), pp.88–91.

2. For examples of architectural histories in handbooks, see Asher Benjamin, *The American Builder's Companion, or A System of Architecture Particularly Adapted to the Present Style of Building*, 6th ed. (Boston: R. P. and C. Williams, 1827), pp. 30–37; Minard Lafever, *The Beauties of Modern Architecture* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1835), pp. 65–128. On the relationship between books and professionalism, see Dell Upton, "Pattern Books and Professionalism: Aspects of the Transformation of American Domestic Architecture, 1800–1860," *Winterthur Portfolio* 19 (Summer/Autumn 1984): 111–118.

3. John W. Ritch, *The American Architect* (New York: C.M. Saxton, 1847), des. 10. On education as a diagnostic quality of the emerging nineteenth-century middle class, see Larson, *Rise of Professionalism*, p. 4; Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, pp. 287–331.

4. Upton, "Pattern Books and Professionalism," pp. 120–127; Dell Upton, "The Traditional House and Its Enemies," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 1 (Spring 1990): 80–82.

5. Alan Gowans, *Learning to See: Historical Perspectives on Modern Popular/Commercial Arts* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), pp. 4–11.

6. Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750–1950*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1965); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment, an Interpretation, vol.* 2, *The Science of Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1969), pp. 368–396; Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (New York: Vintage, 1966, 1968), pp. 88–94.

7. Gay, *Loss of Mastery*, pp. 3–9.

8. For a somewhat different account of the fabrication of high and low in eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 1–26.

9. Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 1–2.

10. Dell Upton, "Toward a Performance Theory of Vernacular Architecture in Tidewater Virginia," *Folklore Forum* 12 (1979): 174–176.

11. Some literary scholars would supplement the great white men's canon by including works by women and non-European authors. Others argue that the

canon constantly evolves, as scholarly assessment of works and authors changes, and is therefore a flexible and living thing. In my opinion, both of these positions evade the implications of the theoretical literature on texts and readership that I draw on below.

12. Thomas U. Walter, "Architecture Considered as a Fine Art," MS, December 1841, pp. 7–8, Walter Papers, Athenaeum of Philadelphia; Walter, "On Ancient Architecture," MS, November 11, 1841, p. 2, Walter Papers.

13. This narrative within vernacular architecture studies builds on the pioneering analysis of autonomous working-class culture introduced into Anglo-American social history by E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1963) and featured prominently in the work of such Americanists as the labor historian Herbert Gutman and the historian of slavery Eugene Genovese.

14. At the same time, we must reject out of hand the common idea of unself-conscious creation often advanced as a diagnostic characteristic of vernacular building. Henry Glassie demolished this claim, especially in *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Study of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).

15. See Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," in Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Material Life in America 1600-1860* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp. 357–369.

16. See Dell Upton, "The City as Material Culture," in Anne E. Yentsch and Mary C. Beaudry, eds., *Material Culture, World View, and Culture Change*, Telford Press, in press.

17. In addition, as Jonathan Culler pointed out, the attempt is a Sisyphean one, since "while meaning is context-bound, context is boundless... Contextualization is never completed; rather one reaches a point where further contextualization seems unproductive." *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 148.

18. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 78.

19. See, for example, James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1977), pp. 10–11; Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956), pp. 51–86; Jonathan Culler,"Writing and Logocentrism," in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 89–110.

20. For a longer discussion of the cultural landscape and an example of such an analysis, see Dell Upton, "Another City: The Urban Cultural Landscape in the Early Republic," in Catherine E. Hutchins, ed., *Everyday Life in the Early Republic, 1789–1828* (Winterthur, DE: Winterthur Museum, in press).