

Evidence and Narrative

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At the seventieth annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, held in Glasgow, we co-chaired a session titled “Evidence and Narrative in Architectural History.”¹ The purpose of this session was to discover some of the practices widely used in the discipline, especially those employed to manage two interrelated problems of particular interest: choosing evidence with which to make arguments and developing structures for telling stories. From the SAH session, as well as in future conferences and workshops on these topics, we hope to seed a conversation on writing history that will help the field become more self-conscious about its use of evidence and narrative. Ultimately, reconsideration of evidence and narrative will produce new and different histories of architecture as well as reimagined agencies for ourselves as writers, readers, teachers, and students.

Issues of evidence and narrative have always been part of architectural history discursively, despite architectural historians’ general indifference. Yet there may be an institutional timeliness to the intertwined themes. For architectural historians in art history departments, focusing on narrative might foster alliances with scholars in similarly concerned fields, like history, literature, and philosophy, strengthening architectural history’s identity and legitimacy within the humanities and the academy. For architectural historians in architecture schools,

focusing on evidence can create links with the sciences and law, underscoring the field’s validity for professional practices that rely on the legitimating capacity of objective knowledge. Insofar as architectural history sits between these two sources of institutional power, by considering the reciprocal dependencies of evidence and narrative in our writing, we can give our work the capacity to make this dynamic explicit.

Architectural historians find evidence everywhere. We mine built and unbuilt projects alike, textual and visual documents of all kinds, and findings of other fields. Quantitative data, too, have recently entered the field—plural and standardized information, in contrast to more singular facts. Evidence is what demonstrates, proves, or attests to the truth claims of a historical narrative. However, transforming the epistemic unit called “fact” into evidence requires marshaling it in the service of an argument, as historian Lorraine Daston observes. Yet facts remain “notoriously inert—‘angular,’ ‘stubborn,’ or even ‘nasty’ in their resistance to interpretation and inference.” In Daston’s telling, facts—etymologically related to an action or deed already completed—are unique and “robust in their existence and opaque in their meaning.”² Daston, as a historian of early modern science, reads the resistance of facts to immediate understanding as the basis for legitimating scientists’ later claims to objective knowledge, in that a fact’s presumed existence prior to the observer’s engagement guarantees the fact’s immunity from distortion. Objectivity, based on this understanding of fact, was developed as an “epistemic virtue” for controlling potentially untrustworthy conclusions from scientists who might be tempted by their overactive subjective selves.³ Valorizing fact, reality, and knowledge and the related suppression of value, fiction, and

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the subjective self have similarly underwritten historians' claims to objectivity.⁴

How do we mobilize, specifically, the visual material we use to understand architecture in our arguments as evidence? Like textual evidence, the visual material through which we access form is discontinuous and inconclusive when it stands alone. Historical arguments must transform such elements through a conjectural analysis of form, as in art and architectural historians' privileged technique of side-by-side comparison. These traditions of formal analysis in our field, so often centered on comparing visual materials to give them meaning, have not yet, we believe, found a theory of the value of evidence. By contrast to claims to objectivity, formal analysis often produces evidence from visual material by ascribing subjective intention. That is, one typical practice of our discipline relies on the power of connoisseurship to link drawings to their creator—to the architect's signature, practice, or workshop.⁵ Against the stubbornness of facts to meaning, invoking an author gives the architectural historian access to a biography to invest that individual's creations with apparent purposes. Furthermore, in the case of drawings, those made by different authors may share similarities in form and therefore, by the historian's light, borrow meaning from one another and appear to produce continuities between projects before and after. Yet these connections across space and time are rarely made explicit in any one drawing, and the construction of such connections relies heavily on the historian's imagination.⁶

In this essay, we do not claim that fact-based objectivity is any more or less important to an understanding of architecture than speculations derived from formal analysis. This is not a call to a new empiricism that privileges one form of evidence over another. Rather, by marking out differences in the methods for producing evidence, we aim to reveal the internal tensions in our historical practice. To underscore the essentially interpretive, even political, work of architectural history, which we see as a process of assembling discontinuous elements of evidence into a story, we turn to the matter of narrative. One of the chief means by which we as historians give purposeful sense to our facts—turn them into evidence—is by narrating them, that is to say, putting them into a specific kind of chronological order.

Scholars in other fields have explored the role of narrative in making evidence meaningful, but architectural historians have done so to a lesser degree.⁷ Following historian Hayden White's definition of "narrativity," we define narrative as storytelling—evidence plotted into a beginning, middle, and end, complete with turning points and a central subject, be it a person, building, or concept.⁸ Awareness of narrativity yields benefits to us as architectural history authors and readers. In writing and teaching, harnessing storytelling's persuasive powers strengthens our arguments, creating images of

coherence and fullness out of masses of undifferentiated facts, even those that have been given evidentiary value.

Consciousness of narrativity allows us, too, as readers, glimpses beneath surfaces, toward the politics underlying every story. White suggests that "the demand for closure in the historical story is a demand . . . for moral meaning." He argues that "narrative in general . . . has to do with topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority." Thus, at the center of every narrative plotted as a story is a "politico-social order," no less so in architectural history, and every ending is a pronouncement upon the world's ideal.⁹

Analysis of narrative can reveal evidence turned for political purposes, legitimating authority of one sort or another. Yet narrative's condition points as well to alternatives and resistances. The selection of evidence to fit one story line inescapably omits other potential evidence, which could be used for a different story. Counternarratives are inevitably invited, as facts, voices, and experiences are always left out, undiscovered, excluded, waiting to be deployed in other stories. From the outset, then, "every narrative is also a counternarrative," cultural theorist Martin McQuillan explains, responding implicitly to some prior understanding and ordering of the evidence. Continuing the chain, "as a condition of its production a narrative will always initiate a counternarrative."¹⁰

Besides the marshaling of excluded evidence into different stories against dominant narratives, evidence itself might be rearranged to resist narrative's totalizing effects and political purposes. As White points out, stories with beginnings, middles, and ends are not the only way to organize the past. There are also annals and chronicles, lists of events without closure or plot. In these instances—alternatives to the narrative story form itself—evidence might maintain its singularity, its discontinuity, its independence apart from all-encompassing narratives, a form of resistance to imposed authority, which Foucault has called "genealogy" and "effective history":

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity . . . ; rather, it is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers. . . . "Effective" history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity.¹¹

Such a form of history, which resists narrative certainty, invites indeterminacy and even meaninglessness as alternative politics in history writing. Joan Scott promotes composing "undetermined history," emphasizing accident and agency over structure and teleology, so that the past's contingency models a similarly open future, not merely a continuing

present.¹² Resisting narrative's impositions, accepting instead facts' or forms' inherent "meaninglessness is the only invitation that potentially oppositional and dissenting groups of historians may get to challenge certainist (e.g. fascist) history," declares historian Alun Munslow. "They, and we, empower ourselves when we can find no objective certainty in the past—in the sense of a factual correspondence with Truth—that can be used to validate the authority of those in power over us."¹³

It is never enough to rethink evidence without narrative. Architectural history needs counternarratives and alternatives to narrative for numerous reasons. First, they can educate us differently about the past's heretofore obscured evidence and meanings. Counternarratives can also free and inspire practicing architects to design differently. The politics of narrative and evidence are not just contained within history but are present, too, in our subjectivity as teachers and students, authors and readers, inscribing relations of power and authority. Facing up to narrative's authoritarian impulses can encourage us to write and instruct differently, loosening the reins of narrative, inviting readers and students to more open-ended engagements with evidence and our determination of its significance, questioning transmissions of power and authority across texts and classrooms. At the same time, we must acknowledge the benefits and desires of tightly plotted, memorable story lines. They persuade and inspire. Can the future, in other words, be liberated without convincing narratives of the past?

Paradoxes, tensions, and choices within and between evidence and narrative remain ultimately irresolvable; there is no true path. Precisely, then, in the complex space of evidence and narrative lies room for innovation and maneuvering in architectural history—deploying new evidence, trying different narratives and alternatives, testing combinations of tactics, enacting other politics and subjectivities—if only we understand first this multifarious terrain, evidence and narrative always intertwined.

Notes

1. We would like to thank our new collaborator in this project, Zeynep Çelik Alexander, for her suggestions for this text, and Patricia Morton for helping to sharpen its focus. The session was presented on 8 June 2017, and the speakers and their presentations were as follows: Dianne Harris, "Large Data: Shaping Architectural History from 70,000 Pieces of Evidence"; Peter Minosh, "The Revolutionary Architecture of Haiti: Construction without Origin"; Lucia Allais, "Riegl's Evidence"; Laila Seewang, "From Truth to Proof: Science behind Public Works in 19th-Century Berlin"; Timothy Hyde, "Striking and Imposing Beauty: On the Evidence of Aesthetic Value."
2. Lorraine Daston, "Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991), 93, reprinted in *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*, ed. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 243.
3. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "The Scientific Self," in *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 191–253.
4. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
5. Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop*, no. 9 (Spring 1980), 5–36.
6. One example is Cristoph Frommel's analysis of Bramante's drawings in "Early Architectural Drawings," in *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo: The Representation of Architecture*, ed. Henry A. Millon and Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), 114.
7. See, for example, Mary S. Morgan and M. Norton Wise, eds., "Narrative in Science," special issue, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 62 (Apr. 2017).
8. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
9. *Ibid.*, 21, 13, 11.
10. Martin McQuillan, "Introduction," in *The Narrative Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (London: Routledge, 2000), 23.
11. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 146, 154.
12. Joan W. Scott, "History-Writing as Critique," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), 25.
13. Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), 12.