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Rethinking Europe's Position in the Formation of Architectural Histories: Is a Non-Eurocentric Narrative Possible?

The paper examines the following challenge that the architectural historians that attempting to enunciate a non-Eurocentric or non-western discourse face: an overwhelming majority of the buildings that have an important place in scholars' collective memory, and in what we could call the epistemology of architecture, are designed by architects whose approaches are based on Eurocentric or Western values. The majority of archival resources contain material that is either representative of Eurocentric or Western values, or comes from architects who were legitimized according to Eurocentric or Western values, thus playing a dominant role within Eurocentric or Western contexts. The protocols that define what is evaluated and legitimized as scholarly research are based on Eurocentric or Western criteria. These three dimensions of the problem make the task of narrating a history that takes critical distance from Eurocentric or Western principles very difficult. One possible path could be to show the interaction between the different factors that contributed to a built result, revealing the non-realized episodes of a project and the controversies that preceded or accompanied its realization, having access to primary sources, that is to say archival materials, representing all the agents.

Keywords: archival materials, non-Eurocentric discourse, non-western discourse, postcolonialism, provincializing Europe

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Introduction

The point of departure of this paper is the realization that architectural historians who aim to narrate certain events while avoiding a Eurocentric approach and revealing the various agents that contributed to their realization should found their survey on sources coming from different archives that represent western and non-western or Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric perspectives. The problem of “Eurocentrism” has its roots in the Baroque and became a historiographic problem in the nineteenth century in line with other concurrent themes such as “exotism”, “orientalism”, “archeology”, and “culturalism”. Sir Bannister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* is a good illustration of the Eurocentric biases of architectural historiography, periodization, and classification¹. More than forty years before the publication of Sir Bannister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, James Fergusson published *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* (fig. 1), which aimed to provide “a concise and popular account of the different styles of architecture prevailing in all ages and countries”². Fergusson's three volumes of *A History of Architecture in all Countries, from The Earliest Times to The Present Day*, was an attempt to write a comprehensive survey of world architecture³. Despite his interest in writing about non-Western architecture such as the Indian architecture⁴, as Peter Kohane has remarked, “[c]entral to [...] [Fergusson's] stereotypical account of the East as Other is the assumed superiority of European civilization”. Kohane has also noted that Fergusson's “gaze is that of an enlightened Westerner, who momentarily delights in a strange, confused, and claustrophobic spatial experience, but ultimately remains in control”⁵.

¹ Sir Banister FLETCHER. *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1896; John MCKEAN. “Sir Banister Fletcher: Pillar to post-colonial readings.”, *The Journal of Architecture*, 11(2), 2006, 187–204; Murray FRASER. “A global history of architecture for an age of globalization.” *ABE Journal*, 14-15, 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.5702>

² James FERGUSSON. *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture: Being a Concise and Popular Account of the Different Styles of Architecture Prevailing in All Ages and Countries*, 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1855.

³ James FERGUSSON. *A History of Architecture in All Countries: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Vol. I, Vol. II, Vol. III. London: John Murray, 1862-67.

⁴ James FERGUSSON. *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*. London: John Murray, 1876.

⁵ Peter KOHANE. “From Scotland to India: The Sources of James Fergusson's Theory of Architecture's ‘True Styles’ *ABE Journal*, 14-15, 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.5551>

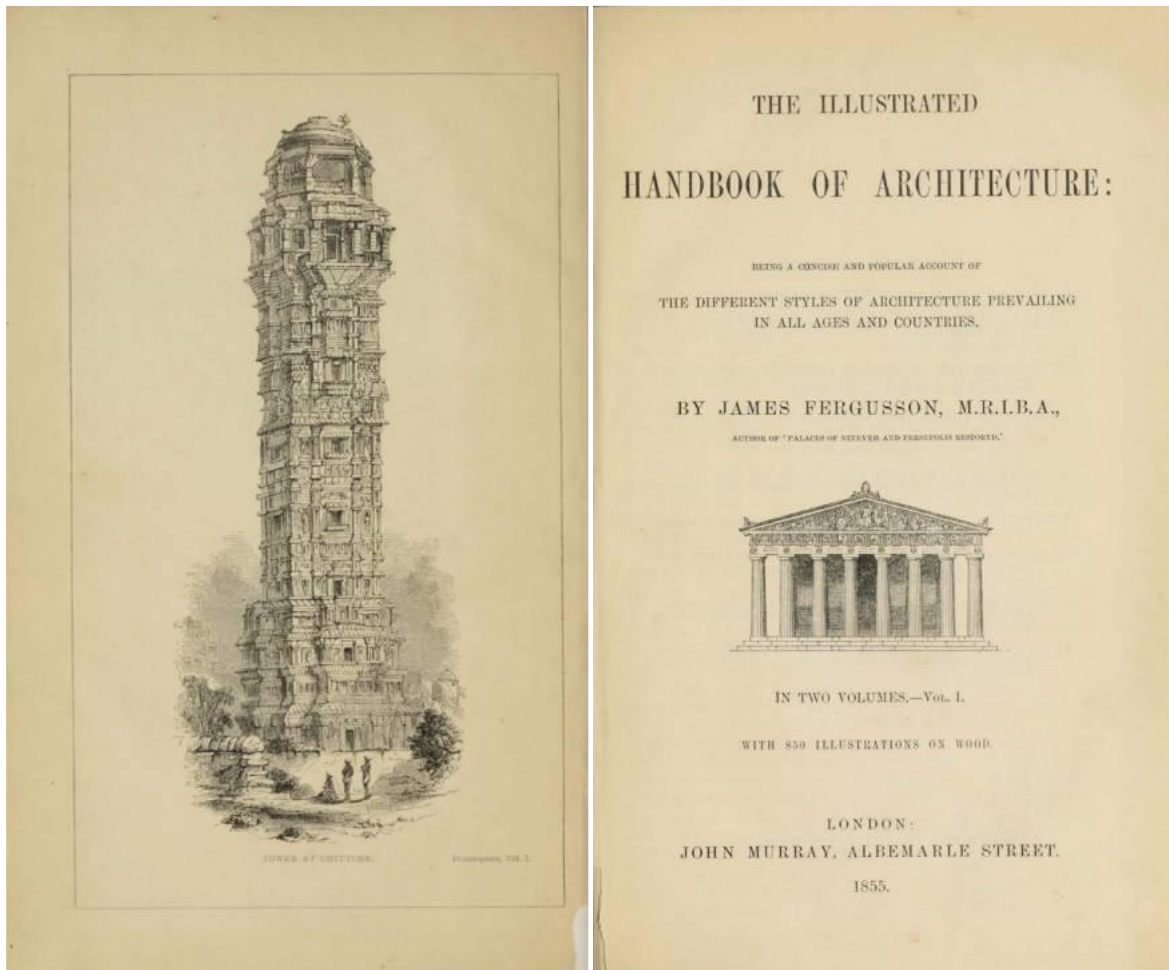


Figure 1. From James FERGUSSON. *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*. London: John Murray, 1855.

The paper is based on the conviction that archives are also constructed according to criteria that – in most cases – are Eurocentric or western. As a concept or idea Europe is a project: the task of thinking and accomplishing universality. Eurocentrism as a concept is specifiable only within the context of modernity and is crucial for thinking modernity. Modernity is here understood as an attitude, as a way of relating to contemporary reality. The efforts to incorporate post-colonialist criticism into architectural discourse, during the last four decades, have been proved risky, as they cannot avoid the peril of “provincializing” Europe. In order to write histories that are not based on the western canon, it is necessary to avoid labels such as the “other” or “colonial”. By depicting Europe and the West as a homogeneous power of domination over the rest of the world, postcolonial criticism turns ‘Europe’ into the blind spot of its own discourse. The fallacious character of dichotomies, such as western/non-western or Eurocentric/non-Eurocentric, becomes evident if we think that various societies have adopted aspects of western modernity without fully adopting them, and incorporating them into the indigenous culture. Europe, as a concept, represents the potential for an enlightened resistance in a world that is progressively becoming dominated by the mono-perspectivism of globalism. Since the dissolution of colonialist models, architectural history has been trying to place Eurocentric narratives under critical scrutiny. This tendency is accompanied by a questioning of the

Zeitgeist theories, which, for a long time, had served to legitimize modernism.

Nowadays, what seems to be at stake in architectural history models is the increase of efforts to better understand the relation of architecture with structures of power and dominant ideological agendas in society. The tension between the scientific ethos of the task of the historian, which is based on the demand for a commitment free of preconceptions and value judgments, and the political function of the project of history, which is based on a certain social order, has always existed since the emergence of the profession of the historian and was reflected in the educational mission of the nineteenth century university. The very notion of Enlightenment is related to the task of the historian and to the concept of Europe. Enlightenment was defined by a modification of the pre-existing relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason.

Rethinking the role of Europe and the formation of architectural history

The task of rethinking the role of Europe in the formation of architectural history cannot but be related to an institutional analysis of the evolution of architectural history's position within the universities and the production of knowledge at large. Spiro Kostof's *A History of Architecture*⁶, which constitutes an endeavour to include non-monumental and non-western traditions in architectural survey, is interpreted here as an attempt to rethink the western canon. Kostof made a significant effort to present non-western architecture as an important factor in our understanding of western architecture, but his point of view still remained Eurocentric. Ákos Moravánsky, in *Competing Visions. Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918*⁷, intended to dissect the tight web of biographical, cultural, and aesthetic cross-connection. For this reason, he chose a thematic structure, which aimed to explore architectural history in clusters, rather than through a linear development toward a monolithic modern form. Jean-Louis Cohen, in *The Future of Architecture since 1889*⁸, adopted a narrative structure, which is based on Fernand Braudel's conception of multidimensional "planes", and aimed to take into account the multiple and overlapping temporalities that characterise the evolution of our understanding of architecture (fig. 2).

⁶ Spiro KOSTOF, *A History of Architecture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

⁷ Ákos MORAVÁNSKY, *Competing Visions. Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998.

⁸ Jean-Louis COHEN. *The Future of Architecture since 1889*. London: Phaidon Press, 2012.

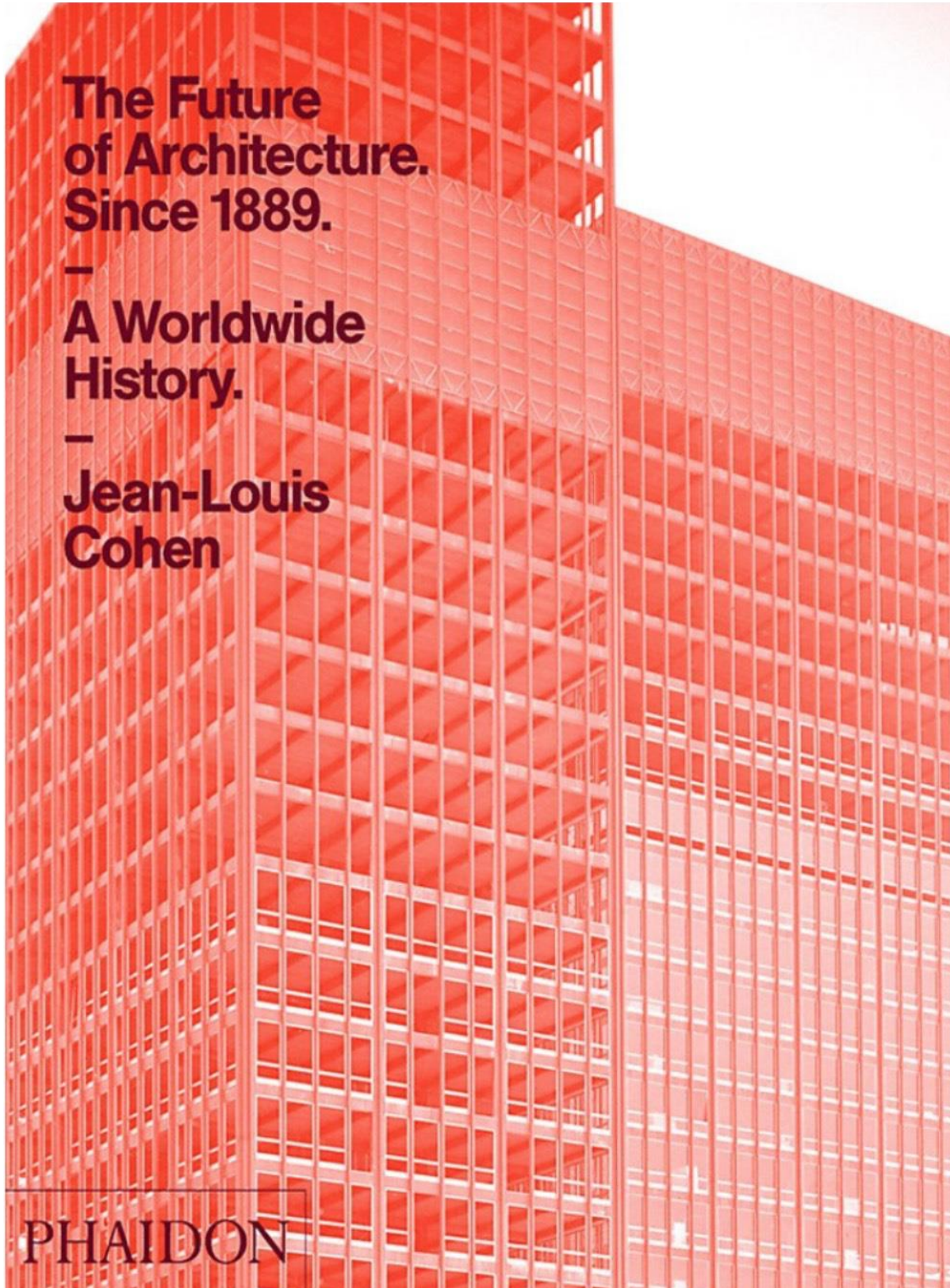


Figure 2. Cover of Jean-Louis COHEN. *The Future of Architecture since 1889*. London: Phaidon Press, 2012.

Towards a comparison of different methods of teaching and writing architectural history since 1968

The paper focuses on the analysis of an ensemble of strategies of teaching and writing architectural history and theory from 1968 until today within different institutional and geographical contexts. As Andrew Leach has underscored in *What Is Architectural History?*, depending on the criteria adopted by the respective historian, the most common categorizations encountered in architectural history models are based on the following types of structures: “style and period”, “biography”, “geography and culture”, “typology”, “technique” and “subject and analogy”⁹. Jean-Louis Cohen, in a lecture entitled “The new horizons of the history of architecture” he delivered in the framework of the colloquium “Architecture between practical and scientific knowledge” he organized at the Collège de France in January 2015, presented an ensemble of shifts concerning the methods of architectural history that dominated the last quarter of the twentieth century¹⁰. He underlined the fact that the majority of dissertations in the field of architectural history focus on monographic studies of architects or buildings and the analysis of architectural movements.

An important distinction concerning the narration of architectural history is that between narration based on diachronic structures and narration based on synchronic structures. Both synchronic and diachronic comparisons aim to shed light on the social and political processes that shape institutional structures¹¹. According to Deborah Howard, diachronic structures activate the creative imagination in the learning process¹². A question that the methods of teaching history and theory of architecture attempt to answer is the dilemma of whether chronological or typological organization is preferable. The questioning of chronological organization is related to the exploration of new ways of framing the knowledge and understanding of historical time. According to Ellen K. Morris, “[k]nowledge about architectural achievements of the past can be imparted either by the standard, chronologically geared ‘survey’ course [...] or by a course which cuts across the continuum of architectural history through the study of major institutional building types”¹³. In order to better grasp thematic approaches, part of which are the typological studies, we should relate them to the endeavour to provoke an awareness of chronological sequences¹⁴. Argentinian architectural historian Marina Waisman argued that the organization of courses according to typological groupings favours the emergence of relationships between the buildings and the urban structures in which they are embedded¹⁵.

⁹ Andrew LEACH. *What Is Architectural History?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.

¹⁰ Jean-Louis COHEN. “Les nouveaux horizons de l’histoire de l’architecture », lecture given at the colloquium « Architecture entre pratique et connaissance scientifique », Collège de France, Paris, 16 January 2015.

¹¹ Marianna CHARITONIDOU. “Réinventer la posture historique : les débats théoriques à propos de la comparaison et des transferts.” *Espaces et sociétés*, 167, 2016, 137-152.

¹² Deborah HOWARD. “Teaching Architectural History in Great Britain and Australia: Local Conditions and Global Perspectives.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 61(3), 2002, 351.

¹³ Ellen K. MORRIS. “Teaching History Typologically.” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 34(1), 1980, 27.

¹⁴ Hans MORGENTHALER. “Chronology Versus System: Unleashing the Creative Potential of Architectural History.” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 48(4), 2013, 218-26.

¹⁵ Marina WAISMAN. *La estructura histórica del entorno*. Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1985; Susana TORRE. “Teaching Architectural History in Latin America: The Elusive Unifying Architectural Discourse.” *Journal of the Society of*

Hilde Heynen and Krista de Jonge, in their article entitled “The Teaching of Architectural History and Theory in Belgium and the Netherlands” identify the following two distinct models of education: the approach based on the division between architecture history courses and architectural design courses, which are dominant in the Belgian Schools of Architecture, and the methods that aim to incorporate architectural history into design studios, which are more dominant within the Dutch context¹⁶. The integration of the design process and visual expression in the research process, and the promotion of the interactions between the design process and the historical analysis are at the core of the recognition of doctoral dissertations through design (PhD by Design) in various institutional and geographical contexts including the DDes programme at the GSD of Harvard University, the Phd by Architectural Design programme at the Bartlett School of Architecture. The emergence of the doctoral research by design has caused significant changes in the institutional nature of architectural research. At the same time, it has contributed significantly to the realization that the teaching of architectural history and the teaching of architectural design courses should be understood as complementary.

Deborah Howard, in her article entitled “Teaching Architectural History in Great Britain and Australia: Local Conditions and Global Perspectives”, points out the differences between the teaching methods of architectural history in art history departments and those in schools of architecture. She places particular emphasis on the importance of teaching architectural history to mixed groups of art history and architecture students¹⁷. A symptom of the suspension of the dialogue between architectural history and art history, to which Alina A. Payne refers, in her article entitled “Architectural History and the History of Art: A Suspended Dialogue”, is the separation of the Society of Architectural Historians from the College Art Association, which took place in the early 1970s¹⁸.

The relationship between architectural history and architectural theory and the reconciliation of their differences is a challenge to which contemporary teaching methods aim to respond. Pioneers in the teaching of the history and theory of architecture were Dalibor Vesely and Joseph Rykwert, who between 1968 and 1978, in the framework of the so-called “Advanced Masters-Level Course in the History and Theory of Architecture” at the University of Essex in the UK, introduced a new teaching method, which, instead of relying on the presentation of buildings according to chronological or stylistic organization, attempted to examine the cultural contexts of the buildings by analysing the intentions of architects through their writings. Among the graduates of the aforementioned programme were Robin Evans, Daniel Libeskind, Alberto Perez-Gomez, David Leatherbarrow, Mohsen Mostafavi, and Peter Carl (fig. 3).

Architectural Historians, 61(4), 2002, 549-558.

¹⁶ Hilde HEYNEN, Krista de JONGE. “The Teaching of Architectural History and Theory in Belgium and the Netherlands.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 61(3), 2002, 335-45.

¹⁷ HOWARD. “Teaching Architectural History in Great Britain and Australia: Local Conditions and Global Perspectives.”

¹⁸ Alina A. PAYNE. “Architectural History and the History of Art: A Suspended Dialogue.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 58(3), 1999, 296.

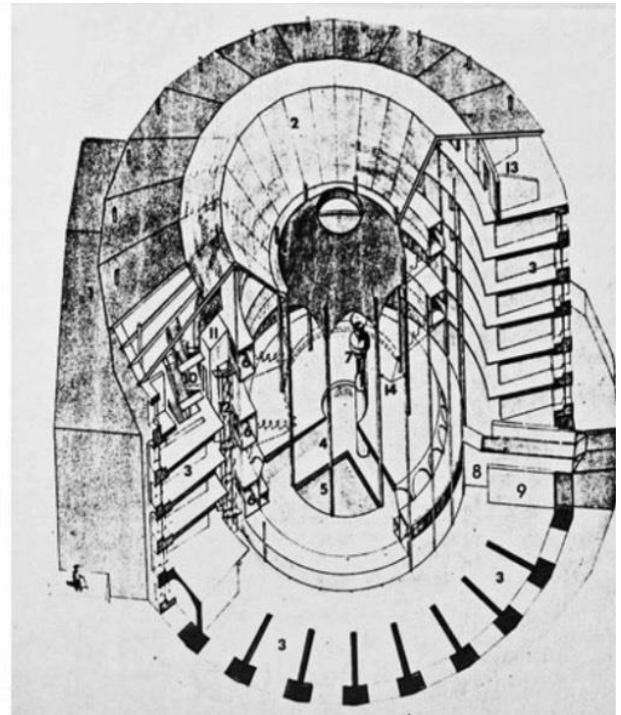
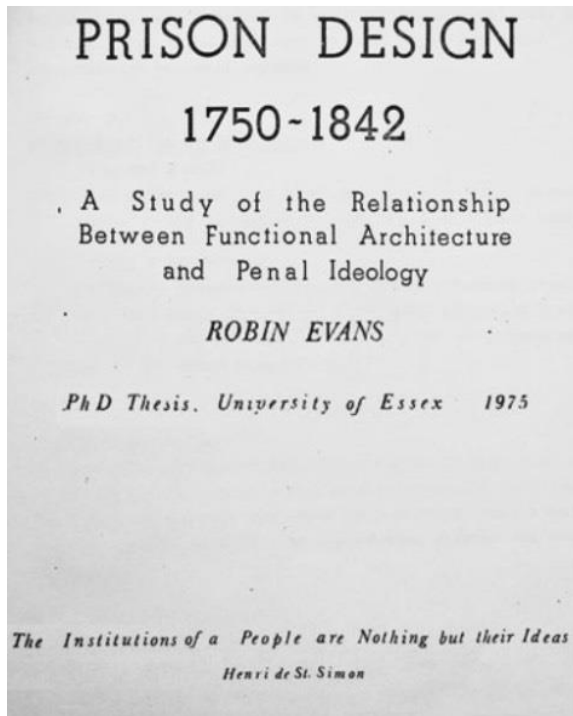


Figure 3. Cover and image of the doctoral dissertation prepared by Robin Evans at the University of Essex in England. Source: Special Collection, Albert Sloman Library, Essex University

Ákos Moravánszky, in his article entitled “Architectural Theory: A Construction Site”, argues that architectural theory is still searching for its identity and refers to the dilemma of whether architectural theory is a matter of discourse or aesthetics¹⁹. In the same text, he also underscores that the term “aesthetics” has been systematically avoided by theorists of architecture since 1968. The interaction between architectural history and architectural theory is linked to the historiographical shift of architectural theory and the issue of periodization, which have been intensified since 1968. At the same time, since 1968, there has been an increasing concern about interdisciplinarity. As Sylvia Lavin has pointed out, the correlation between architectural history and architectural theory is related to the intensification of the production of architectural anthologies during the 1990s²⁰. More recently, an issue that arose due to rapid digitization is the adaptation of teaching methods to the phenomenon of direct dissemination of visual information across all latitudes and longitudes²¹. Educational approaches seek to address the problem of managing the plethora of images available due to the galloping development of online and digital tools. In parallel, the possibilities of quantitative data analysis thanks to the digital revolution are causing significant reorientations in historical research methods²².

Alina A. Payne has underscored the fact that the integration of history into the curriculum of

¹⁹ Ákos MORAVÁNSZKY. “Architectural Theory: A Construction Site.” *Footprint*, 1, 2007, 47.

²⁰ Sylvia LAVIN. “Theory into History or, The Will to Anthology.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 58(3), 1999, 494-499.

²¹ HOWARD, 2002, 352.

²² Marianna CHARITONIDOU. “Architecture Museum Trends vis-à-vis the Archive: The Effect of Digitization.” *OASE*, 99, 2017.

architecture schools intensified during the 1970s²³. An important shift, which is related to the fact that the title of doctor is now a prerequisite for teaching history of architecture, is the increase in the number of doctorates in the field of architectural history since the 1980s. Another reorientation concerning architectural history is the shift of architectural historians who focused on older periods to the twentieth century. This category includes researchers such as Nicholas Adams²⁴, Alina Payne²⁵ and Barry Bergdoll²⁶. However, the number of historians of architecture with thorough knowledge of both modern and earlier periods, such as Manfredo Tafuri, remains limited.

Shaping research models that aim to challenge Western narratives

Within the current context, architectural history models are characterised by an attempt to shape research models that oppose Western narratives. The examination of Europe's role in shaping the history of architecture is linked to an institutional analysis of the evolution of the place of architectural history in universities. The efforts to integrate post-colonial critique into architectural discourse over the past four decades are particularly evident. I could refer, for instance, to that fact that, according to the evaluation criteria of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, the schools of North America must include in their curriculum “global” courses.

Two questions that arise are: how is it possible to raise the question of the politics of architecture without reducing architecture to politics?²⁷ Are historical narratives inevitably imbued with the ideological assumptions of the period and the geographical context in which they are formed? A question address within the framework of the Getty Summer Institute in Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Rochester in 1999 is the following: if historical narratives are inevitably imbued with the ideological assumptions of the period in which they are formed, what is the cultural function of history?²⁸ The current situation is characterized by an effort to overcome the dichotomy between the methods of architectural history that place particular emphasis on cultural and political aspects, and the strategies concerning architectural design methods that focus on the processes of analysing architectural form.

An example of a Western narrative is Sir Banister Fletcher's book entitled *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*²⁹. The “tree of architecture”, which was included in

²³ PAYNE, 1999, 293.

²⁴ Simon PEPPER, Nicholas ADAMS. *Firearms & Fortifications: Military Architecture and Siege Warfare in Sixteenth-Century Siena*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986; Nicholas ADAMS. *Gunnar Asplund's Gothenburg: The Transformation of Public Architecture in Interwar Europe*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014.

²⁵ Alina A. PAYNE. *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance: Architectural Invention, Ornament and Literary Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Alina A. PAYNE. *From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

²⁶ Barry BERGDOLL. *European Architecture 1750-1890*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Barry BERGDOLL. *Marcel Breuer: Bauhaus Tradition, Brutalist Invention*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016.

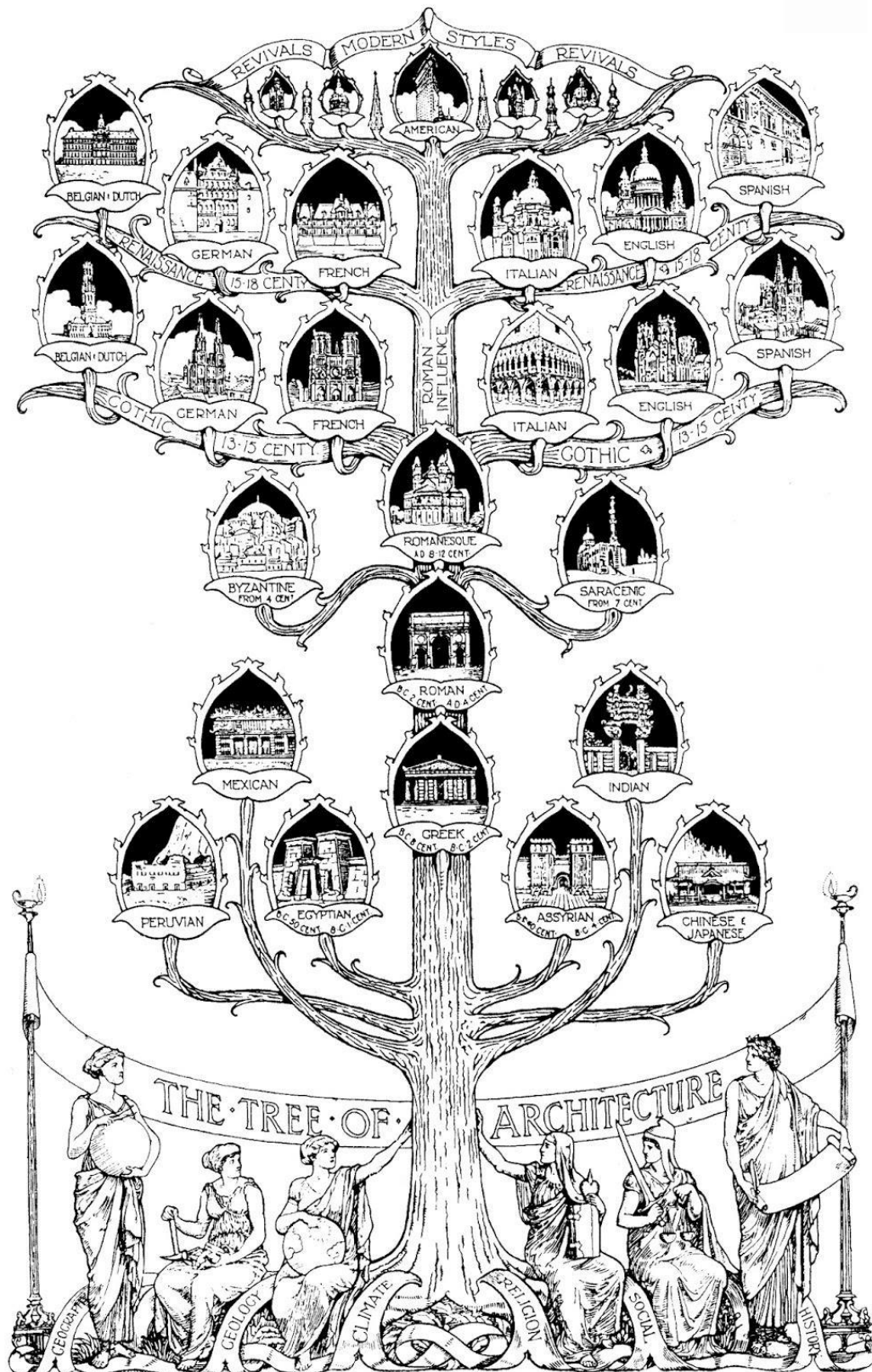
²⁷ Sibel BOZDOGAN. “Architectural History in Professional Education: Reflections on Postcolonial Challenges to the Modern.” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 52(4), 1999, 207-215.

²⁸ PAYNE, 1998, 296.

²⁹ Sir Banister FLETCHER. *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd. 1896.

it, depicted evolution and progress as exclusively western features (in this case, from classical Greek architecture to modern revivals of the nineteenth century)³⁰ (fig. 4). The misleading nature of Western/non-Western or Euro-centric/non-Euro-Centric dichotomies becomes apparent if we consider that different societies have adopted aspects of Western modernity, and without fully assimilating them, have adapted them to the respective cultural context.

³⁰ Glsm BAYDAR NALBANTOGLU. "Toward postcolonial openings: rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's "History of Architecture"." *Assemblage*, 35, 1998, 6-17.



BANISTER FLETCHER. INV.

Figure 4. "Tree of Architecture," frontispiece of Sir Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student Craftsman, and Amateur*, sixteenth edition. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.

Conclusion

The majority of buildings that have an important place in the collective memory of scholars and in the epistemology of architecture, have been designed by architects whose approaches are based on Western values. Much of the archival resources contain material representative of Western values or come from architects who were legitimized according to Western values. The protocols that define what is evaluated as scientific research are based on Western criteria. The aforementioned three dimensions of the problem make the distancing of historical narratives from the Western values very difficult.

Greek architectural theorist Giorgos Simeioforidis shed light on the “questioning of the narrative structure of the history of architecture as early as the 1960s (with emphasis on the period 1965-68)”. He referred to the shift from “attempts to write a comprehensive history of architecture”, which aimed at legitimizing the modern, to narratives that deal with [...] local stories, biographies of architects and critical analyses of buildings, subject matter, epistemology and interpretive issues”³¹. Simeioforidis also placed particular emphasis on a reorientation of interest from perceptions of history that aim to legitimize the respective works to be analysed as modern, to narrative structures that examine the terms under which the dialogue about architecture and the city takes place. Giorgio Ciucci, in the framework of his endeavour to describe the same transition, remarked that “history as an edifice of a whole and therefore as an ethology, is replaced by a network of stories that examine the excerpts from which a work is made”³² (fig. 5).

³¹ Giorgos Simeioforidis/Γιώργος ΣΗΜΑΙΟΦΟΡΙΔΗΣ. «Μικρο-αφηγήματα και η τέχνη των αποσπασμάτων». Γ. Αίσωπος, Ο. Σημαιοφορίδου, Γ. Τζιρτζιλιάκης (eds.). *Διελεύσεις: Κείμενα για την αρχιτεκτονική και τη μετάπολη*. Athens: Metapolis Press, 2005, σ. 82.

³² Giorgio CIUCCI. “Roprogettare storie/Replanning the Histories.”. *Casabellà*, 498/499, 1984, 109-11.

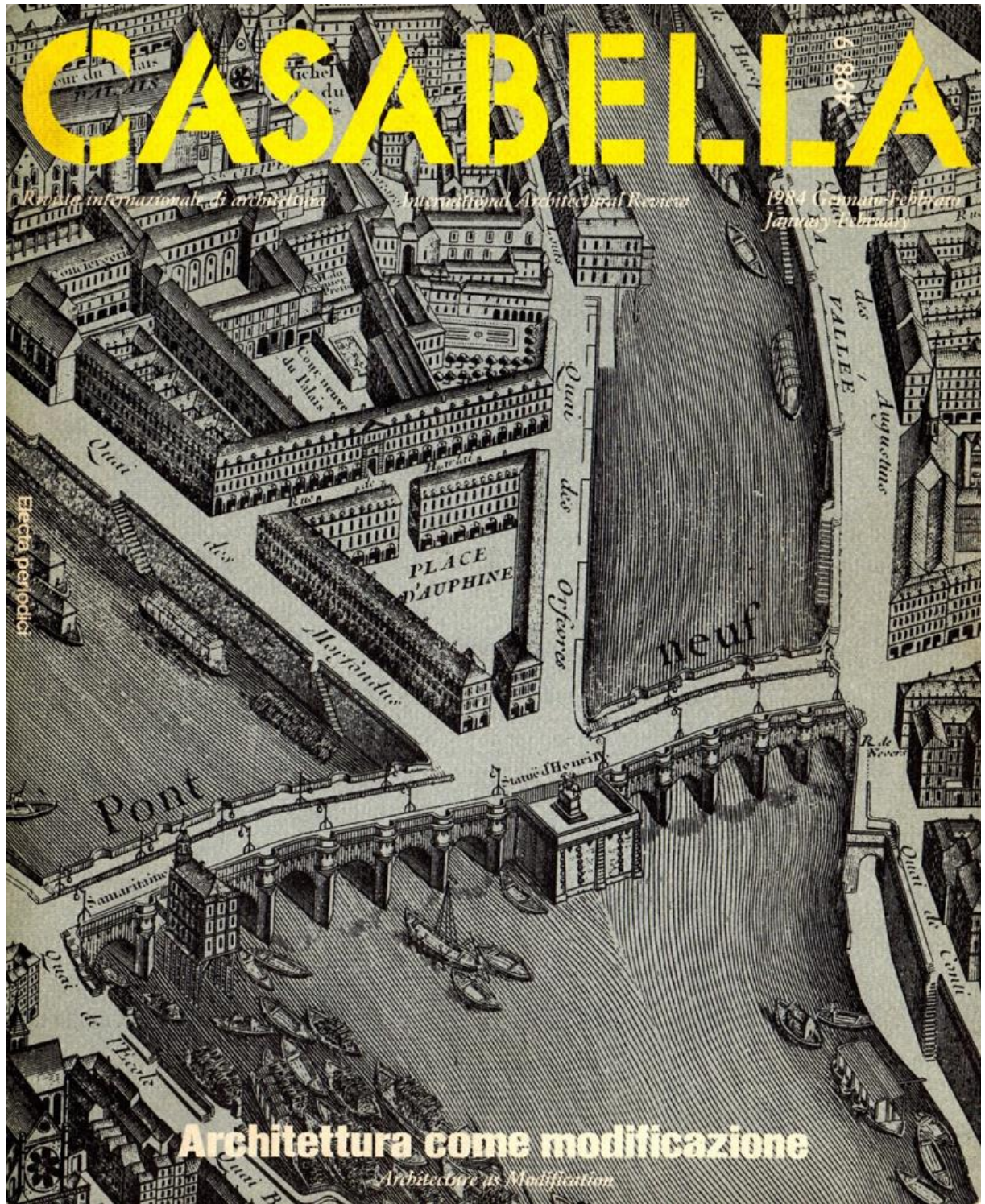


Figure 5. Cover of the issue of *Casabella* in which Giorgio Ciucci's article entitled "Roprogettare storie/Replanning the Histories" was published.

The teaching and writing of history and theory of architecture should aim at sharpening the creative imagination of each student and at understanding the culturally and historically imbued formation of architectural knowledge and expression. The narration of history according to

methods that highlight the interactions between the various factors that have contributed to the planned and/or built result, and the revelation of the unrealized episodes and controversies that accompany the implementation of an architectural project, favour such a direction. Such a direction presupposes access to primary sources that represent all the factors that shaped the implementation of the respective architectural projects under study. History and theory of architecture should focus on the following goals: firstly, to the documentation; secondly, to the interpretation of the social, economic, symbolic, political and cultural dimensions that accompany the design and construction of each project for analysis and, thirdly, to the construction of interpretive structures and evolutionary shapes of the course of architecture. The fact that the last two dimensions of the practices history and theory of architecture are related to the philosophical practice, makes the integration of philosophy as a cognitive field in the teaching of the history of architecture a necessity.

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