arq (2017), **21.4**, 347–350. © Cambridge University Press 2018

Recognising that the discipline of architectural history is circumscribed by still-modest aspirations, a bigger disciplinary ambition remains to be forged.

Is architectural history getting any bigger?

Timothy Hyde

It is by chance that just-published obituaries of the American architectural historian Vincent Scully are open on my screen as I begin to write an article for this issue of **arq**, but the juxtaposition seems significant. Scully passed away at the age of ninety-seven, a long scholarly life to bookend the present subject of this issue of **arq**: the journal's coming of age in its twenty-first year. That one of these is a biological age and the other a temporal duration distinguishes them, of course, but the juxtaposition nevertheless illuminates in a curious way the question of when and whether architectural history will enter into maturity.

Scully's death, occurring so recently, is a reminder that the discipline is not terribly old, with only a few intellectual generations needed to skip back to the turn of the twentieth century. Heinrich Wölfflin died in 1945 and Scully started writing his dissertation the following year, under the supervision of Henry-Russell Hitchcock. James Ackerman (who died only a year ago) co-taught with Scully in those graduate student years while being advised by Richard Krautheimer, who had completed his own dissertation under Paul Frankl. Students of both Scully and Ackerman are, of course, alive and well today, adjusting the contours of the field with their books, articles, and lectures. Similarly, students taught by Manfredo Tafuri have a present standing in the field, and Tafuri (who died the year before **arq** published its first issue), anchors a short chain linking himself, Giulio Carlo Argan, and Lionello Venturi, Wölfflin's contemporary. Other architectural historians could serve equally to reveal the same point: that the scope of the development of architectural history is perhaps more limited than chronological age might suggest, and certainly that in comparison to the existence of its presumed subject matter – architecture – has barely made it to infancy.

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Without diminishing the hours of archival labour, fieldwork, cogitation, and writing that have been undertaken over the past century and a half, and without understating the contributions to knowledge and understanding those efforts have produced, the implication should be admitted: there really isn't very much architectural history. Not that many architectural historians, not that many books, not that much history, relatively speaking. Especially when set against comparative measures, such as linear feet of library shelving allotted to literature, for example, or the grant funding allocated to physics; when viewed against the overall context of architectural production that has taken place around it during its one-hundred-and-fifty formative years. This isn't to say, necessarily, that architectural history is marginal, for it has attained points of instrumentality and effect along the way, but the admission is the necessary starting point for reflection on the future of the discipline, because architectural history needs to think about how to get bigger.

Incompleteness

The ambition to provide broad accountings and summary explanations, as formalised in universities by the textbook and by the institution of the survey course, accompanied architectural history from the start. Auguste Choisy, for example, made such an attempt, to be followed by Sigfried Giedeon's sweeping textual panoramas and Nikolaus Pevsner's nimble narratives, shorter in their chronologies but even more insistent upon their syntheses. Over the past few decades, new accounts have been placed alongside these by historians brave enough to write surveys and textbooks, variously covering architecture over a period of several centuries, architecture from all around the globe, or architecture from all times

doi: 10.1017/S1359135518000106

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135518000106 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and places. Even the most generous publisher will allot only a certain number of pages to such books, so even these surveys, more precise and more rigorously theorised than their predecessors, are episodic, edited to use exemplars to stand for tendencies they represent and sets in which they are included.

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Put simply, architectural history has long depended upon a strategy of extrapolation. Unable to achieve any comprehensive collation of its subject matter, the discipline's historical narratives have coalesced into categories sustained by extrapolative approaches. They embed discrete architectural works within aesthetic or technological movements, or use nation-states as isomorphs of architecture's geography, or employ monographic studies of individuals as corollaries of durations of social time. From the necessity of employing the organisation and presentation of selections, architectural history has over the past century made habitual and conventional what should actually be startling and problematic. That the claims of the discipline are based upon an incomplete knowledge is not in itself the issue – what area of historical enquiry, indeed what discipline, does not share in this? Rather, the issue lies in the fact that architectural history has, as a discipline, failed to theorise sufficiently the incompleteness of its knowledge.

The disciplinary guilt needn't be evenly shared. Many classicists and medievalists have been clear enough about the constraints faced in fully constructing their subjects. It is perhaps the modernists who, possibly too close to the nineteenth century's illusory impression of a complete archive and to technologies of reproduction, need most urgently to confront the problematic condition of incompleteness. And yet, the reflexive response to the problem – to fill in more information, to seek out the missing buildings, the unknown architects, the unstudied cities and territories – should be recognised as itself being a modernist response, one which, while well-intentioned and undoubtedly helpful, does not address the underlying methodological crisis. Nor would another familiar response, that of reinforcing disciplinary boundaries so that they contain only already-extant categories – a response that is becoming less common, but which is by no means extinct.

One potential opening towards an expansion of the discipline of architectural history, in its materials and its subjects but more so in its epistemological capacity to address incompleteness, might be signalled not by the modernist response but by taking up the theoretical concern for deeper histories. The current conceptual scope of deep history addresses materials and boundaries of time that precede architecture itself, so mere appropriation of the perspective would not address a specific disciplinary concern. But the deliberate conceptualisation of distance and duration could suggest a means of fashioning historiographic frameworks that are more loosely attached to their particulate subjects.

Invisibility

What other evolutions of the discipline might have come to pass had the enquiries into the history of architecture emerged and been consolidated not from within art history but another field – intellectual history, say, or from a science such as chemistry? Such counterfactual possibilities are hard to conjure in any great detail, though the cause is less their short-sightedness in themselves than the relentlessness of the aesthetic priority that has attached to architectural history since its relatively recent emergence from art history. But to the extent that such alternative narratives can be conceived and deployed as speculative inquiries, they point toward the myriad non-aesthetic, and more specifically non-visual, dimensions through which architecture and its understanding are approached.

Text has accompanied the visual and physical appearance of architecture, of course, so that textuality has been an accomplice of the phenomenal in architectural interpretation, no matter that the two are often stood in opposition to one another. From their initially subordinate relation within conclusions drawn by architectural history, text and textuality came to hold, by the end of the twentieth century, a position of near independence from architectural appearance within some disciplinary arguments. If this development opened the clear possibility of an emphasis in architectural history upon the non-visual, or even a non-visual architectural history, it was only a provisional step away from visibility, given that text remained conventional communicative language, and textuality remained the textuality of literary criticism and linguistics.

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Through this opening, however, different potentialities of textuality have entered into the compass of architectural history. Contracts, specifications, legislation, and other instrumental texts of legal reasoning have, for example, begun to receive increasing attention as necessary materials of architectural history, even to the extent that, in some arguments, the specification surpasses the drawing as the evidentiary ground of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135518000106 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interpretation. Such texts, however removed from the visual sphere, retain at least the recognisability of everyday communicative language. That is not likely to be the case for the next expansion of architectural history's attention, into the mediums of the digital age, algorithms, scripts, and machine codes. Some groundbreaking work notwithstanding, in the context of the overall field of architectural history, the pervasiveness of computation within architecture of the last half-century has barely been acknowledged, taken as a decisive criterion only in consideration of architects whose work is explicitly 'about' computation.

Yet the presence of the digital has been widespread for some time, whether in design, communication, manufacture, or in other realms of architectural production. So, if the historian examining the nineteenth century needed to read French and German and to be able to navigate the documentary realm of bureaucracy, the historian of the twentieth century and beyond needs a fluency in computational languages as well as a knowledge of the material supports of the digital: magnetic cores, silicon chips, and fibre-optics. The expansion of architectural history is an expansion toward invisibilities, and it is not clear that the discipline has yet formulated even primitive, let alone adequate, tools to work with invisibility. It will not likely be sufficient merely to translate tools devised for realms of visibility. For example, the phenomenological approaches premised upon human experience will not elucidate the molecular materiality of architecture and its significance (though some theorists are attempting such a bridge using claims of neuroscience). Architectural history can certainly seize upon this all-but-unexplored territory of architectural understanding, but must first admit a disciplinary unpreparedness in order to shift effort and resources toward a new objective.

Invention

From its foundational endeavour of evaluating and explicating the origins and significances of architectural forms, the discipline of architectural history assembled an armature of connections to disciplinary neighbours, in philosophy, in engineering, and in literature. From these connections developed the fuller scope of what would now be defined as the potential for interdisciplinarity, in which architectural history traded concepts and arguments with these adjacent fields, while retaining its privileges as an interpreter of the architectural profession and the built environment. But it has not only been broad disciplinary overlaps that have shaped the development of architectural history; the influences have been conveyed more instrumentally through techniques: the empirical routines of archaeology, for example, or the operations of archival conservation and recording, or quantitative regimes of calculation and computation. These techniques, encoded with their own rules, potentials, and limits, contribute their own capacities to bring architectural objects into the requisite degree of presence such that they can become objects of architectural history.

The objects of architectural history are not found, but invented; not only in the sense that they are designed, conjured up through the motivated actions of persons and institutions, but invented in the sense that they are designated as the proper materials of disciplinary enquiry and resolution. Unlike the geologist seeking out and discovering the autonomous materials to be placed under scrutiny, the historian is engaged in a process of summoning from disparate materials a coherent (or at least provisionally coherent) entity to be situated, examined, and questioned. For the architectural historian specifically, this process is carried out with borrowed techniques, and by understanding these borrowed techniques as the tools through which it encounters its objects, architectural history would confront a quite challenging possibility: that architectural history is not a discipline in and of itself, but is the collection and remainder of potentials defined in and by the techniques other disciplines.

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Continued rehearsals of claims to a disciplinary core or to a disciplinary irreducibility do more to threaten disciplinary persistence than to enhance it, precisely because they postpone a moment of reckoning. By contrast, an embrace of inventiveness, as represented by all of these prior acts of borrowing, might authorise a new moment of disciplinary expansion. For architectural history to be bigger – in the sense of a capacity to engage a wider array of materials and also in the sense of greater maturity that enables it to resolve its current methodological deficiencies – for the discipline to be bigger, a willing experimentation in novel assemblies of techniques would offer a way to invent different kinds of objects of enquiry. Alongside monographs could appear data sets; alongside Scully's anthropocentric empathetic encounters with buildings could appear visualisations of molecular change; alongside Tafuri's contextualising narratives of contingency could be a new literature of intermittent documentation, closer in conception to a seismograph than a Pevsnerian narrative.

Bigger and bigger

The route to disciplinary growth is in some aspects obvious: more doctoral students, more academic appointments in universities and research assignments in institutions around the world, more books and articles; a natural growth, however compromised by current trends within academic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135518000106 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spheres of funding and publishing. But, of course, disciplinary growth is not merely a numerical measure. Although this issue of **arq**, as the journal's speculative coming of age, provokes from me an assessment of the smallness or – maintaining the chronological metaphor – the immaturity of architectural history, the prognosis, like that for any minor, should be optimistic. For by recognising that the discipline is presently quite circumscribed, and quite modest in its aspirations, a different tone can be forged, of encouragement and speculation. Though the expansion of architectural history is by no means a given, and is unlikely to be a painless transformation, the obstacles are largely self-imposed. By declaring an end to its childhood, and by seeing what paths are open towards many futures, architectural history can become bigger and bigger.

Author's biography
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135518000106 Published online by Cambridge University Press