

What is Architectural History?

Review of:

Andrew Leach, *What is Architectural History?* Polity, Cambridge, 2010. 196pp. ISBN 978-0-7456-4457-8. £14.99.

Taking at face value Andrew Leach's approach to the subject: that architectural historians 'enact' a 'translation' that responds to the 'problem of organizing the past of architecture into historical units' (p.75) then a good place to start reading this book would be the second chapter dedicated precisely to the task of 'Organizing the past' (pp.41-75). Here the author convincingly identifies as the principal modern (1880s to present) historical approaches to 'doing' architectural history: 'Style and period', 'Biography', 'Geography and culture', 'Type', 'Technique' and 'Theme and analogy'. Leach also locates the rise of architectural history within the context of the architectural profession of the same period, but this leads to problems. Whereas military historians and historians of medicine belong to a clear category of academic discipline that operates independently from current military and medical practice, the author has real difficulty in accepting that architectural historians can plausibly occupy a like place as academics functioning separately from current architectural practice. One consequence of this is that Leach evaluates architectural history for its 'use' value as though it has to justify itself and its existence within architecture schools, thus re-running a debate of the 1990s when historians were progressively removed or reduced in number in such schools.

Although the title of this book is 'What is Architectural History?', the responses found within the text suggest that several differently formulated questions had been posed in the mind of the author, who also attempts to answer the questions 'What is Architectural Historiography?'; 'What is Architecture's Intellectual History?' But because the author himself cannot conceive (even philosophically) of architectural history as a separate entity or discipline from architecture, he comes across as not being entirely convinced that there is an answer to the question posed in the title (p.2): 'there is as little agreement on what architectural history is and how it should be done as on what architecture is and how it should be made'. But rather one might say that there are different methodological approaches to architectural history that find different degrees of acceptance and use by members of the field, just as there are schools and factions and movements among architects.

But why should debates about what constitutes architectural practice today impact on methodological debates about how one might practice and write architectural history? This confusion comes from Leach's fundamental assumption, which this reviewer does not share, that architectural history's 'value' resides in its 'usefulness' for architecture: 'This form of architectural historiography constitutes an enquiry into the past of architecture that pays varying degrees of attention to its *usefulness for those who make architecture* [my italics]' (p.4). This is also one of the many frequent references to architectural historiography rather than architectural

history as though they are the same thing and that prompted this reviewer to wonder whether the title of this book ought to be different.

This concept of usefulness is one found in architecture schools where 'history' is taught and tolerated principally because it might be useful in the training of future architects. It takes virtually no account of the numerous – and in the twentieth century perhaps the majority – of architectural historians who, for example in the English speaking world, belonged and belong to the discipline specific Society of Architectural Historians in the USA and UK. Thus Richard Krautheimer, for example, is not even mentioned in this text (nor Mark Girouard for that matter), despite the fact that at Vassar College and then at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts Krautheimer trained an entire generation of 'academic' architectural historians.

Instead, the architectural historians who are considered here are precisely those whose work has had an influence on the practice and practitioners of architecture as the author considers this the principal significance of architectural history restricted to this narrowly, almost moralistically defined nexus of 'work concerned with the history of architecture' (p.3) and 'academics concerned with architecture's intellectual history'. Thus for Leach the architectural historians who count are those that have had and have a perceptible impact on architects: Wittkower, Portoghesi, Rowe, Banham, Tafuri, in which case he might have also mentioned the impact of current architectural history writing in journals such as *Casabella* that are widely read by and influential on architects practising today.

After discussing briefly (p.3) the 'academic practice of architectural history', Leach, like a Culture Minister trying to force a National Gallery to encourage visits by groups from social classes 'C', 'D' and 'E' and not just from 'A' and 'B' tries to valorise non-academic architectural history by journalists and local historians (which is all very well), but on the bizarre grounds (thereby implying that their work isn't very good) that they: 'have nonetheless widened the audience for architecture and its history by piquing interest with notable details and connecting the particular and the peculiar with the general and the significant' (p.4). Even odder is Leach's inclusive 'outreach' to the point of unrecognisability: 'For example, a religious community might identify with a church building or convent, a university community with a college complex or campus'. I think emotional 'identification' with a building hardly constitutes architectural history.

Leach's conflated architectural history – historiography – is suddenly revealed as being almost entirely narcissistic: 'architectural history has regularly taken on the form of a mirror – a mirror portraying a field of architecture into which architecture itself peers in order to define itself historically'; 'a mirror held insistently before it [architecture] by the historian' (p.5); and this history is as narcissistic as architecture itself: 'Architecture also offers a lasting mirror image of the people who commissioned, made and lived in and around it' (p.9). From this seems to flow as a consequence the assertion that: 'There is great disagreement, too, over the set of buildings deemed fundamental to an architect's historical education', with the suggested solution being: 'No one position has an inherently stronger claim than any other, even if the architect can claim privileged insight into historical works.' (p.11). And thus we return to Leach's architect based view of the subject: 'Architectural history is always shaped, to one extent or another, by a theory of

history and historiography that determines the historical scope and content of architecture as a profession' (pp.18-19). I would have expected such a sentence to end with: 'as a subject of research', whereas history and architecture are so often confused and conflated in this volume that one finds sentences such as: 'Architecture tends to define itself, through its historians, against historical measures – even when claiming to work beyond history, and even when those measures are made outside of any concept of architecture'.

There is also an underlying assumption that those writing history are architects: 'architectural history written by and for the architecture profession' (p.39, reiterating p.34) and while this may be true of Cornelius Gurlitt, it was not so of Heinrich Wölfflin or Alois Riegl, Eberhard Hempel or Hans Sedlmayr. But here even Leach's understanding of Gustavo Giovannoni is mistaken as Giovannoni was not 'an architect and art historian' who 'mobilized his historical knowledge to practical ends'; rather he was one of the first Italian figures who might truly be described as an 'architectural historian' as his first degree was in Civil Engineering (1895), he went on to found the first Faculty of Architecture in Italy in Rome in the 1930s, and all of his extensive writings are exclusively dedicated to subjects to do with what has long been recognised in the field as the discipline of Architectural History in its widest sense.

Andrew Hopkins is a member of the journal's Editorial Advisory Board.

Andrew Hopkins
Dipartimento di Storia e Metodologie Comparate
Università degli studi de L'Aquila

hopkins@cc.univaq.it