



Title:

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OUT OF CONCEIVED SPACE: FOR ANOTHER HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses two processes of production of space and how historiography of architecture relates to them. The first one is based on professional design of extraordinary spaces (monuments) and is widespread during the 20th century, even in the design of ordinary buildings. We understand it through Henri Lefebvre's 'conceived space': the architect's intellectual work dominates the builder's manual work by means of abstract concepts, tools and codes. Its products are the objects of prevailing histories of architecture reinforcing the very concepts used before. In contrast, the second process relates to Lefebvre's 'lived space'. It is collective and cooperative, characterized by people's engagement and negotiation on nonhierarchical building-sites, in which design, building and use are simultaneous. It creates everyday spaces in constant change, such as Brazilian favelas. Prevailing histories of architecture do not include this second process, because there are no concepts, schools, authors or finished products to be reified, while alternative approaches, also called 'new history' (School of Annales, 'history from below', microhistory, *Alltagsgeschichte*), have not yet reached the academic field of architecture. Our question is how to include the production of lived space in this field, as the way of making history is crucial to define the understanding of students and professionals about their role in society.

INTRODUCTION

Lefebvre's theory of space as a social product is based on the idea of a dialectical process of production involving three fundamental dimensions. Space is socially produced as a material network of things and physical actions, perceived through the senses, and constituting spatial practices. Space is also produced as mental constructions, which are conceived and coded in

representations (concepts) of space. And space is produced as a lived world of experiences, constituting spaces of representation (imagination). For Lefebvre, these three dimensions make an inseparable, although contradictory, unity: ‘material practice *per se* has no existence when viewed from a social perspective [...] pure thought is pure fiction [...] and pure “experience” is in the last analysis pure mysticism’.¹

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the three dimensions are symmetrical or even stable. Every society produces its own space according to its (general) mode of production, its (specific) social formation and the contradictions thus engendered. Lefebvre states that the lived, conceived and perceived realms probably constitute a coherent whole in ‘favorable circumstances, when a common language, a consensus and a code can be established’.² But ‘modern neocapitalism’, as Lefebvre calls it, has produced an ‘abstract space’ where the conceived dimension prevails.³

The representation of space, in thrall to both knowledge and power, leaves only the narrowest leeway to representational spaces, which are limited in works, images and memories whose content, whether sensory, sensual or sexual, is so far displaced that it barely achieves symbolic force.

At the same time, abstract space determines not only biological reproduction and socio-economic production (as in pre-capitalist societies), but most of all *reproduction of the social relations of production*, or the maintenance of class division and power. The secret of the ‘survival of capitalism’ is its capacity to ‘erase distinctions’⁴ through concrete violence organized by representations of space.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CONVENTIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

We may now distinguish between two notions of *architecture*. The first is architecture as *every space transformed by human work*; it is related to the lived dimension of the production of space. The second is architecture as a professional and academic field (in the sense of Bourdieu), specialized in conceived products. When Lefebvre uses the term *architecture* he conventionally addresses the latter. However, his theory of space indeed concerns the former, and that is what interests us.

The field of architecture originates from the transition between two modes of production: feudalism and (merchant) capitalism. Its history and tools correspond to the history of ‘abstract space’. As a field, architecture is ‘responsible for producing those parts of the built environment that the dominant classes use to justify their domination of the social order’.⁵ Architects are thus specialized in the design of apparently meaningful objects (monuments) to garnish abstract space. Even if professional design procedures are now widespread, defining a substantial part of everyday life, their basis is still the extraordinary: the architect’s intellectual work dominates the builder’s manual work and the user’s actions by means of abstract concepts and codes.

Conventional historiography of architecture, along with most architectural theory, is part of this academic and professional field, consolidating and distinguishing it from competitors, such as engineering or industrial design. History of architecture is thus focused on extraordinary spaces, and written for ruling groups, specialists, or at best *amateurs*. Essentially, its task is to retell, explain and interpret the very concepts architects use for their designs. Some architects even write on their own work, providing the historians with the ‘right’ interpretation.

The theoretical background of this conventional historiography of architecture is tied to a German speaking tradition, beginning with Herder's notions of *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the time, and *Volksgeist* or national character. While the *Zeitgeist* (*genius saeculi*) is supposed to be common to an age, crossing space, the *Volksgeist* (*genius loci*) is supposed to be common to a place, crossing time. Hegel (1848) later saw the *Zeitgeist* as the historically developing consciousness of humankind, so that each period constitutes a stage of this spirit.⁶ But even authors not aligned with Hegel's model of a dialectical progress, such as the art historian Jacob Burckhardt, maintain the general schemes of *Zeitgeist* and *Volksgeist*.

In history of architecture the *Volksgeist* still persists through geopolitical categorizations such as 'Japanese contemporary architecture' or 'American architecture'. The *Zeitgeist*, on the other hand, was extensively explored by Giedion, Pevsner and later historians of modern movements, who elected a small range of buildings as manifestations of the modern spirit.⁷ Even as late as 1974 Christian Norberg-Schulz reinforces the idea of an evolutive and comprehensive *Meaning in Western Architecture*⁸

Another crucial influence for conventional historiography of architecture is Leopold von Ranke's method of carefully investigating official records to 'tell what actually happened'⁹ in the realm of nation states, powerful people, and macro-political events. Burckhardt, a student of Ranke, in spite of being more interested in art and culture than in politics, reinforced his priority on celebrities with the thesis that since the Italian Renaissance man (not woman, of course) 'became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such'.¹⁰ Life and work of 'great men' can thus be considered representative of a certain time and place, as if they gave voice to everybody and as if they were able to express the *Zeitgeist* or the *Volksgeist*.

In history of architecture this means prioritizing monumental buildings with clearly identifiable authorship, at best through documental sources. (Google Books shows 194 results with the title 'life and work' for the subject *architecture*.) But it is worth asking why a building or plan conceived by an individual should be more important in architectural history than collective or anonymous creations like, for instance, the city. Why history of architecture is told as a history of monuments? Are they not just representing dominant groups?

Finally, there is the assumption that architecture is part of the 'modern system of the arts'¹¹ besides sculpture, painting, poetry, music and theater. This grouping is everything but natural. Why architecture is paired with writing a novel and not with growing wine or any other human activity? And why should a building, a novel and a symphony express the *Zeitgeist*?

THE NEED OF A HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE *QUA* LIVED EXPERIENCE

Architecture understood as space transformed by human work concerns everyone. So everyone should be able to take part in decisions about architecture insofar as they affect daily life. However, most people experience changes in their environment as passive spectators not as active transformers. Lefebvre himself questions the 'silence of the users' concerning abstract space:

Why do they allow themselves to be manipulated in ways so damaging to their spaces and their daily life without embarking on massive revolts? Why is protest left to 'enlightened', and hence elite, groups who are in any case largely exempt from these manipulations?¹²

The passiveness of users Lefebvre has in mind applies specially to mass housing, a situation where the conceived heteronomous production of space is the rule. In other contexts, such as the Brazilian favelas, people still negotiate space, make informal agreements, transform

and build without any mediation of design or concept. But such practices are not chosen, they come out of necessity. When confronted with heteronomous interventions, they tend to disappear, since people are seldom conscious of their value. Conversely, a historical awareness of this value would be a means to resist spatial manipulation. A history focused on the production of space *qua* lived experience could enable people to withstand imposed concepts and produce everyday space in a collective and critical manner. Conventional history of architecture does not provide anything like this.

Another history of architecture would also be crucial to the education of architects if they are to contribute in such an emancipated or emancipatory production of space. Instead of reinforcing their self-image as geniuses designated to express the spirit of the age, a history of lived space could offer a critical perspective on their own professional field and its bias. And instead of making ‘representations of space the basis for the study of life’, reducing lived experience,¹³ it could inspire new ways of understanding and transforming lived space.

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR ANOTHER HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

The opposition to the Rankean tradition of historiography is already consolidated in social sciences. Peter Burke¹⁴ systematizes the main features of the various approaches to a new history (School of Annales, History from Below, Microhistory, *Alltagsgeschichte*). They are concerned with every human activity, not only with politics or outstanding events. They are focused on structures, ordinary people, and collective movements, not on ‘great men’ and their personal motives. They tend to include all kinds of sources, not only official documents and monuments. Finally, they include awareness of the unavoidable bias of the historians, instead of assuming their objectivity.

In social sciences these approaches came about because in one way or another social history has to be consistent with real society. Architectural history, on the contrary, is self-referential. Its main requirement of legitimizing the field is fulfilled by conventional models, even if barely related to social space. That is why attempts to surpass old models are still quite rare.¹⁵

We can neither analyze these attempts, nor detail our own program here. Nevertheless, the framework for another history of architecture as lived space can be summarized:

1. Its focus lies more on the processes of production of space than on the products and their formal analysis;
2. Understanding the relationship between material objects and people in action matters more than verifying preconceived meanings;
3. Interviews with builders and users, lived experience of the historian, and traces of use might be primary sources, while architectural drawings and discourses become secondary references;
4. If the analysis of a particular space relates it to a broader context, this could be social space, political economy or any other socially relevant realm, but not the history of extraordinary architecture, its concepts, or tools such as perspective, geometry, information technology;
5. Its aim is not translating lived experience into concepts to increase control, but empowering people to access conceptual codes up to now unavailable to them;
6. It is addressed not to specialists, but to a wide audience, mainly the people directly involved in the object of the study; it might be produced by anyone sufficiently engaged;

7. Presentations might be written, but words must be used to put the spatial practice in evidence instead of concealing it; other media might also be used;

8. Finally, turning this kind of history public might involve conventional means such as books, conference papers and lectures. However, the most important is to provide wide access to everyone, ideally through interactive means that enable people to continue the historiographical study by themselves.

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12. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.51.
13. Ibid., p.230.
14. Peter Burke, "Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future", in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

15. Just a few examples: Favre-Bulle writes an interesting but short essay about the historiographical methods in architecture; Borden and Rendell focus on the lack of reflection about the theoretical foundation and of interdisciplinary discussions in historiography of architecture; Sonne systematizes the historical views used by architects to conceive and justify their own works; Arnold *et al* offer a wider range of questions, although still very much related to the academic than to the social future of the discipline. There are also some examples of researches that apparently adopt features of the ‘new history’, like John Peter’s *Oral History of Architecture*, which unfortunately is nothing more than interviews with ‘the greatest architects of the twentieth century’. Thomas Favre-Bulle, *D’autres histoires de l’architecture*, Le Bureau Politique (2009) [<http://bureaupolitique.com/2009/05/dautres-histoires-de-larchitecture/>]; Iain Borden and Jane Rendell, “From chamber to transformer: epistemological challenges in the methodology of theorised architectural history”, in *The Journal of Architecture* 5 (Summer, 2000); Wolfgang Sonne, “Gebaute Geschichtsbilder: Klassizismus, Historismus, Traditionalismus und Modernismus in der Architektur”, in Evelyn Schulz; Wolfgang Sonne (Hg.), *Kontinuität und Wandel: Geschichtsbilder in verschiedenen Fächern und Kulturen*. (Zürich: ETH, 1999); Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Özkaya, eds., *Rethinking Architectural Historiography* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006); John Peter, *The Oral History of Modern Architecture: Interviews with the Greatest Architects of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).