

# The critical architect

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# The Critical Architect

## Jonathan Hill

While a prospect of the future is implicit in many histories and novels, it is explicit in a design, which is always imagined before it is built. The architect is a ‹physical novelist› as well as a ‹physical historian›. We expect a history or a novel to be written in words, but they can also be delineated in drawing, cast in concrete or seeded in soil.

Associated with words not drawings or buildings, and the writer not the designer, architectural criticism is widely known and understood. But it is assumed that few architects are critical. This assumption is open to criticism however. First, because it relies on a limited understanding of what is architectural. Second, because it caricatures who and what is critical. To consider both issues, the history of the architect is a useful point of departure.

### Drawing Forth

Before the fifteenth century the status of the architect was low due to the association with manual labour and dispersed authorship. Of little importance to building, the drawing was understood to be no more than a flat surface and the shapes upon it were but tokens of three-dimensional objects. The Italian Renaissance introduced a fundamental change in perception, establishing the principle that the drawing truthfully depicts the three-dimensional world, and is a window to that world, which places the viewer outside and in command of the view. For the first time, the drawing became essential to architectural practice.

The command of drawing unlocked the status of the architect. Interdependent, the drawing and the architect affirm the same idea: architecture results not from the accumulated knowledge of a team of anonymous craftsman working together on a construction site but the artistic creation of an individual architect in command of drawing who designs a building as a whole at a remove from construction. Thus, the architectural drawing depends on two related but distinct concepts. One indicates that drawing is an intellectual, artistic activity distant from the grubby materiality of building. The other claims that the drawing is the truthful representation of the building, indicating the mastery of architects over building production.

The histories of the architect and the drawing are interwoven with that of design. The term design comes from the Italian *disegno*, meaning drawing, and suggesting both the drawing of a line on paper and the

drawing forth of an idea. Dependent on the assumption that ideas are superior to matter and, thus, that intellectual labour is superior to manual labour, *disegno* enabled architecture, painting and sculpture—the three visual arts—to be identified as liberal arts concerned with ideas, a position they had rarely been accorded previously.<sup>1</sup> *Disegno* is concerned with the idea of architecture not the matter of building. Leon Battista Alberti notably states that «It is quite possible to project whole forms in the mind without recourse to the material.»<sup>2</sup>

Alongside the traditional practice of building, architects acquired new means to practice architecture: drawing and writing. To affirm their status as exponents of intellectual and artistic labour, architects began increasingly to theorise architecture in images and books. Sebastiano Serlio and Andrea Palladio are notable early exponents of this tradition, Le Corbusier and Rem Koolhaas more recent ones.<sup>3</sup>

Often a design does not get built and an architect must be persuasive to see that it does. Sometimes a building is not the best way to explore an architectural idea. Consequently, architects, especially influential ones, tend to talk, write and draw a lot as well as build. The relations between the drawing, text and building are multi-directional. Drawing may lead to building. But writing may also lead to drawing, or building to writing and drawing, for example. If everyone reading this text listed all the architectural works that influence them, some would be drawings, some would be texts, and others would be buildings either visited or described in drawings and texts. Studying the history of architecture since the Italian Renaissance, it is evident that researching, testing and questioning the limits of architecture occurs through drawing and writing as well as building. As drawings, books and buildings are architectural, they are potential sites for critical architecture, independently or together.

### Ideas and Appliances

The history of design from the fifteenth-century to the twenty-first is not seamless however, and a significant

departure occurred in the eighteenth century when the meaning of a design and an idea changed significantly. Opposed to utility, the classification of the fine arts — notably poetry, music, painting, sculpture and architecture—is primarily an invention of that century. Associated with utility, the design disciplines that proliferated due to industrialization, such as product design, are defined as applied arts at best. In the Renaissance a form was synonymous with an idea. But, especially since industrialisation and the codification of type, a form may be less about an idea and more about a product. Painters and sculptors discarded design once it became associated with collective authorship and industrial production. Among the fine arts, which include the three original visual arts, only in architecture is the term design regularly referred to today. Many people associate design with the newer design disciplines, which informs how architectural design is understood. But in the discourse of architects, the older meaning of design—drawing ideas—and the newer meaning of design—drawing appliances—are both in evidence. The architectural profession is more compatible with the newer concept of design, and is a significant hindrance to critical architecture. Since the nineteenth-century, architects and non-architects alike assume that it is natural for the architect to be a professional and that there is no alternative. To the apparent benefit of practitioners, consumers and the state, the professions reflect the desire to manage capitalism's excesses and reduce the threat of economic and social disorder. Professionals are neither expected nor paid to generate ideas, whether critical or not. Focusing on technical competence and acquiescence to commercial and regulatory forces, the architectural profession wants neither architecture nor architects to be critical. To be critical, the architect must be critical of the profession.

### Designs on History and Fiction

The eighteenth century was pivotal in other ways. Countering the Platonist philosophical tradition in which knowledge is acquired by the mind alone, and the subsequent distrust of the senses in Renaissance theory, empiricism emphasised that experience is key to understanding, which develops through an evolving dialogue between the environment, senses and mind. Associating the natural world with subjective experience and drawing attention to the conditions that inform self-understanding, the eighteenth century fundamentally transformed the visual arts, its objects, authors and viewers. The architect associated with *disegno* was in its infancy when another type of architect appeared alongside it, exemplifying a new form of design and a new way of designing that valued the ideas and emotions evoked through experience and acknowledged the creative influences of the user and the weather. The first example of such a design practice occurred in gardens and garden buildings because they were closer to nature and more subject to seasonal and yearly change. Rather than refer to universal ideas,

forms and proportions, design can draw forth an idea that is provisional and dependent on experience at conception, production and reception.

The empirical method stimulated innovations in literature as well as landscape. In the sixteenth century, history's purpose was to offer useful lessons and accuracy was not necessary. In subsequent centuries, empiricism's emphasis on the distinction between fact and fiction transformed historical analysis. Rather than focus on individual achievements, the historian began to characterise changing cultural, social and economic processes in which the deeds of specific protagonists were contextualised. But this transition was slow and most eighteenth-century histories inherited some of the rhetorical approach of earlier histories.

In valuing direct experience, precise description, and a sceptical approach to 'facts', which needed to be repeatedly questioned, the empirical method created a fruitful climate in which the everyday realism of a new literary genre—the novel—could prosper as 'factual fiction'.<sup>4</sup> The uncertainties and dilemmas of personal fortune and identity in a vibrant, secular society were ripe for narrative account. Notably, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719, which is often described as the first English novel, is a fictional autobiography.<sup>5</sup> Defoe describes another novel, *Roxana*, 1724, as 'laid in Truth of Fact' and thus 'not a Story, but a History', a claim echoed by other novelists throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> History's uncertain and evolving status supported authors' claims that the first novels were in fact histories. Even Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726, is presented as true. The frontispiece depicts Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon and captain, who claims to verify his story in a number of ways, including by reference to the stingers of three gigantic wasps, which he teasingly claims to have donated to the first home of the Royal Society. Swift gently mocks empiricism while using its method.<sup>7</sup>

Focusing on the fate of individuals, the early novels—fictional autobiographies—developed in parallel with the early diaries—autobiographical fictions. People have written about themselves for millennia but the formation of modern identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is associated with a new emphasis on diary writing that Michel Foucault describes as a 'technology of the self', the process of self-examination by which moral character and behaviour are constructed and maintained in conjunction with other social forces.<sup>8</sup>

Objectivity may be an aspiration but no diary is entirely truthful and the diarist cannot fail to edit and reinvent life while reflecting upon it, altering the past as well influencing the future. Equivalent to a visual and spatial diary, the process of design—from one drawing to the next iteration and from one project to another—is itself an autobiographical 'technology of the self', formulating a design ethos for an individual or a studio. An architectural drawing can be autobiographical, as well as a means of negotiation between an architect and others, and thus subject to a more complex authorship. A building or landscape can also

be an autobiography of its principal author, even if many people are involved in its design, construction and use. Equally, a building or a landscape can be the combined autobiographies of its many protagonists, with some getting more attention than others.

The early eighteenth century stimulated the simultaneous and interdependent emergence of new art forms, each of them a creative and questioning response to empiricism's detailed investigation of subjective experience and the natural world, namely the picturesque landscape, analytical history and English novel. The picturesque landscape is equivalent to a history, formulating an interpretation of the past in the present through classical reconstructions, antique sculptures and imported trees. Equally, the picturesque landscape is equivalent to a fiction, triggering fractured narratives, unexpected digressions, and reflections on identity and society. The conjunction of new art forms instigated a new design practice and lyrical environmentalism that profoundly influenced subsequent centuries.

#### The Physical Historian and the Physical Novelist

To design, the architect must decide what to remember and what to forget. In 1969 Vincent Scully concluded that the architect will «always be dealing with historical problems—with the past and, a function of the past, with the future. So the architect should be regarded as a kind of physical historian ... the architect builds visible history»<sup>9</sup>. Like a history, a design is a reinterpretation of the past that is meaningful to the present. Whether implicit or explicit, a critique of the present and a prospect of the future are evident in a history and a design, which is always imagined before it is built. Architects have used history in different ways, whether to indicate their continuity with the past or departure from it. From the Renaissance to the twentieth century, the architect was a historian in the sense that a treatise combined design and history, and a building was expected to manifest the character of the time and knowingly critique earlier historical eras. Modernism ruptured this system in principle if not always in practice, but it returned in the second half of the twentieth century as modernism's previously dismissive reaction to social norms and cultural memories was itself anachronistic. The architect is a historian twice over: as a designer and as a writer.

Histories and novels each display a concern for the past, present and future. The historian acknowledges that the past is not the same as the present, while the novelist inserts the reader in a place and time that feels very present even if it is not. Histories and novels both need to be convincing but in different ways. Although no history is completely objective, to have any validity it must appear truthful to the past. A novel may be believable but not true, convincing the «reader» to suspend disbelief. While a prospect of the future is implicit in many histories and novels, it is explicit in a design, which is always imagined before it is built. The

architect is a «physical novelist» as well as a «physical historian». We expect a history or a novel to be written in words, but they can also be delineated in drawing, cast in concrete or seeded in soil.

Creative and critical architects have often looked to the past to imagine the future, studying an earlier architecture not simply to replicate it but to understand it as unfinished and open to further development. Twenty-first century architects need to appreciate the shock of the old as well as the shock of the new.

#### Postscript: The Critical User

Architecture is usually experienced habitually, when it is rarely the focus of attention. But, as empiricism made evident, habit is not passive. Instead, it is a questioning intelligence acquired through experience and subject to continuing re-evaluation. Rather than necessarily a deviation from habit, a critical and creative use can instead establish, affirm or develop a habit that is itself unexpected and evolving. In contrast to a singular focused activity such as reading, use is a particular type of awareness in which a person performs, sometimes all at once, a series of complex activities, some habitual, others not, that move in and out of conscious attention. Just as the reader makes a book anew through reading, the user makes a building anew through using, either by a physical transformation, using it in ways not previously imagined, or in conceiving it anew.<sup>10</sup> Architects do not have a monopoly over architecture. And neither do they have a monopoly over critical architecture.

- 1 Plato, *Timaeus*, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, *Epistles*, trans. R. G. Bury, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1929, p. 121.
- 2 Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1988, p. 7. Written in 1452 and first published in 1485 as *De re aedificatoria* (*Ten Books on Architecture*).
- 3 Sebastiano Serlio, *Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture*, vol. 1, books I-V of *Tutte l'opere d'architettura et prospettiva*, 1537–51, trans. Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books on Architecture*, trans. Robert Tavernor and Richard Schofield, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997; first published as *I quattro libri dell'architettura* in 1570. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells, London: Rodker, 1927; first published as *Vers une architecture* in 1923. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, Rotterdam: 010, 1994; first published in 1978.
- 4 Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. 213. First published in 1983.
- 5 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- 6 Daniel Defoe, *Roxana, or the Fortunate Mistress*, ed. P.N. Furbank, London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009, p. 21.
- 7 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, London: Penguin, 2001.
- 8 Michel Foucault, «On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress», in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, London: Penguin, 1984, p. 369; Michel Foucault, «Technologies of the Self», in Luther H. Martin, Hugh.
- 9 Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton, eds, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, London: Tavistock, 1988, pp. 18-19.
- 10 Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1969, p. 257. Roland Barthes, «The Death of the Author», in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, London: Flamingo, 1977, pp. 142–48.