

Introduction

Evidence, Narrative, and Writing Architectural History



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Writing *Architectural History: Evidence and Narrative in the Twenty-First Century* gathers together recent scholarship to explore the opportunities presented by rethinking issues of evidence and narrative in architectural history. Unifying the volume is a set of intertwined questions: What kinds of evidence does architectural history use? How is this evidence organized in different narratives and toward what ends? What might these concerns tell us about architectural historians' disciplinary and institutional positions in the past and present? And finally, how can consideration of evidence and narrative help us all reimagine the limits and the potentials of the field? These matters have not generally been addressed in architectural history.¹

The twenty numbered chapters in *Writing Architectural History* represent a broad range of subjects, from medieval European coin trials and eighteenth-century Haitian revolutionary buildings, to Weimar German construction firms and present-day refugee camps in Kenya. This breadth, along with the volume's general thematic questions about history writing, opens it to readers beyond architectural history. The book's content, however, is not all-encompassing. It excludes the pre-medieval period and large swaths of the globe's built environment. Besides subject limits, the volume's perspectives and norms are also largely restricted to the writing of architectural history under North American conditions. Excluded are architectural histories produced under different situations—geographic and institutional (e.g., the heritage industry)—as well as in forms other than writing (e.g., exhibitions, teaching, design). While the volume's materials and methods thus reproduce established relations of authority and power, they also self-consciously take such conditions as a starting point from which disciplinary boundaries might be expanded and conventions rethought.

This volume examines some of architectural history writing's foundational practices, myths, struggles, and contradictions and, specifically, how historical evidence and narrative can or cannot represent a more liberated field of study for the future. This has particular resonance today. The book's formation took place during the presidency of Donald J. Trump, a period that surely registered in each contributor's life and work and in their thinking about evidence and narrative. Then, intensely, a global pandemic coincided with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, with these upheavals set against the background of climate catastrophe and migrant dislocations, thus laying bare and intensifying persistent, systematic inequalities and injustices. Overlapping crises and immediate emergencies often prompt practitioners in various disciplines to rethink entrenched concepts and practices, to seek analysis and restructuring. As is the case in most collaborations—and *Aggregate* is no exception—differences abound in how to respond. Some chapters in this book explicitly engage political goals. Others do so more indirectly. Some authors hold on to the “semistillness” of history's infrastructure, in the words of Fernand Braudel, identifying change in deep bedrock. Other authors might have reflected on the present in what Braudel called a “breathless rush of narrative,” urgently applying historiography to the here and now.² These differences of approach—all critical in the end—vivify the volume's content and ambitions. The work as a whole is intended as a guide not only for students specializing in architectural history today but also for any scholar engaged in questions of history writing under the specificities of their time.

Given the exigencies of the moment, one might ask, Why rethink the field through themes of evidence and narrative? Wouldn't “climate” or “decolonization” be more productive categories with which to reexamine architectural history writing today? Our interest in evidence and narrative is informed by “historical epistemology,” an approach that insists on asking questions about the historical conditions that make knowledge possible in the first place.³ We adopt this approach strategically. We asked the contributors to detach themselves temporarily from the thick, focused descriptions in which they are so heavily invested as historians and to ask broad questions about their *modus operandi*—the kinds of evidence they rely on and the tactics that they use for weaving that evidence into narratives. For some authors, this approach has pushed them away from their explicit political priorities. However, we did so with the expectation that examining the implicit structural forces at work in history writing will allow us to return to those thematics with renewed vigor and focus. Historical epistemology in architectural history is offered here not to oppose contemporary relevance but rather as the necessary mooring both for the historical specificity of our descriptions of the past and for the criticality of our engagement in the present.⁴

Interdisciplinarity and reflexivity make this book an *Aggregate* project, along with sustained collective workshopping among the contributors.⁵ Cooperative workshopping and open peer review are of course not unique to the *Aggregate*

Architectural History Collaborative, but commitment to these activities defines Aggregate as a practice rather than an attachment to any specific theoretical approach. Accordingly, this volume is not a demand for methodological discipline but rather an open-ended exploration of various practicalities of writing histories. This introduction thus offers a working philosophy, not a hard method, formulated here as a soft set of questions, which are posed in the present tense because they are questions that the architectural historian may ask now. But the responses will mainly be historiographic, in the past tense, drawing from particular histories of architecture and other historical disciplines in the humanities.

I. How do uses of evidence and narrative in architectural history relate to the field's history and institutional settings?

In North America, architectural history traced a move from art history departments, where PhD candidates were once predominantly trained, to architecture schools, which have increasingly assumed that role since the 1960s. This shift altered how architectural history handled its evidence and narratives, as well as its relationships to other disciplines within the academy. From the primarily visual and sociopolitical evidence of art history, aligned with humanities subjects such as literature and its critical reception, evidence for architectural history drew from a wider field, including gender, race, and critical theory, plus philosophy, psychology, and economic history. More recently, a global turn further connected evidence in North American architectural history to revisionist currents in other fields producing histories of hitherto neglected geographies. Also produced were new narratives that side-stepped the universalizing notions often associated with traditional university disciplines such as art history. This “postmodern intellection,” to use the term coined by Mark Jarzombek of MIT’s History, Theory, and Criticism program, also sought alternatives to teleological, story-like narratives, which plotted the past in a straight line to the present and a desired future.⁶ Querying traditional concepts of evidence and narrative, based in the inadequacies of the archive and the alternatives to narrative closure, is the function of the first section of this volume, the part titled “Legends.”

Yet architectural history’s disciplinary “dislocation,” in Jarzombek’s term, was not entirely by choice. The field’s late twentieth-century “dissolution” from art history has been traced by Mark Crinson and Robert J. Williams, who cite in part architectural history being “vulnerable to other disciplinary interests.”⁷ At the same time, art history can be said to have pushed away architectural history. Fewer and fewer art historians concerned themselves with architecture, as notables such as Erwin Panofsky once did.

Architectural history’s other position in professional schools of architecture gave it new opportunities for interdisciplinary sources of evidence and narrative beyond art history. Linking architectural history to histories of science, technol-

ogy, and environment, as well as to business and legal studies, offered relevance to the technical and professional interests of architecture school colleagues and students. For example, numerous chapters in *Writing Architectural History*, especially those gathered in the final section, the part titled “Retrials,” deploy legal evidence. Notwithstanding evidentiary and narrative innovations, however, few architectural historians would consider themselves and their work to have migrated from the margins to the center of professional education.

Such institutional arrangements have left North American architectural history unmoored among traditional university disciplines and without a defined methodology. This should be taken not as a negative consequence but as a context for the work of many architectural historians, like those contributing to this volume. They are necessarily left to their own devices to pursue an ad hoc interdisciplinarity, which asks questions, offers answers for the field, and sometimes poses problems to other disciplines and the world more broadly. Bridgeheads thus may be established in hospitable locations for an otherwise homeless field, not least by asking questions relevant across disciplines that require the critical use of both evidence and narrative.

2. How do certain kinds of evidence make a history “architectural”? What kinds of expertise and subjectivity are granted to the architectural historian?

The legitimacy of historical knowledge depends on the historian’s claim to expertise over the subject matter. Architectural history has long fixated on evidence with an apparent internal coherence, especially buildings or architects. Both have been mobilized as material for historical narrative and have been the basis for the field’s traditional monographic narrative form: the life story of a unified central subject, be it an architect or a building. Individuated “greatness” in subject matter has also been transferred to the subjectivity of architectural historians themselves, whose expertise and knowledge production are individualized because of institutional requirements. The contemporary university prizes first and foremost individual achievement for granting the PhD and for tenuring architectural historians in the humanities and in most architecture schools. But these are mythic, idealized coherences of evidence, narrative, and subjectivity, which may give way under pressure.

Such terms as “space,” “form,” “function,” and “context” reinforce the choice to define an object of architecture primarily as a building. But the grouping of buildings into districts, towns, or cities, as well as acknowledging layers of revision over time, such as reconstructions, renovations, destruction, or technical retrofits, makes any assumption of a building’s individuated coherence difficult to accept. Perhaps there is no more conspicuous example of a building’s incoherence in the canon of Western architecture than the intermingling of de-

signs for St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, a structure lavished with attention by generations of European and North American architectural historians.⁸ Further troubles in centering the building in a narrative have arisen at the limits of formal analysis. As a tool for understanding the composition of ornament, mass, and figuration, formal analysis delivers clarity, even though it does not apply equally well to other aspects of architecture, such as plumbing, environmental controls, and legal restrictions.

There is also little stability in any definition of "the architect." Selecting an individuated protagonist has served to replace the assumption of a building's visual coherence with a focus on the position of the agent, one who accesses and organizes elements that resist formal interpretation. Understanding the variety of practical and institutional tasks required of an architect to produce buildings, in all their empirical disjunction, emerged more than a half century ago as a tool to define the boundaries of the architect's identity. Spiro Kostof's social history of the practice positioned historians to address the general "unease about the future of architecture" after challenges had been posed to traditional forms of architectural authority during the 1960s.⁹ In the study of both buildings and architects, internal coherence has served as a practical myth for developing a claim to disciplinary expertise and an individuated professional subjectivity for the architectural historian.

It was also possible to take the two foci of building and architect as competing or reinforcing frames of reference. For instance, Stanford Anderson in the 1980s argued that the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen*, which centered on form as the primary source of evidence, was useful in creating a unified narrative for the visual coherence of everything from buckles to buildings. Alternatively, if one used, as Anderson did, the practicing architect Adolf Loos's words as primary evidence, written roughly around that time and in the same city, a more complex historical narrative released buildings designed by him from the overbearing influence of Riegl's conception of stylistic coherence.¹⁰ The symmetry that Anderson brought between historical analysis (Riegl) and architectural practice (Loos) positioned architectural history against some of the well-worn methods of art history, toward defining architectural history's own disciplinary territory.

Against Anderson's search for a disciplinary semiautonomy for architectural history, more recent scholarship has revealed techniques for working without assumed disciplinary boundaries, thus diverging from the problematic of autonomy that preoccupied Anderson's generation coming of age in the 1960s. For example, historians who recently focused on infrastructure have expanded their scope from a building to a viaduct, a waste-treatment plant, and a system of standards. Such topics required incorporating expertise into histories of environmental, technical, and urban administration. This expansion offered an opportunity to understand the roles of architects and planners within networks

of power.¹¹ Neither buildings nor architects centered these narratives. Instead, the evidence of infrastructure opened a broad scale of analysis and became a pretext for reflecting on a terrain of language that Michel Foucault called “discourse.”¹² Take, for instance, Daniel Barber’s notion of the “planetary interior,” defined as “millions of interior spaces, all around the planet, [that] aggregate toward a collective impact on geophysical systems.”¹³ This vast terrain of discursive evidence is both real and metaphorical, designed by architects but also often merely abiding by a system of standards for environmental control. Set against the coherence of a building or an architect, Barber’s proposal indicates an ad hoc attitude toward expertise. There is no preexisting method for representing the imbrolios through which those in power have constructed a “planetary politics.” Instead, architectural historians are left to drift and diverge in their approach to “practical matters of induction, hypothesizing, causal theorizing, and the relating of matters of fact to their explanations,” much like Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer’s characterization of the scientist Robert Boyle’s working philosophy.¹⁴

A similar nonmethodical working philosophy may well be useful in characterizing the architectural historian’s claim to expertise, as it moves away from a focus on individuated buildings and architects. But even as object, agency, and expertise are dispersed among architecture reconceived as discourse, media, and infrastructure, alternative subjectivities for the individuated architectural historian are harder to come by. Recent group work in architectural history—such as that of Aggregate, the Feminist Art and Architecture Collaborative, and the coauthored chapters in this collection—offer collaborative practices and subjectivities. But group work still usually redounds to the credit of individuals. The single-authored book remains the *sine qua non* for academic promotion for architectural historians in the humanities and most architecture schools.

3. What constitutes evidence in architectural history? What work does it do to build the historian’s epistemological authority?

Yale University students of the 1970s have recalled scenes of Vincent Scully acting out the “buffalo dance” while lecturing about the architecture of Pueblo Indians (as conquering Spaniards had termed them). Scully’s version of a minstrel show enacted a form of cultural colonialism while deploying a kind of evidence that has been ubiquitous in architectural history: the evidence of bodily experience.¹⁵ Scully’s performance exploited his audience’s ignorance of Native American culture to convince them, in the service of architectural history, that the dancing body of the professor could transmit the elusive experience of Indigenous peoples in the American Southwest to the undergraduates crowded in a lecture hall. Scully’s theatricality was also supposed to make buildings speak for themselves as if without any mediation. When Scully “beat his long wooden

pointer at the slides on the screen,” according to one student, “the buildings ‘gestured,’ ‘thrust,’ and ‘thundered.’”¹⁶ Another student recalled that Scully’s whole body was “ultimately concentrated into the tip of his long bamboo pointer, a wizard’s wand that coaxed, or jolted, the slides into their appointed roles.”¹⁷

What “‘gestured,’ ‘thrust,’ and ‘thundered’” under the authoritative wand of the architectural historian of course were not buildings themselves but their photographic reproductions on the screen in a lecture hall. Scully’s dramatics, in fact, would have been impossible without the work of previous generations of art historians who had invented a formalism that harnessed technical media to create this peculiar effect of self-evidence. For most late nineteenth-century art historians in the German-speaking lands, the evidence of experience came first and foremost from photography. According to Anton Springer, who taught art history at the University of Leipzig, photographs were to art history what the microscope had been to the natural sciences. Just as the latter had made it possible for natural philosophers to proceed inductively from observed particulars to universal scientific laws, photography would offer art historians precise and concrete evidence that would elevate their analytic practices to those of a rigorous science. Hermann Grimm, who taught at the University of Berlin, explained that, practically speaking, this entailed “spread[ing] photographs out on the same table” so that they could be compared side by side and their formal characteristics observed.¹⁸ Exceptionally, the art historian August Schmarsow was convinced that the essence of all architectural creation—spatial experience—could never be represented in images.¹⁹ This produced the paradox that while photographic mediation was crucial to the rise of formalism in the late nineteenth century, knowledge gained from the evidence of direct experience—as defended by the likes of Schmarsow—persisted in an incipient field of knowledge that was at pains to distinguish itself from others.

Dismissing such “naïve” formalisms as nothing more than “appreciationism,” Erwin Panofsky, too, urged a rigorous *Kunstwissenschaft* but suggested that science would now have to “bother about classical languages, boring historical methods and dusty old documents.”²⁰ In Panofsky’s telling, no amount of projecting oneself experientially into and out of a cathedral (or photographs that captured one such instant of experience) could provide the historian with any reliable evidence. But one could understand the “habitus” shared by Gothic architecture and scholasticism by comparing *pilier cantonné* to the textual subdivisions of *Summa Theologiae*.²¹ The historian’s search for extra-experiential evidence, however, proved to be just as difficult. Such materials as wood and concrete, for example, have presented a seemingly obvious but nevertheless problematic form of evidence for architectural history, as explored in this volume’s section titled “Self-Evidence.” Moreover, some evidence was nowhere to be found, as explored in the section “Legends.” At other times, the scale of evidence proved so overwhelming that historians had to invent new techniques to understand it, as historicized, demonstrated, and theorized in this volume’s

section titled “Data.” And old formalist habits persisted even in the most document-minded historian. Manfredo Tafuri returned to deep archival research late in his career and ended up describing architecture in formalist terms, whose ideological dangers he had been wary of on other occasions.²²

Postwar formalism in North America, however, was different from its earlier continental cousins. Unlike Scully, for whom form was the currency of emotional experience across incompatible temporalities, geographies, and subjectivities, Colin Rowe considered form a tool of detached, rational analysis.²³ As photography did not capture invisible formal relationships, it did not suffice as evidence. Rowe and his acolyte Peter Eisenman relied instead on analytic drawings that became mainstays of curricula in American architecture schools.²⁴ Like advocates of New Criticism, Rowe and those who followed in his footsteps insisted on close reading an increasingly narrow repertoire of buildings, an evidentiary technique used by Rowe and his detractors alike.

Against this kind of formal resurgence on North America's East Coast emerged an alternative spearheaded on the West Coast with the addition of “vernacular” and “non-Western” traditions to architectural history curriculum. At the University of California, Berkeley's College of Environmental Design, both faculty and students found new evidence of experience by tracing social bodies in their enactment of various cultural rituals.²⁵ Trained in that method, Diane Favro analyzed spectacles and festivals in ancient Rome, extending her earlier topographical analyses of Augustinian Rome into interactive and immersive models through computational methods.²⁶ Whether one favors experience or documents in architectural history depends, in part, on either the authority gained by the historian as a performer or the availability of archives for reanimating the textual past. This dichotomy in evidence may trace the unspoken and bidirectional influence of teaching and research in every scholar's career.

4. What counts as an archive, that is, the privileged site where evidence can be found? What kinds of histories result from reading along the grain of the archive versus against it? What are the implications of an archive that is too big or too small, inaccessible, or nonexistent?

In 1983, Francesco Passanti reviewed the first few books issued as part of the thirty-two-volume series that reproduced thirty-two thousand drawings from the archives of the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris. He pointedly described the contents of this monumental publication project as “raw.”²⁷ What he meant was that the published documentation followed the archive's order too closely, which made it difficult for the serious student to use the published series to make attributions correctly to Le Corbusier or someone else. Because Passanti assumed architectural history was organized primarily around the figure

of the architect, he worried that the reproduction in print of an imperfectly organized archive would lead historians astray, preventing them from making accurate determinations of authorship.²⁸ As Passanti acknowledged, however, there was another sense in which the representation of the archive in print was “raw.” Drawings constituted only approximately one-tenth of the entire Le Corbusier archive. The rest consisted of correspondence, books, magazines, mail-order catalogs, newspaper clippings, and every other scrap of paper that Le Corbusier had saved in anticipation of this would-be collection. These elements became the focus of Beatriz Colomina’s attention a decade later.²⁹ Taking Le Corbusier’s fabrication of his publicity as seriously as the architect himself did, Colomina demonstrated how the historian could shift her gaze from the one-tenth to the nine-tenths of the archive to understand the impact of mass media on that architect’s polemics.³⁰

While Colomina had shifted her historical attention *within* the archive from one small segment to the rest, others remade their own archives by forcing their historical gaze *beyond* the confines of an official archive. Consider Mabel Wilson’s contribution to *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive*, a 2017 publication that accompanied the exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art and the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University after jointly acquiring Wright’s archive. Wilson based her arguments on the few pieces of correspondence and even fewer drawings for the unrealized Rosenwald School project for Black students in the segregated American South.³¹ Because the organization of the official Wright archive around the figure of the architect elided the question of race, Wilson had to read the archive *against* the grain, making its absences visible by incorporating material she gathered from other sources. In this instance, remaining within the boundaries of the official archive would have amounted to reproducing the countless hagiographies of Wright and his purportedly reformist democratic agenda.

It takes political urgency, then, as well as historical imagination, to redraw the boundaries of an archive. When, in the 1940s, Sigfried Giedion turned to the US Patent Office as an archive in his newly adopted country, it was not just to produce a new “anonymous history” of modern architecture, akin to his teacher Heinrich Wölfflin’s “art history without names.”³² That history by Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, appeared in the wake of World War II. The parallels between anonymized and mechanized murder in the slaughterhouse and in concentration camps must have been all too obvious to a reader in 1948. Extending further the technological substrate of architecture in subsequent decades, Reyner Banham criticized the previous generation’s attribution of architecture’s modernity to tectonics by analyzing Wright’s Larkin Administration Building among the archives of its *mechanical* systems. Banham argued that what made the building genuinely modern was its air-conditioning system, an attempt to reevaluate modern architecture’s efficacy to change peo-

ple's surroundings when worldwide change at that scale seemed imminent.³³ Against "space" (more precisely, *Raum*, in German-speaking lands), which had been the central concept of architectural discourses since the late nineteenth century, Banham's *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* now imagined a discipline organized around the concept of "environment."³⁴

Such reimaginings of the archive aspire to transformational disciplinary effects. Others move the focus of the field more slowly and cumulatively. Several historiographical interventions of the past few decades can be characterized as having expanded rather than transformed architectural history's jurisdiction by venturing beyond conventional sources—for example, by archaeologically documenting previously undocumented architecture, by using a previously neglected literature as a guide to sources, or by turning to institutional archives of various sorts.³⁵ Such archival moves have extended the focus of architectural history from individual designers to collectives, as well as to actors hitherto unacknowledged by architectural historians: from single buildings to entire cities, and from processes of design and construction to obsolescence and destruction.³⁶

One kind of move to expand the archival imagination of architectural history has stood out among others: the project of readjusting the geographical focus of architectural history. A generation ago, the work of scholars studying what was called the "non-West" might have been presented as an addendum to a field still firmly focused on Europe and North America.³⁷ More recently, "global" histories building on this first-generation work have appeared, and they have demonstrated that these archives are not merely additions to the European canon but instead transform it completely, making any notion of canon increasingly untenable.³⁸ Read in conjunction with recent literature in the humanities, for example, the work of Louis P. Nelson on the architecture of plantations in Jamaica suggests that assuming the Industrial Revolution in England was a milestone for architectural modernity is mere provincialism.³⁹ In this sense, the cumulative expansion of architectural history's archival imagination beyond Europe and North America can be said to have transformed some of the most entrenched assumptions of a field essentially centered in these two continents.

In practical terms, such projects to reorient architectural history's archival imagination have had to tackle countless problems. Many scholars have pointed out the difficulties of writing architectural histories outside of Europe and North America with scant or nonexistent sources or with sources produced and maintained by institutions that are successors to colonial bureaucracies.⁴⁰ Others caution against the assumption of dichotomous, hierarchical relationships of influence or center-periphery, inherited from nineteenth-century colonialisms, when considering geographies outside of Europe and North America. In other cases, irrespective of geography, the expansion of archival sources, especially in digitized primary documents and text, has led scholars to suffer from information overload. When the archive is large and unwieldy, corollary digital tech-

niques for “distant reading”—mapping, charting, graphing, quantification—offer potential clarity.⁴¹ Such techniques may call not only for new technologies but, more importantly, for new forms of institutional and labor organization to make scholarship possible. Research visits by a lone scholar give way to multidisciplinary teams of researchers and experts building databases and visualizations. Redrawing the boundaries of an evidentiary archive, in short, requires not only historical imagination from the architectural historian but a fundamental rethinking and renegotiation of institutional, disciplinary, and working arrangements.

5. What kinds of narratives and counternarratives are produced in architectural history? What subjectivities and desires, individual and collective, are produced and pursued through narrative?

Nikolaus Pevsner’s *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936) features heroic agents of causality (especially the individuals of the book’s subtitle) and design work as evidence, from wallpaper to buildings. This material Pevsner ordered into the particular narrative structure of a story. *Pioneers* possesses a strongly defined beginning (Morris) and a moralizing end, which calls upon readers and architects to choose Gropius’s path of technology and anonymity over expressive individualism.⁴² The decisive middle turn in the *Pioneers* story—when modernism’s vanguard relocates from England to Germany—is attributed, however, not to a designer’s agency but to a political economy. Pevsner contrasted English “private enterprise” in town planning with German “municipal initiative.” “Directly this stage was reached, England dropped out and Germany took the lead,” he wrote.⁴³ Social democracy, in other words, gained Pevsner’s native land the architectural laurels over his adopted home. Implicitly, England would retake the lead in modern architecture only if it reformed. Thus, there is a political dynamic at the center of the *Pioneers* narrative.

Pioneers neatly illustrates “narrativity,” the theory that philosopher of history Hayden White based on story-like historical narratives that satisfy desires both for political and subjective coherence.⁴⁴ The *Pioneers* narrative has a moralizing ending, a politico-social center, and, above all, a structuring of its evidence into the form of a story—a unitary version of events, from Morris to Gropius—which, White argued, “arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.”⁴⁵ A history story like *Pioneers* “displays to us a formal coherency to which we ourselves aspire.”⁴⁶ The story’s narrative wholeness soothes a need in both author and reader for a unified subjective identity.

Yet *Pioneers* in its story form can also be identified as a counternarrative to architectural histories differently organized, for example, by comparison and typology. Comparative narratives have been favored in art and architectural