

## The Study of History in Architecture

John J. Linn<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

---

The architecture of history is the architecture of humanity in search of finding and knowing itself in its own unique place and time. Study of this history is the study of mankind. This paper explores a brief survey of humanity's ways of thinking and exploring both common to us all, and particular to certain times. The idea of history offers a perspective for our common efforts, and insight into the importance of the questions we ask. What is the place of relevance that history that can provide in our educated exploration of the field architecture?

---

**Keywords:** Architecture | History | Learning | Types of Thinking

In times where common understandings of knowledge and progress are so clearly dominated by the ideas of science and technology, it may not be clear the role or even the definition of 'history' in education and in practice. Clearly the field of architecture is included in such an observation.

What do we want to learn from history? What 'place' does history hold in our search for knowledge? How does the study of history contribute to a thorough and balanced architectural education? What are the languages of design and examples of humanity's efforts that the study of history can contribute to the impact of our own efforts?

With answers to these questions seemingly vague at times in contemporary settings, it may best be appropriate to first visit the foundations of history itself in the context of human knowledge. A brief consideration of how humanity has used the idea of history in various cultures through time follows. Together, these findings from the structure for both the observation and reflection of historical perspectives. While the study of the architectural history is one form of the study of history itself, direct correlation is assumed between on the 'place' of history in our corporate body of knowledge, and the 'place' of architectural history within that body.

The intended exploration, and value of this inquiry, then, is an acquaintance with ideas of knowledge and history through time. Concluding reflections reference how our understandings of architecture itself have provided evidence clearly reflective of ways of thinking about the Western world in most recent times. The descriptions of historic thinking provide insight into how humanity has understood and shaped its world provides a framework for understanding the role and vale of history. The study of the history of architecture is the study of this history.

---

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, High Point University, 1 University Parkway, High Point, North Carolina 27268, USA. [jlinn@highpoint.edu](mailto:jlinn@highpoint.edu), 336 841 4575

There have been various types of learning and thinking displayed in humanity's goal to identify itself. Who are we? What can we do and not do? How far can we go? Where are our limits?

And then, of course, the same questions have been applied to the surroundings in which man has found himself. The study of history is a particular form of analysis. It finds and examines evidence, as does any scientific inquiry. Where does it fit in the spectrum of mankind's ways of knowing?

In attempting to understand history's place in ways of knowing, we begin by visiting ways of knowing common to modes of exploration. We look to Collingswood for the most concise unfolding of the types of thinking. Later, we rely heavily on his words to provide concise evidence for the nature and background for the study of history itself. Collingswood describes ways of knowing in terms of levels.

The levels of knowing can be understood most simply as proceeding from types of observation, to types of reflection, to active forms of conscious imagination. In first degree thought, we think about objects, in second degree thought, we think about our own thought about those objects. Collingswood's example of how one may think about the relation between the earth and the sun provides clarity;

For example, to discover the distance of the earth from the sun is a task of the first degree, in this case astronomy; to discover what it is exactly that we are doing when we discover the distance of the earth from the sun is a task for thought of the second degree, in this instance for logic or the theory of science. (Collingswood, 2005, p. 1)

First degree thought types include direct cognitions of both abstract objects with no special location in space or time (mathematics) and physically observable events (physical sciences). Second degree thought includes reflective thought about first degree thinking (philosophy).

Second degree thought cannot separate the study of knowing from the study of what is known. Third degree thoughts are imaginative experiences of conscious activity in a holistic posture (art). Art is a form of knowledge and exploration that is of courses both difficult to describe and to understand. Architectural explorations are among the many ways of knowing that approach and embrace the acts of creating art. Engaging in such activities are examples of thought that while relying clearly on findings and thought types of the first and second degree, simultaneously engage in the conscious posture which allows one to approach thought types of the third degree. Collingswood offers a description of the act of this way of thinking;

Art is not indifferent to truth; it is essentially the pursuit of truth. But the truth it pursues is not a truth of relation; it is a truth of individual fact. The truths art discovers are those single and self-contained individualities which from the intellectual point of view become the 'terms' between which it is the business of intellect to establish or apprehend relations. Each of these individualities, as art discovers it, is a perfectly concrete individual, one from which nothing has yet been abstracted by the work of the intellect. Each is an experience in which the distinction between what is due to me and what is due to my world has not been made. (Collingswood, 1958, p. 288)

Just as surely as the numerous types of knowledge characterize different areas of focus and interest, it must be understood that within each area of interest, there exists a diversity of types of thinking in use at different times in each field. None of the types of thinking, or levels, as Collingswood names them, are exclusive to a particular area of study. Rather, all levels are native types of human thought, and are applied more distinctly by the nature and type of the explorer and the quality of the exploration than to the field of study itself.

Understanding the distinctions in the types of thinking is foundational to clear conceptions of history, informed thought, and of course the study of architecture. A lack of understanding provides fodder for the confusion and misuse or misnaming of the knowledge itself. Needed today are both clarity of how the arts contribute to the bodies of informed knowledge, and understandings of what the activities involved in art and design are in themselves. The study of history can provide content and examples relevant to the discernment and discussions that seek such understanding.

History is a special form or type of thinking. History begins as a science, and like all sciences, asks questions, and tries to answer them. It is a kind of research or inquiry. The object of history is actions of human beings that have been done in the past. It uses observable documents as evidence and proceeds by examining its findings.

"History is 'for' human self-knowledge" (Collingswood, 2005, p.10). The study of history proceeds from the findings of 'first degree' thought, to ways of 'second degree' thinking, reflecting on the 'meaning' of what is 'known'. History provides observable and reflective evidence which contribute to humanity's goal of knowing itself. "The value of history is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is". (Collingswood, 2005, p.10).

The architecture of history is the architecture of humanity in search of finding and knowing itself in its own unique place and time. Study of this history is the study of mankind.

What, then, is the history of historical thought? How have the natures and ways of thinking about the world, taken place in time? The idea of history was known to the Greeks. We understand that they 'invented' the term, which simply means an investigation or inquiry. Yet the Greek way of thought was formed in the consciousness not of age long traditions forming uniform patterns, but of "violent, catastrophic changes from one state to the other" (Collingswood, 2005, p.22). For Greeks there was no theory of causation. Greek thought was unlike the type of thinking of seventeenth-century inductive science with its metaphysical basis in the axiom of cause and effect. For the Greeks, history was valuable to human life;

"simply because the rhythm of its changes (was) likely to repeat itself, similar antecedents leading to similar consequents; the history of notable events (was) worth remembering in order to serve as a basis for prognostic judgments, not demonstrable but probable, laying down not what will happen but what is likely to happen, indicating the points of danger in rhythms now going on. (Collingswood, 2005, p. 23) Plato's' term for this type of knowledge is 'right opinion' embodies a value for a well-instructed human will, informed as much by what we would call poetry as by what we would call science. Ways of thinking about the world, and history, evolved through Greek and Roman times, and were questioned not only by them but from Christian and scientific ways of thinking that offered their own challenges and crises.

With the Enlightenment following the Protestant Revolution in time, attitudes and ways of thinking developed "according to which the historical process is the working out not of man's purpose but of God's; God's purpose being a purpose for man." (Collingswood, 2005, p.48). No longer relying solely on the creations of God himself, or of the necessary attempts by man to copy God's creations was requisite. Modern ways of thinking about history, and the role of the historian were new as well. The Enlightenment period brought a revolt against religion of any nature and a crusade to secularize every aspect of human life and thought. This attack on spiritual substance laid the foundations for a scientific history because it destroyed the remaining traces of the substantial's embraced by Greco-Roman thought.

Rousseau, a 'child of the Enlightenment', brought two things necessary for historical thought to progress in his day. He provided a broader view of the past and one more critical of the idea that human nature was unvarying and unable to be changed. In contrast to the idea of a despotic will which imposed on a passive people what a despot knew to be good for it, was substituted "the idea of a general will on the part of the people itself, a will of the people as a whole to pursue its interest as a whole." (Collingswood, 2005, p.86). The period of the Enlightenment embodied expectations based on the hope for enlightened rulers, the Romanticists (following of the heels of Enlightenment thought) hoped to advance enlightened people by means of common education. In this way of thinking the idea of history can be seen as a progress and a development of human reason and the education of mankind.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century new thought patterns and an attack on positivism focused not with an attack on science, but an attack on the type of philosophy "which claimed that science was the only kind of knowledge that existed or could ever exist." (Collingswood, 2005, p.134). In our understanding of what History is, and in its role in our ways of thinking, Collingswood makes an important distinction for us to consider; What really happened 'is only what the evidence obliges us to believe'. Thus the facts of history are present facts. The historical past is the world of ideas which the present evidence creates in the present. In historical inference we do not move from our present world to a past world; the movement in experience is always a movement within a present world of ideas. The paradoxical result is that the historical past is not past at all; it is present. It is not a past surviving into the present; it *is* present." (Collingswood, 2005, p.154).

When considering the paths of inquiry, ways of knowing, philosophical approaches, and definitions of knowledge through time, we need to embrace this understanding of historical facts as 'present' to our forms of inquiry. How then do we discern meaning from what we have observed? Can we not characterize the approaches described as evidence of humanity's common desire to know who it is? To know itself? To know its own mind? To know the world around it? Contemporary constructs of architectural and historical thinking 'sit on' and are 'embedded in' the same contemporary constructs shared by all of humanity. Factual events recorded from times past reveal both 'outer' and 'inner' findings to the scientist and the philosopher. Fully developed approaches to architecture and history include inquiries of types both observational and reflective. If 'What really happened' is only what the evidence obliges us to believe', and, " It is not a past surviving into the present; it *is* present. Then how did medieval thought correspond, and differ from our own ways of knowing? How did it lead to contemporary ways of knowing?

In *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis provides a commentary describing mankind's 'Model', and ways of thinking, in Medieval and Renaissance thought. His reflections provide not only a perspective view of historic thought, but with philosophical postures which we are looking for. Lewis' 'Model' of medieval thought will serve as 'mediator' in our own reflective consideration of the past that the Model came from, and our past which came from it. "From our earliest picture-books we learn the differences in clothes, weapons, furniture, and architecture. We cannot remember in our lives any historical knowledge earlier than this. This superficial (and often inaccurate) characterization of different ages helps far more than we suspect towards our later and subtler distinctions between them." (Lewis, 2014, p.183).

Lewis conveys both findings and preferences when considering the impact that the changing ways of thinking had brought to Western culture; In this great change something has been won and something lost. I take it to be part and parcel of the same great process of Internationalization which has turned *genius* from an attendant *daemon* into a quality of mind. Always, century by century, item after item is transferred from the object's side of the account to the subject's. And now, in some extreme forms of Behaviorism, the subject himself is discounted as merely subjective; we only think what we think. Having eaten up everything else, he himself eats himself up too. (Lewis, 2014, p.215)

With the incubation of modern ways of thinking, not only had man begun to see his new role as a type of creator, but abstract and conceptual knowledge replaced the importance of observed knowledge as both poetic and scientific. This simple narrative by Lewis provides an example that could be considered both new and radical to the early days of modern thinking and yet be so common as to go unnoticed today; With the incubation of modern ways of thinking, not only had man begun to see his new role as a type of creator, but abstract and conceptual knowledge replaced the importance of observed knowledge as both poetic and scientific. This simple narrative by Lewis provides an example that could be considered both new and radical to the early days of modern thinking and yet be so common as to go unnoticed today;

We should be like the man coming to know about a foreign country without visiting it. He learns about the mountains from carefully studying the contour lines on a map. But his knowledge is not knowledge of contour lines. The real knowledge is achieved when these enable him to say 'That would be an easy ascent', 'This is a dangerous precipice', 'A would not be visible from B', 'these woods and waters must make a pleasant valley'. In going beyond the contour lines to such conclusions he is (if he knows how to read a map) getting nearer to the reality. It would be different if someone said to him (and was believed) 'But it is the contour lines themselves that are the fullest reality you can get. (Lewis, 2014, p.217)

Is this what has happened to the study of architectural history as well? Are 'models of architecture and of history no longer 'replicas of reality', in ways that we 'know and enjoy the truth'? What are examples of the 'modern model' of architectural thinking we can point to when understanding its influence on contemporary thought? Lewis continues his reflection of the transformation from medieval to modern with the observation that it was not only the availability of new 'facts' and scientific findings that guaranteed the changes in how man saw himself in the universe. While he has no doubt that the facts of all ages are true, reliable, and repeatable, they are so with the frames of mind and ways of thinking that perceive them. The questions answered in any age or inquiry relies solely on the questions asked. And "Nature has all sorts of phenomena in stock and can suit many different tastes." (Lewis, 2014, p.221) What are examples of the 'modern model' of architectural thinking we can point to when understanding its influence on contemporary thought?

Louis Sullivan's declaration that "form ever follows function. This is the law." (Sullivan, 1896 p.403) certainly embodies the functionalist approach to design representative of his time. Both as a type of harbinger and prophet, Sullivan's thoughts and work exemplified ways of thinking which straddled both 'classic' and 'modern' approaches being transformed at the time. Adolf Loos, by way of contrast, clearly exemplifies man's way of thinking about architecture from a perspective of 'subject as master', described in Lewis' earlier analogy. In his "Ornament of Crime" of 1908, Loos boldly declares that "Lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength" (Loos, 2004)

Early forms of the Bauhaus embraced and provided contemporary interpretations of the teachings and philosophies resulting from the Enlightenment and Romantic ways of thinking as described earlier. At the same time, the 'purely scientific' posture conveyed by Loos, and powerfully present during their times, was 'in parallel time and place' explored and foundational to the philosophy of the Bauhaus. While the primary role of Gropius was that of 'headmaster', his embrace of the variety of philosophies, often in stark contrast to each other, were superseded in priority by his passion for the 'social role' in German history that the endeavors of the Bauhaus would provide. While Itten embodied clear evidence of ways of thinking both 'modern', and 'classic' in the Romantic sense, Moholy-Nagy, Kandinsky and others clearly embraced the philosophy held by Loos, and by the late years of the Bauhaus, evidence of Classic and Romantic thought were gone.

No exploration of architectural thought or education has had more impact on the theory and practice of architecture in Western culture than has that of the Bauhaus. It remains, to this day, the primary foundation, standard bearer and benchmark for evaluating contemporary architectural thought in the Western world. The demands of the post-war and 'modern' world of the early twentieth century which propelled the needs and passions that birthed the Bauhaus remains in similar form and nature to this day. The places, names, technologies, and forms of constructed environments continue to evolve. Yet the intellectual postures and reflective ways of thinking remain essentially unchanged from those as characterized by Lewis.

But was Lewis advocating the impossible approach of somehow 'returning to previous ways of thinking, somehow transported into contemporary times? Not so. And yet, at the same time, it is worth considering a perspective offered by Lewis who addresses the types of knowledge, ways of understanding history, and a reasonable posture for considering how we think about our own times, our own histories, and our own relationship to the world.

"We must recognize that what has been called 'a taste in universes' is not only pardonable but inevitable. We can no longer dismiss the change of Models as a simple progress from error to truth. No Model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is mere fantasy. Each is a serious attempt to get in all the phenomena known at a given period, and each succeeds in getting in a great many. But also, and no less surely, each reflects the prevalent psychology of an age almost as much as it reflects the state of that age's knowledge. Hardly any battery of new facts could have persuaded a Greek that the universe had an attribute so repugnant to him as infinity; hardly any such battery could persuade a modern that it is hierarchical. (Lewis, 2014, p.222)

And is not this a perspective we can consider in answering our initial questions? Where does the study of history fit within the types of study known and practiced through time? Should not our 'model' continue to rely on evidence? It would seem that our findings have thus far confirmed that mankind has typically relied on 'evidence' of some kind. Evidence particular to the questions that is asked. Perhaps 'the new' that we bring to our 'present' apperception of historical findings, and their interpretive conclusions, can host a more complete understanding and respect for the understanding of the impact that the nature and form of our questions hold in the 'place' of knowledge. If it's true that "We shape our buildings, and thereafter they shape us" (Churchill, 2015), how might we understand the idea that we shape our questions, and thereafter our questions shape us?

If the structure of the examination has such influence on the 'truth' that will appear and the pattern it will suggest, then must we not recognize the importance of the questions we form? How one formalizes the ways in which they seek, perceive, find, and organize the perceptions that are fashioned into ideas is influenced by personal traits and cultural context. The importance, place, and methods of architectural thought, historical thought, and indeed all forms of thought are never separated from place or time, including contemporary philosophies towards the past, present, and future.

Contemporary constructs of architectural and historical thinking 'sit on' and are 'embedded in' the constructs of contemporary humanity. Factual events recorded from times past reveal both 'outer' and 'inner' findings to the scientist and the philosopher. Fully developed approaches to architecture and history include inquires of both types; observational and reflective. The consciousness of the architect and the historian in recent centuries can safely be assumed to reflect the nature and types of society in which they have thrived. We commonly refer to 'periods' or 'ages' as ways to characterize affinities in ways of thinking to certain places and times. What have seen current 'periods' of thinking in which we most closely inherit our ways of thinking, practicing, and 'knowing'? Where did they come from?

As 'spokesman' for the lives to be lived in intended environments, the architect inherits the role of providing places that host ways for mankind to 'know itself'. Since there is nothing in creation which favors uniqueness between creatures and against parity among them, the task of the designer includes the development of language appropriate to its place and time. The architect's language begins with all knowledge types of the first degree. Significance depends on reflective thought of the second degree. The level of art, if ever achieved, transposes findings from crude observations into ideas which resonate with the lives and emotions of contemporary humanity.

The architecture of history is the architecture of humanity in search of finding and knowing itself in its own unique place and time. Study of this history is the study of mankind. Mastery of this study elevates the history of mankind. Hosting access to this study in academic settings elevates the history of both students and mankind.

## References

- "Adolf Loos." Encyclopedia of World Biography.(2004). Retrieved September 20, 2015 from Encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404703960.html>
- Collingswood, R.G. (2005). *The Idea of History*. Revised Edition. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Collingswood, R.G.. (1958) *The Principles of Art*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, C.S. (2014) *The Discarded Image*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sullivan, Louis H. (1896). "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered". *Lippincott's Magazine* (March 1896): 403–409.
- Winston Churchill. (n.d.). CleverQuotations.com. Retrieved September 20, 2015, from CleverQuotations.com Web site: <http://www.cleverquotations.com/quote/4941/we-shape-our-buildings-thereafter-they-shape-us>