1

Reading the past

What is architectural history?

Architectural History is more than just the study of buildings. Architecture of the past and the present remains an essential emblem of a distinctive social system and set of cultural values, and as a result it has been the subject of study of a variety of disciplines. But what is architectural history and how should we read it? This book examines both the role of architecture in the construction of its histories and, equally, the way in which histories of architecture are written – in other words how the forces of history impact on our perception and understanding of the architecture of the past. But first what is meant by architecture? And what is history?

History

Let’s begin by unpacking the term ‘history’. History is about the past. Yet it exists only in the present – the moment of its creation as history provides us with a narrative constructed after the events with which it is concerned. The narrative must then relate to the moment of its creation as much as its historical subject. History presents an historian with the task of producing a dialogue between the past and the present. But as these temporal co-ordinates cannot be fixed, history becomes a continuous interaction between the historian and the past. As such, history can be seen as a process of evaluation whereby the past is always coloured by the intellectual fashions and philosophical concerns of the present. This shifting perspective on the past is matched by the fluid status of the past itself. In this way structuralist and post-structuralist discourse has fundamentally altered our view and understanding of knowledge and history. The preoccupation with the nature of history and historical truth is scrutinized in terms of its linguistic and textual possibilities. Similarly, such thoughts and questions as ‘What is history?’ were voiced by historians in the 1960s as part of a discourse around the discipline. Historians were beginning to question what they were doing and the philosophical implications of their construction of the discipline. In this way we see that the concern with what history is is not merely the preoccupation of social and cultural theorists intent on dismantling traditional canons of thought, it is a fundamental core of the historiography of history.

One of the principal concerns when considering of the nature of history is the question of subjectivity. Now that human knowledge is no longer viewed as being a stable and immutable – a kind of humanistic or enlightenment vision of the subject knowing both the world and itself – we define subjectivity as a state of flux and change. History, as a part of human knowledge, cannot then be seen as a solid ever-expanding discourse developing along generally accepted trajectories. We have dissembled these certainties in order to question established principles of knowledge upon which historical thought is based.
The recognition of the role and importance of subjectivity in the construction of histories does, by implication, negate the possibility for objectivity in the writing of history. But there will always be historical narrative and, consequently, a narrative voice, be it hidden in the syntactical structure of the writing by, for instance, the absence of first person or the use of simple past tense. But this is a sleight of hand which gives the reader a sense of immediate contact with the past without the presence of an interlocutor. This apparently ‘unmediated’ contact gives history a kind of privileged status of objective knowledge.

Narrative and its role in history is the concern of Roland Barthes’ influential essay on Historical Discourse.

What really happens is that the author discards the human persona but replaces it by an ‘objective’ one; the authorial subject is as evident as ever, but it has become an objective subject . . . At the level of discourse objectivity, or the absence of any clues to the narrator, turns out to be particular form of fiction, where the historian tries to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself.

Here we see how the theoretical preoccupations with language and textuality enable us to examine the kinds of narrative constructions used in the telling of histories and the consequences these different modes of narrative have on the subject. Historical reality is then a ‘referential illusion’, in which we try to grasp the reality (the referent of language) that we believe lies beyond the barrier of the linguistic construction of its narratives. In this way history becomes a Myth or an ideology as it purports to be reality. Indeed, storytelling is often seen as one of the most important functions of writing histories and fundamental to the nature of the discipline. A story requires a beginning, middle and end, based on a series of events that take place over a period of time. Lawrence Stone sums up this understanding of narrative:

"Narrative is taken to mean the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focussing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with sub-plots. The two essential ways in which narrative history differs from structural history is that its arrangement is descriptive rather than analytical and that its central focus is on man not circumstances. It therefore deals with the peculiar and the specific, rather than the collective and statistical. Narrative is a mode of historical writing, but it is a mode which also affects and is affected by content and method."

Coherence is then an essential part of narrative in order for it to work as a story and for it to work in Barthes’ terms as a myth or reality. This coherence or linearity is a selective process that requires the exclusion of material and the imposition of a unity on a disparate set of historical events or circumstances. This consequence of the desire for narrative relates to the empirical tradition; it is one way of ordering facts – ‘letting them speak for themselves’ – and has a built-in notion of progress. Two orders of narrative used frequently in architectural history are the narrative of style and the narrative of the author (architect). The narrative of style allows the ordering of architectural production, whether anonymous or not, through aesthetic categories. Here the heterogeneity, discordance and lack of synchronization between different strands of architectural production can be unified into what Laura Mulvey has called ‘parabolic patterns of narrative’, with elements/movements coming into ascendancy and then declining. This provides a dominant narrative thrust in history within which the ideas of progress movement and development are expressed through a narrative of opposition and dominant patterns in stylistic histories where teleological patterns of stylistic
dominance and recession are imposed. In this way English Palladianism, typified by Inigo Jones (Figure 1.1), is followed by English Baroque, typified by Sir John Vanbrugh (Figure 1.2) is followed by English Palladianism, typified by Lord Burlington (Figure 1.3). Vanbrugh rejected the style of Jones in the same way that Burlington rejected the style of Vanbrugh.

What of the substance of these narratives – the factual information?

The choice of narrative is an important way of making the facts speak. But this was rarely recognised by nineteenth-century historians, many of whom were oblivious to the nature and consequences of the narrative choices available to them. They believed, instead, that at some point all facts would be known and thus to provide an archival truth. There are traces of this today where narrative choices, centred for instance on biography, style or social history, stem from the belief that an empirical reiteration of the facts presents reality. The adoption of ‘scientific’ techniques of narration from the early nineteenth century onwards, where the historian dissociated himself (usually) from literature in favour of science, reinforces the primacy of factual accuracy and empirical information and the myth of truthful reality.

Wilhelm von Humboldt’s essay entitled The Historian’s Task, written in 1821, leaves us in no doubt as to the prevalent view:

The historian’s task is to present what actually happened. The more purely and completely he [note ‘he’] achieves this, the more perfectly has he solved this problem. A simple presentation is at the same time the primary indispensable condition of his work and the highest achievement he will be able to attain. Regarded in this way, he seems to be merely receptive and productive, not active and creative.
Facts are the substance of this ‘objective’ historical narrative. But what are they? And what is the relationship of the historian to the facts? Is it the duty of the historian, as Ranke amongst others suggests, to let the facts speak for themselves? But the facts history purports to describe are in the past – no longer accessible to direct inspection or empirical observation. They are untestable and have no yardstick of known reality to which they can be compared.

Again, this was a concern of historians before the post-structuralist discourses began to permeate historical thinking. W H Walsh in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* considered the question of truth and fact in history, which he saw as relating to the more general theory of knowledge.

We are apt to suppose that the facts in any branch of meaning must be in some way open to direct inspection, and that the statements of experts in each branch can be tested by their conformity with them . . .

The most striking thing about history is that the facts it purports to describe are past facts; and past facts are no longer accessible to direct inspection. We cannot, in a word, test the accuracy of historical statements by simply seeing whether they correspond to a reality which is independently known. How then can we test them? . . .

. . . we do so by referring to historical evidence. Although the past is not accessible to direct inspection it has left ample traces of itself in the present, in the shape of documents, buildings, coins, institutions, procedures and so forth.5

Every assertion must be based, therefore, on some kind of evidence. If there is no evidence history, according to Walsh, becomes an inspired guess or a fiction. But the original sources

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*Figure 1.2 Eastbury, Dorset by Sir John Vanbrugh, illustrated in *Vitrivius Britannicus*, Volume III, plate 17, 1725 (private collection).*

need scrutiny and the historian has to decide whether or not to believe them; they are not
the ‘ultimate datum to which we can refer to test historical judgements’. Walsh places his-
torical thinking firmly in the present so that the historical truth arrived at by the historian is
a product of the present and not the past.

The past does leave traces of itself in the present in the form of archives, whether they be
documents, institutions or indeed buildings. This archive of knowledge about the past, no
matter how incomplete, allows the historian to present an argument or reconstruction based
on this body of ‘evidence’ or facts. But the ‘facts of history can never come to us in a pure
state’, as the historian E H Carr observed: ‘they are always refracted through the mind of the
recorder’. So we not only have an imperfect and uncorroborated archive, but we also have
the subjectivity of the historian. Indeed, Carr advises that ‘It follows that when we take up
a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with
the historian who wrote it.’

Architectural historians and their histories of architecture are the substance of this
enquiry. The dialogue between the historian and his/her facts is an essential element
Michel de Certeau calls it ‘the particularity of place where discourse is produced’. He
argues that this

. . . [puts] the subject-producer of knowledge into question . . . One can, of course,
either maintain that the personal status of the author is a matter of indifference (in relation
to the objectivity of his or her work) or that he or she alone authorizes or invalidates
the discourse (according to whether he or she is ‘of it’ or not). But this debate requires
what has been concealed by an epistemology, namely, the impact of subject-to-subject
relationships (men and women, blacks and whites, etc.) on the use of apparently ‘neutral’ techniques and in the organization of discourses that are, perhaps, equally scientific. For example, from the differentiation of the sexes, must one conclude that a woman produces a different historiography from that of a man? Of course, I do not answer this question, but I do assert that this interrogation puts the place of the subject in question and requires a treatment of it unlike the epistemology that constructed the ‘truth’ of the work on the foundation of the speaker’s irrelevance.  

De Certeau is particularly concerned with histories and the historiography of ‘other’, but this sensitivity to the subject-to-subject relationship outlined here has resonance with the concerns of this study. And de Certeau sees these categories of historical discourse as magnifying more general concerns about the narratives and subjects of history outlined in this chapter. At this point I would add a third party to this perceived dialogue between historian and narrative – the reader. What do we bring to and what do we want from these discourses? And what is our ‘experience’ of the past?

The past is encountered and mapped through the discovery and ordering of facts which are not static, fixed – or indeed certain. Foucault amongst many other thinkers asserts that there is no essential order, meaning or framework as knowledge is forever changing and is itself subject to periodisation or fashion, as is the discipline of history itself. These epistemes, as Foucault referred to them, were both a means of exploring and understanding the historical discourses of the past and a way of discovering and interpreting the production of the present.

If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of acetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process.

History can then imply chronology and sequence, perhaps even a sense of development and progress. Linearity is not necessarily problematic – it is only one route through knowledge – but if we accept that architecture and urban environments are complex entities with interwoven meanings, this straightening out of the different strands or chains of facts/events can both clarify and obscure our readings of these phenomena.

Architecture

‘Architecture’ may at first appear to be a more fixed and finite term. It has a three-dimensional, tangible, useable form. But questions remain about what can be considered architecture and what cannot, and by this I mean that we usually understand architecture to incorporate aesthetic as well as functional consideration into its structure. Anything that does not fall into this category can be described as ‘just a building’. This may seem too simple. Can architecture be determined solely by the use of refined architectural style – high or polite architecture, or to use a more inscribed term, ‘classical’? This view reduces architecture to an aesthetic – a cosmetic...
transformation or intervention of which the cultural and historical meaning remains in the realms of the visual. But style has been an essential tool in the construction of the narratives of architectural history. If we then consider the function of a building, is the answer really as simple as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner’s view that ‘a bicycle shed is a building: Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture’? In one way we return to the importance of the aesthetic, whilst at the same time imposing hierarchies of utility. Moreover, can we deny that technical and structural innovations play a crucial part in the design process – both in terms of infrastructure and formal possibilities. At what point does this become ‘architecture’? The complexities revealed by these questions amplify when buildings are considered in their urban context. Most would agree that buildings comprise a substantial part of a city. But do these buildings have to be ‘architecture’? And if we accept buildings as constituent parts of an incoherent whole, it becomes infeasible to categorise these key features of metropolitan structures and identities in any fixed way. Instead of fixed definitions, fluid sets of relationships between buildings and the urban infrastructure demonstrate the complex interweaving of the fabricated environment to reveal at once its heterotopic and heterochronic significance.

Architecture differs from a work of art, which can be displayed in different settings and the subject-matter, form and meaning will remain unchanged. The physicality of any built structure can be altered over time as additions and alterations are made. Moreover, a building or work of architecture can change its function as it meets the different demands of its occupants, although its exterior appearance may be unaltered. And its meaning may change depending on the nature of the context. This reveals some of the problems of interpreting historic architecture from a modern-day perspective as the physical changes and different cultural contexts transform the object. So at what point do we consider architecture and how do we reconstruct this period in time? This underlines the importance of treating architecture not as a limited body of design which reflected certain social values. Instead, architecture is an essential instrument of the development and dissemination of these ideas, and this continues throughout the life of the building. By reading architecture as a text we can identify ideological debates and issues that emerge in an interdisciplinary study through which we can understand the relationships between cultural practices and artifacts at various points in time. Indeed, this approach reinforces the point that to consider a building in isolation as a total history in itself, and concentrate solely on form or appearance, is to denude it of much of its meaning. This demonstrates that the sum of the parts of ‘architecture’ is greater than the physical whole, that is to say the architectural form of the building itself.

If we accept architecture as a cultural artefact then we must also see its histories as a text open to a variety of readings. The process of locating ‘the text’ within its appropriate contexts is not merely to provide an historiography, it is to begin the process of interpretation. It is here that critical theory facilitates this kind of interrogation of histories of the built environment and architecture.

We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture.

The focus is then on the interface between theory and archive and how this is manifest in the history of the historiography of architectural history. In this way critical theory, in its broadest constituency, becomes an interlocutor between me – the author narrator – and the historiography and the ‘factual’ archive.
Architecture and history

The relationship between architecture and history is a predominant theme of this book. In many ways they are separate, discrete worlds which collide only to fracture each other into a variety of different meanings and possibilities. First there are the different archives of architecture. We can begin with the building, this physical, tangible archive that comes to us through time. Is this the hard evidence? We also have historic architecture – buildings of historic interest that exist in the present, thereby closing the gap between past and present – but they are loaded with social and cultural meaning and interpretation. Alongside this we have the information around the building. This is a more diverse and scattered archive. Both archives can lead the historian in different directions, and this reveals the tensions and interactions of architectural history and its interconnectedness with so many other disciplines. Architecture can be explained in so many ways – more than any other ‘art form’. A building, what we might call here the primary archive, is commissioned, designed, used, re-used, conserved or demolished. It is the subject of what we might here call the secondary archive as it appears in design briefs, drawings, journals, diaries, household accounts, travel and guidebooks, architectural surveys, and we must not forget architectural histories. The building can become, through a synthesis of its primary and secondary archives, an archive in itself for enquiries from other disciplines – social history, cultural geography and so forth. Buildings can then be historicised or become the objects of history.

Architectural history

The development of the study of architecture and the kinds of histories that have been written about it is the subject of David Watkin’s survey *The Rise of Architectural History*. This study stands as a rather isolated account of the emergence of a discipline which remains unreflective and unself-questioning, especially when compared to its close cousin art history. My purpose here is not to go over the ground covered by Watkin nor to challenge or reconfigure the path he laid out of the evolution of the subject. I am interested instead in looking closely at a specific moment in the development of architectural history in Britain and considering the impact this has had on the writing of architectural history and the way in which it is read.

The Second World War precipitated a quite considerable change in national attitudes towards historic architecture and traditional townscapes. The threat of what could be lost as well as the memory of what had already been lost sharpened interest and awareness on the part of both government and populace. In 1943 the Ministry of Town and Country Planning was instructed to draw up an inventory of buildings of national historic importance. This became the now infamous, if not controversial, listing process. It is perhaps hard for us to imagine how or why in the face of such adversity this seemed relevant. But if we accept that architecture can be a built embodiment or representation of sets of social and cultural values, the importance of the past – of historic architecture – at that moment can be seen as a signifier of the values that were at stake. Also during the war, in order to have at least a photographic/drawn record of the nation’s historic architecture, the National Buildings Record (later the National Monuments Record) was set up and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments had its remit expanded so that it was permitted to survey structures dating from after 1714.

In the immediate post-war period government and public attention was focused on historic architecture of both country and city. At the same time many large country houses owners could
no longer afford to keep them on. This had the twofold effect of making more of these houses available to the visiting public and, perhaps more importantly here, their archives became freely available to scholars and the interested public in county record offices across the country. There was a range of academics and writers ready to work in these newly accessible archives in order to map out the architectural history of Britain, especially its country houses, and to make this history available to the public in order to explain the significance of the historical architecture now deemed worthy of national veneration and preservation.

The range of writing around architecture at this time reflected both the social and intellectual diversity of the historians of architecture in post-war Britain. There were those, such as Reginald Blomfield, Christopher Hussey, James Lees Milne and Sacheverall Sitwell, who continued the elitist *Country Life* tradition of architectural connoisseurship (Figure 1.4). But there was also a new generation of British academics from less grand backgrounds. Most notable here is perhaps Sir John Summerson who, although a confirmed modernist, recognised the importance of Georgian architecture to the urban fabric (Figures 1.5 and 1.6). His seminal study, *Georgian London*, first published in 1945, was partly a response to the loss to bomb damage and demolition of much of London’s eighteenth-century architecture and partly a way of introducing and mapping the urban development of the city at this time for the general public. Through the connections he made between the abstract qualities of Georgian design and the principles of the Modern movement Summerson provided a bridge between historic past and forward-looking modern present. This kind of English empirical tradition in architectural history continued in Summerson’s *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830*, first published in 1953, which offered for the first time a clear, illustrated route through the development of architecture in this period. The stylistic preoccupations of this book are the subject of a chapter in this study, as is the work of another empirical scholar: Sir Howard Colvin. Colvin’s *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* first appeared in 1954, when the flurry of academic activity concerning British architectural history was in full swing. It provided a route map for archival sources for the study of architecture, as well as being, and remaining, the most comprehensive gazetteer of architectural activity, albeit by named architects only, in the period. Colvin was not alone at this time in mapping out British cultural production. Rupert Gunnis produced his *Dictionary of British Sculptors* at the time, which also drew heavily on newly accessible country house collections. There was almost a sense of urgency to discover, order and publish facts – empirical information about a past set of values and architecture that had so nearly been lost.

The influx of scholars to Britain in the mid-twentieth century, many of whom had fled persecution in Nazi-occupied Europe, meant British architecture was scrutinised for the first time in any depth by a set of intellectual and philosophical conventions that had not rested easily in existing British academic traditions. British architecture had not received much attention from European scholars. It provided neither examples of formal brilliance that would stand up to continental examples nor any significant influence on design in Europe – the traffic of ideas had for the most part been one way. In 1945 Sir Nikolaus Pevsner began his expansive survey of buildings, both urban and rural, of interest and importance to the nation in his *Buildings of England* series, the impact of which is considered later in this book. This series was followed by Pevsner’s bigger and more wide-ranging *The Pelican History of Art* series of which Summerson’s volume on *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830* was one of the first to be commissioned alongside the volume by Ellis Waterhouse on *Painting in
Figure 1.4 Foots Cray Place, Kent. Upper-class traditions of architectural connoisseurship endured into the twentieth century. Engraving by William Woollet (detail) 1760 (private collection).
The map of British architectural history may well have been drawn up quickly – in less than a decade. This hasty appearance was in part the result of the flurry of activity as rich, new archives became available for public scrutiny. But it also coincides with the state’s promotion of a ‘New Elizabethan Era’ in the early 1950s as part of the invention of heritage as a tool to focus national loyalty and pride in the post-war era. But this archival material and the established readings of it remain of lasting importance to architectural history in Britain in terms both of the empirical information and the way this is presented, with various aspects privileged over others in the narrative interpretations.

Reading

The textuality of architectural history has many intricate layers. Fundamental to our readings are the complexities of language and syntax – the author’s choice of words and the reader’s understanding of them. Hayden White was one of the first writers who brought the theoretical ideas of literary theory to the study of history. Here the central point is that language and linguistic protocols fundamentally shape the writing of history and by inference our understanding of the narratives of history. The historian’s choice of narrative
The ordinariness of London’s domestic architecture and planning featured in architectural histories of the city. Anonymous nineteenth-century engraving (private collection).

Histories combine a certain amount of ‘data’, theoretical concepts for explaining these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation. In addition, I maintain, they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what distinctively ‘historical’ explanation should be. This paradigm functions as the ‘metahistorical’ element in all historical works that are more comprehensive in scope than the monograph or archival report. In other words, the historian must perceive the field before investigation can begin, and in doing so creates his/her object of analysis and the nature of the conceptual strategies to be used to explain it. Thus, historians employ their narratives in particular ways and these modes of narrative give some form of explanation. An example would be the choice of beginning and end of the narrative. The sources of history are continuous; it is the historian who inserts the breaks.

This book draws together the various ways of writing about architectural history and each chapter aims to show how this study complements them and can serve as a way of revisiting important texts. This is with a view to not only as using these texts as important sources of information but also to interrogating them in terms of their role in the construction of the canon of architectural history. As a result, we see what their preoccupations tell us of the ways in which histories have been written. Alongside this I have included texts which express some of the fundamental ideas that have informed thinking on modern and contemporary architectural history.
architecture and criticism. The juxtaposition of these is there to show how one can serve as a kind of exegesis of the other. The empirical survey can be revisited and re-read in the light of the theoretical paradigm, just as the theoretical paradigm can be vivified and explored through the specifics of the empirical survey. Of particular interest here is the canonical use of biography, style and social history, together with such concepts as gender, and architectural experience through guidebooks and visual analyses. This thematic exploration and ergo fragmentation of the canon of the historical narratives of architecture means that the discipline cannot now assert itself as having the epistemological status attributed to positivist or teleological systems of knowledge. Each fragment or theme represents and relates to current systems of thought where there can be a variety of perspectives or approaches to a subject which do not claim to be total histories in themselves. Inevitably, this challenges the long-held notion of objectivity in architectural history. But is as E H Carr asks us ‘to consider the historian . . .’ we will see that architectural history has been the construct of white European male subjects. Moreover, certain elements of the architectural histories of Britain of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be seen as tools to promote and reinforce the hegemony of certain social and cultural élites, and so reveal much about the social dynamics of the production and consumption of the myths of architecture.

I do not intend these lines of enquiry to constitute a destructive act on the discipline of architectural history. Rather, my aim in scrutinising the canonical texts is to give a range of voices to the monolithic narrative they have constructed. In doing so the facts, such as they are, can be released from the restraints of positivist, teleological interpretative systems and be seen as fluid entities with a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. Reading Architectural History becomes then at once a process of recognition and of analysis of the subject in all its complexities.

Notes

1 In this book I use the terms ‘post-structuralist’ and ‘post-modern’ interchangeably.