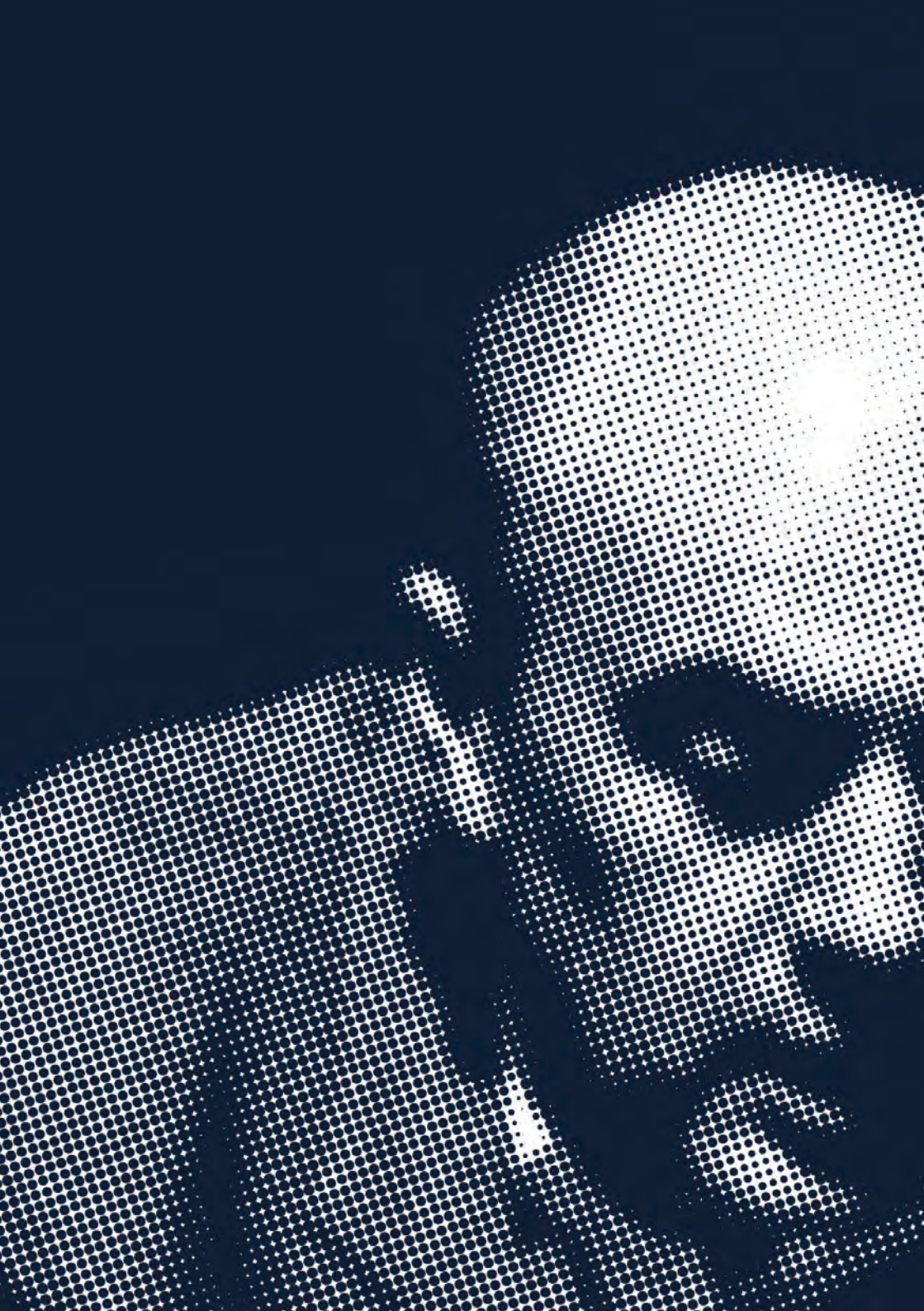


Antoine
Picon
*Some
Concluding
Remarks*

First International Meeting of the
European Architectural History Network
Guimarães, Portugal, 2010



Antoine Picon

Some Concluding Remarks

Final Keynote Event Presented on 19 June 2010

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Antoine Picon (Harvard University) has graciously agreed to share his valuable and stimulating insights about the current state of our discipline as he presented them at the final keynote event of the First International Meeting of the European Architectural History Network in Guimarães on 19 June 2010. Responsible for the concluding remarks at both the 2005 INHA/SAH conference in Paris, Changing Boundaries, as well as at the 2010 Guimarães conference, Professor Picon has thus accompanied the EAHN from its birth in Paris five years ago to its coming of age in Guimarães this spring.

CONTENTS

Questioning Europe — Neglected Themes— Critical
Reexaminations — Geohistoriography— Disciplinary
Interrelationships — Academic Disciplines —
Architectural Practice — Preservation — Materiality —
Politics — Beauty — Outlook

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers of the first meeting of the European Architectural History Network to have invited me to this wonderful event. It is an honor for me to have been asked to present a couple of concluding remarks and this is clearly a daunting task. More than attempting to summarize an extremely rich content, what I would like to do is to share with you a certain number of reflections with which these two and a half days have inspired me.

QUESTIONING EUROPE

I must confess that, for a while, I was a little concerned about the very notion of a European network of architectural historians insofar as it could lead to all sorts of disputable assumptions regarding European identity. Of course something like a European identity exists. But this identity is very difficult to define in simple terms. With the first meeting of the European Architectural History Network, there was a risk of engaging in some kind of narcissistic exercise for those of us who come from Europe. Fortunately, this European Network is actually much broader than the official definition of Europe. Like the organizers, I was struck by the diversity of countries represented in this conference; my North American colleagues are, for instance, very present.

A statement made by Christine Mengin in her introductory remarks greatly contributed to putting this diversity in perspective. She reminded us that for the founders of the European Architectural History Network, Europe is more a subject or rather a field of inquiry than a geographic zone or a cultural identity. I would go even further and suggest that this conference has shown that Europe, far from being a stable entity

or field, appears rather as an open question, a question around which speakers from extremely diverse origins can gather and exchange.

If I was in a provocative mood, I would go as far as to suggest that in this perspective—and since the question of the canon was discussed at length in one of the sessions of this conference—Europe is still canonical, in the sense that people can meet to discuss and criticize it. A canon, a living canon that is, is never static. It must provoke discussion and debate.

Europe is a question, not a stable entity or field. Some of our Portuguese friends have reminded us of the singularity of the architectural trajectory of their country in the early modern era, compared to other countries more directly dependent upon Italian influence. But isn't Europe a collection of endless singularities and specificities to this day? After all, the only thing that we often have in common is the misuse of English!

The geographical and cultural boundaries of Europe are far from clear. The presence of numerous Turkish colleagues reminds us, for instance, that it is extremely difficult to write a history of Europe without taking into account the Ottoman Empire and its intense and conflicted relations with European nations and cultures.

This conflict has shaped European identity almost as much as other factors we are more accustomed to take into account.

Is Europe as a continent the right scale of analysis to understand phenomena such as American settlements and subsequent colonial enterprises? During this conference we have been reminded, for instance, that in recent studies of imperial Great Britain, the perspective is deliberately North Atlantic, or even at a world scale. Not only are the identity and boundaries of Europe subject to debate. The very scale of what it represents is challenged. Once again, Europe these days is a question, an open question, definitely not a stable field populated with certitudes.

Now this status makes the attempt to wrap up what has been going on during the past days difficult. The difficulty becomes even more pronounced when one takes into account the diversity of periods and subjects that have been dealt with. From Roman port construction to Italian civic palaces, from places of leisure in early modern Europe to post-World War II urbanism, the range of subjects is mind-boggling.

NEGLECTED THEMES

Fortunately, for me, there were a few themes relatively underrepresented. One is definitely the history of the environment and the connections architecture has had with environmental concerns, a history brilliantly illustrated by contributors such as Peder Anker with his recent book *From Bauhaus to Ecohaus*.

The history of countercultures has been evoked here and there, but perhaps not as much as it could have been in view of the growing number of scholars interested in this dimension, scholars who have contributed to a better understanding of subjects ranging from European radical architecture to American alternative endeavors. The history of the relations between architecture and nascent information culture, a history to which various scholars from Reinhold Martin to Christopher Hight have contributed, is also missing. Of course, given the fact that I myself have recently contributed to this field, I am certainly a bit biased. To remain on the subject of the relations between architecture and technology, construction history is also underrepresented, even if we have had a series of wonderful contributions in this domain.

But despite these missing elements – and I could have listed others – diversity is still spectacular, making any attempt to summarize the content of the presentations and discussions somewhat vain.

CRITICAL REEXAMINATIONS

However, if I had one general thread to propose, it would be the following: a great number of the contributions that we have listened to are about the critical reexamination of the definition, methods and ambitions of architectural history. Architectural history as we once knew it has evolved into a set of practices that question many dimensions that were taken for granted not so long ago.

There is a noticeable shift towards a more comprehensive history, a history that includes social, political and economic dimensions at a more advanced level than before, a history that enables us to pay attention to a greater array of actors. Various expressions can be mobilized to designate such an evolution. In American schools of architecture, one often evokes the notion of a history of the built environment broader than traditional

architectural history. My Harvard colleague Michael Hays says that we have passed from a history of authors and objects to a history of people and environments.

Even in the most established fields like early modern architectural studies, the evolution is quite striking. The exclusive preeminence given to the figure of the architect as an artist has been challenged, while the complexity of patronage relations and professional interactions appears more and more clearly. We are finally coming to terms with the intractable complexity of architectural authorship.

Speaking of long-neglected actors, it is reassuring to observe how the gender dimension is now fully integrated into the debate. Beyond the session that was explicitly devoted to it, various other presentations made it a key element of their analyses.

New subjects have become possible that not so long ago were deemed minor at best. Complexities and hybrid conditions have become more visible than in the past. This especially struck me in the various sessions devoted to urban problems. We are now able to move beyond the established dichotomy between modernism and tradition, to observe phenomena that are often situated in between these two terms such as cultural urban-

ism in the heyday of functionalism or village planning.

Even architectural objects appear as more complex and diffracted than before, with greater and greater attention paid to the various conditions that surround their design and realization, something that was made very clear by the discussion around the notion of materiality that took place on the last day of this conference. The representation of such objects often tends to blur the distinction between the “real” thing and its simulacrum. This was made quite evident in the series of contributions dealing with the question of the museum.

GEOHISTORIOGRAPHY

Perhaps the most striking feature of this conference for me was the importance taken by postcolonial architectural studies, or to use the term proposed by the organizers “geohistoriography.” The vitality of this field is evident from the diversity and richness of the presentations that were given throughout the conference.

What was also very striking in these sessions is that we are entering a period marked by an even greater complexity and depth of analysis. Is postcolonialism the last

word on the question? Postcolonialism was about giving a place again to an alternative take on what had happened during the colonial period and to allow a different reading of the pre- and postcolonial periods. The time has perhaps come to be even more radical by bringing the critique back to Europe itself, by questioning what we understand as the bases of European cultures, to go beyond an often limited and simplistic understanding of the national frame for instance. What if nations were not the proper level to understand a certain number of phenomena? What if Europe was actually to be considered as a regional, transatlantic or even worldwide network? With geohistoriography we are evidently at the core of this evolution that I have tried to capture, a challenge to what used to be considered, not so long ago, as a canon of architectural history.

The recurrence of this idea of a canon that had to be challenged, enlarged, displaced or even discarded is among the threads that have run throughout the two and a half days we have spent together. And since most of the subjects were European, please allow me to come back to this idea for a minute, intended partly as a provocation, that there is still some kind of link at work

between the European dimension and the notion of a canon, a link that was probed, challenged, and disputed throughout this conference.

If we understand a canon not as something that is uncritically received, but as a domain of discussion and controversy, then European subjects are still somewhat canonical for our discipline, which of course does not mean that the problem thus raised is easily solved. One of the interests of such a conference is to discuss Europe as an open question once again.

DISCIPLINARY INTERRELATIONSHIPS

Now, at this stage, and since these are concluding remarks, I would like to envisage how the evolution of the discipline epitomized by our conference may impact the various constituencies, fields of reflections and practices to which architectural history is related. Part of the complexity of architectural history has indeed to do with the diversity of constituencies and problems that it deals with. Here, I will identify at least three fields or domains.

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

The first is the academic field, with our various colleagues from inside and, above all, outside the discipline. The evolution towards a history of the built environment tends to change not only the way the discipline conceives itself but also the way it is integrated in the broader field of knowledge production. As something closer to a history of the built environment, architectural history is clearly moving closer to disciplines such as anthropology, geography, and sociology. The “spatial turn” discussed in one of the final sessions is clearly at stake in the affair.

This is evidently a positive evolution, but let me point out two emerging problems that must be addressed. The first has to do with the necessity to redefine our discipline’s relation to the history of art and more generally to the classical humanities. Even if the history of art and the humanities have themselves, up to a certain point, been marked by a parallel evolution, we still need to think somewhat strategically of the type of relation we want to have with them. The history of art was, by the way, somewhat underrepresented in this conference, and this is probably not a coincidence.

I mentioned strategy. There is a risk to see the history of architecture lose part of its identity within the general “spatial turn” of contemporary academic production and discourse. A somewhat urgent question is: how should we redefine our specificity? This is the second problem I alluded to. In subjects like the study of the urban sprawl that we share with many other disciplines, this is an immediate question.

ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE

A second constituency and field to which we relate is architecture. Many of us teach in architectural programs. Let me say a few words about the present state of the relations between architectural history and architectural education and practice. On the one hand, we are no longer in a situation in which architectural history is central to architectural education and practice as in the heyday of postmodernism. One of the reasons is that practice has evolved at a more rapid pace in the past decades than architectural theory and history.

On the other hand, it is striking to observe how certain aspects of the evolution of architectural history

are in accordance with what is happening in the architectural realm at large. Of course, the architectural star system still tends to promote an exclusive image of the architect as an artist. But one has to note how many architects are increasingly interested in questions pertaining to the built environment at large through questions like sustainability. To come back to the canon issue, in many instances it seems that it is the canon that is an endangered reality.

The rapid pace of architectural evolution makes it all the more necessary to reintroduce the type of critical attitude conveyed by history. But there is no a priori respect for criticality these days. One has to demonstrate that it can be useful, or to use another of today's buzzwords, that it can perform. The performative turn is a fundamental trend of contemporary architecture, and architectural history needs to confront itself with it. I will return to this point in a moment.

PRESERVATION

Before that, I would like to evoke the last type of practice and constituency architectural historians have to

deal with: preservation and the various actors involved in it. Here again, there was a notable underrepresentation of the theme and domain in this conference, even if we dealt with it through questions pertaining to the medieval heritage or with the actions of Docomomo. This is all the more regrettable since preservation is changing. It is becoming more and more strategic, with the development of tourism, with the political and economic problems linked to the ever increasing numbers of buildings that are eligible to be preserved. It is quite striking to observe how Rem Koolhaas, who is generally not the last one to identify and promote hot subjects, has become obsessed with the rethinking of preservation in a strategic perspective.

I wanted to evoke these three domains since one of the aims of a conference like this one is not only to deal with *how* we write history but also with the *why* and for *whom* we do it. Of course I do not pretend to have the solutions to all the challenges I just listed. Let me just finish by pointing out three approaches or dimensions that we might want to pursue. Here again, I have been strongly inspired by what I have heard throughout this two-and-half day conference.

MATERIALITY

The first approach is to remain attached to the materiality of architecture and more generally that of the built environment. This attachment may enable architectural history to maintain productive relations with the history of art as well as to distinguish itself from the other disciplines concerned with the so-called spatial turn.

But such an attachment does not imply that we should conceive the architectural object exactly in the same light as we used to prior to the evolutions I have tried to characterize throughout this presentation. To make a long story short, it seems quite evident that we have to integrate a whole set of problems that were usually considered as minor. One has to read the built object more closely, to be even more contextual than before. We also have to suspend the traditional hierarchy that placed design—artistically-oriented design—at the top, and the means of realization at the bottom of what mattered. We have to challenge the distinction between object and process. Another way to put it would be to say that we need to blur the frontier of the architectural object, a little like what contemporary philosophy and cultural theory have done with the subject, from

Deleuze to Latour and Sloterdijk, that is to explore the multiple ways that it extends beyond his or her body. The architectural object is no longer to be conceived as closed upon itself. It is as much a network, a series of concentric circles.

Such a reading will provide architectural students and practitioners with a new take on architectural complexity, as well as performativity. It is through the multiple channels that relate it to its context that architecture truly performs.

POLITICS

The second dimension I want to underline is politics. Politics was one of the themes connecting selected panels of this conference, but it was also everywhere. There is a need to understand architecture as something political again. The question, however, is whether we need architectural historians for that. The answer will be positive only if we historians can show how political issues are actually embedded in the built objects themselves, not something that influences architecture from the outside.

Quite often, built objects are not political in relation to outside determinations, but because they materialize controversies, like walls passing through contested territories. This may help us to understand a few things—for instance, how architects can claim to be apolitical while at the same time being so effective from a political standpoint through their realizations. This is one of the reasons criticality remains so essential in the architectural realm. It may also help to frame the question of performativity in a broader way. Lastly, it allows for a more insightful understanding of what is at stake in today's preservationist debates. Indeed, these debates are deeply political, and the political issues are partly embedded in the materiality of the object, more than is often assumed.

BEAUTY

The final dimension that I would like to evoke pertains to the old-fashioned question of beauty or taste. Contrary to the two previous ones, this dimension has been suggested rather by what I have *not* heard in this conference, a little like the barking of the hound of the

Baskervilles in the famous Sherlock Holmes story.

Beauty has almost become a politically incorrect question these days. By the way, it is striking to observe how architectural history converges on this point with contemporary architectural practice and its reluctance to deal frontally with aesthetic questions. Still, most of us are here because we are sensitive to some kind of emotion conveyed by built objects. But how are we to deal with this embarrassing problem? At the same time, it is worth noting that this sensitivity to a certain emotional quality of spatial objects and ambiances is definitely among the characteristics of architectural historians.

Beauty is not a trivial question, because it intersects all the problems raised by the relations between architectural history and other academic disciplines, between architectural history and the architectural profession, between architectural history and preservation issues.

What should we do? Historicize beauty and confuse it with taste? Consider it as irrelevant? Reframe the problem by substituting notions such as visual complexity or emotional content? Or why not then choose the term “elegance” used by contemporary digital designers and

theorists like Ali Rahim and Patrik Schumacher?

Beauty is not a simple question for another reason, because many of the new objects that the history of the built environment considers have only marginally to do with the intentional pursuit of beauty. Moreover, the ugly represents a fundamental dimension of contemporary practice and many a preeminent contemporary designer has played with the notion.

As “serious” historians, we certainly don’t want to be confused with amateurs or, worse, with naïve canon endorsers. Does it mean that we have to radically abandon aesthetic concerns? This is not necessarily what the public at large expects from us. Our attitude of denial might have something to do with the need to understand architectural aesthetic values somewhat differently. Indeed, we might have reached a moment that calls for such a displacement.

In the realm of architecture, why not switch for instance to the notion of affect that is currently proposed, after Deleuze, by a certain number of theorists? What this notion entails is a reconsideration of the radical distinction between object and subject, cause and effect, in favor of a different model based on continuity and reciprocity of action. I don’t know whether affect will survive

the present years, but it seems clear to me that the state of aesthetic and ideological uncertainty we are currently experiencing has something to do with a series of drastic changes in the way architecture and more generally the built environment is produced and understood.

OUTLOOK

From the need to remain faithful to the material dimension of architecture to the necessity to redefine beauty, many tasks are awaiting us. Traditionally, historians are not the most vocal people on earth. Looking towards the past is necessary to prepare the advent of the future, but it does not predispose to radical statements. We might nevertheless be living at a time that calls for a certain radicalization of the historical project in order to accompany and make sense of evolutions that extend far beyond the realm of academia. In such a perspective we might need to reinvest boldly in domains like aesthetics.

This is definitely an exciting moment for architectural historians like us. This is an exciting moment for the members of a European Architectural History Network.

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