

# ***Architectural history isn't what it used to be***

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## What architectural history are we used to?

The author of 'The Fields Beneath' and pioneer of the *minaturist history* approach to layered and place specific narratives, Gillian Tindall connects large-scale social developments to the incidental and every-day of a place, documenting how those histories are revealed, or masked by ongoing development. History *as a process* aligns to this 'archaeological' approach that frequently deals in residues and uses the scientific processing of those residues to speculate on former realities. The value of this approach is the value it confers to potentially marginalised aspects of the past, the detriment can be that the contemporary Neo-liberal frame we inhabit politically neuters the fragments of social history the *minaturist* collects.

In a recent RIBA Journal article<sup>1</sup> on Tindall, her attitude to the current destruction around delivering the High Speed 2 railway into Euston was framed by that process driven approach, content with mapping historical development rather than challenging it. In some respects this 'archaeological' praxis links to William Morris's proposition of the 'building as a document'<sup>2</sup>, but without the zeal for retention and meaningful re-use as a resistance to exploitation. Tindall is political in that her subject is entirely within political contexts – i.e. the physical residues of social action, but apolitical in a *laissez faire* position regarding protection – simply documenting land grabs, railway demolition, exploitation and profiteering as a fascinating subject for discussion and enlightenment.

'Nor does she have much sympathy for residents of Park Village East (adjacent to HS2 at Euston), fearful for their houses "I'm always wary of too much hysterical fuss. If notice had been taken of the public in the 1840's, we wouldn't have a single railway'.<sup>3</sup>

This positionality is interesting as it highlights the strength and limitation of history *as process*, and the political reticence that it engenders. For architects used to defining problems and proposing solutions this approach to history appears ambiguous – both inspiring/interesting but passive, its role being to provide *fuel for other fires* by at best prompting new design ideas from old, or at worst just giving a context statement that may or may not *justify* a priori design whims. We might return to Morris and his zeal for history to underpin politics and social action rather than simply report on its machinations in order to unearth a form of historical enquiry that can more directly partner with problem definition and resolution. The active *deployment* of history has informed the decision to discuss architectural history in new and more provocative ways via this journal edition.

## Why the urgency?

It is in the politician's interest to ensure that history lines up in the queue of admirers for their latest policy initiative. Whether it is the Monarchy, the Constitution (it's lack thereof, or the vested interest politics that its absence enables), right to bear arms in the US, the extent of a previous incarnation of a former Soviet empire suddenly back on the map, the reinforcement

of power structures and skewed positionality around gender and so called *western values* – it is clear that history has no intrinsic value, what value it has is only relative to the might of its advocates, with truth simply the manure upon which to grow thorns.

History is in reality a box of someone else's stuff. We inherit it, it is our box, but who filled it and who keeps filling it? We look through it on Monday and come to some conclusions about its value and meaning. When we look through the same box on Wednesday, because of the events of Tuesday we see different meanings and realise different values. We amalgamate experience and re-make history to reflect our new priorities, criteria and insights. Experience produces priorities that are both reflections and projections. We attribute *benchmark* status to history but, as every cabinet maker does, we carve a new mark on the bench whenever we cut something new. If the bench itself is history on which we fabricate the future, then we have to acknowledge that our purpose shapes what history delivers.

#### So, architectural history - what is it now?

The authors in this journal collectively articulate what architectural histories could be, and by sketching that premonition clarify what is was and can no longer remain. Broadly our papers reflect on the role of the historian/ protagonist or on the purpose of the tools of the trade – often the archive material – even the archive itself. The former sets an active, transformational agenda, the latter becoming operationalised to evidence a changing reality. The archive is classically the place where remnants of history are sustained – but also where the power structures that constructed those archives sought to embed themselves. This politically constructed landscape is shifting, but how is it shifting, who does the shifting and how is that shift defended or deflected? In the digital age *to archive* is the mechanism for removing from view data that is rarely used. What happens when the noun and the verb disaggregate? Is this a radical opportunity for democratic process or another Neo-liberal spectacle? The authors in this edition of Charette reveal how this latter manifestation is a mistake – how the radical reinvention of our pedagogy and our architectural profession depends on a fundamental reassessment of now, which is a precarious space atop the mound of stuff we previously called history. Foucault rightly demands that this mound is neither a pile of truth nor a falsehood, simply a demonstration of the powers that put it there, so we should accept an open invitation to dismantle those power structures as we play with the stuff.<sup>4</sup>

This Journal is a history in itself – the call, the responses, our round table discussion of abstracts, refinement and resubmission sandwiched into academic schedules, the editors comments and the all-important peer review process we initiated between the authors themselves. This sharing of the draft papers between the authors and invitation to comment and engage has been rewarding to experience, capturing a spirit of enquiry that can influence the final drafting, bringing together ideas and positions for a collective good.

When constructing this lead editorial one sifts through the papers and the comments like a typographic archaeology to construct the strategic from the tactics. First drafts tended to reticence, the radical intent framed within the dispassionate conventions of academic papers. Perhaps the *rearguard* action that history is draped in brings forward its own set of limitations, hindering the operational potential of the field? Where appropriate we have encouraged activism in the Morrisian mould. In the first draft of comments on Hugh Strange's fascinating paper on Lethaby's pedagogy we were prompted to reply:

'Lethaby provides in this paper a genuine stick to prod the bear with, one could take your conclusion up to a form of oversight that pushes this a little further. His pedagogic framework sidesteps the usual criticism of 'arts and crafts' practice that dwells on the fact that digital manufacturing makes craft expensive / obsolete. Lethaby instead focusses on the intellectual activity of harnessing construction, context and legacy holistically within a single form of practice. This is the new model that Lethaby started to develop and that the industrialisation of Higher Education has made all but extinct in architecture schools now'.<sup>5</sup>

Discuss.

Willa Granger's piece takes an interesting look into the employment frameworks for history lecturers and mapping the precarity resulting from the insecure space that history is given in the curriculum, positioning the person within the process of knowledge exchange:

'The twinning of practitioner/historian is further reinforced in tenure-track job requirements for architectural history, many of which still require applicants to teach studio in addition to history surveys and seminars. This limits the interdisciplinary perspectives that scholars of the built environment from other departments—Geography, Sociology, African American Studies, Psychology, to name a few—might offer and thereby broaden the implications of history within the lives of aspiring architects'.<sup>6</sup>

Granger's first draft conveyed the sense of hesitancy in discussing the fragility of tenure and roles around the pedagogy of history – which meant the lid of this particular box was opened only so far for fear of what it released. As editors we encouraged this revealing. Granger suggests that the rich insights offered on the place of history in the curriculum actually sit within an institutional context where the function of such insights is undervalued. Perhaps the powers structures within academia are better served by keeping the lid on this particular box? Granger, like many of our authors are on the verge of defining mechanisms to challenge the question of value – not only the value of history, but more the value of the systems that construct it. Only by equipping architects to identify and question such systems can new, absent, overlooked and concealed histories be recovered in order to write future history with equity and inspiration. The value of our authors research is to set out the problem and take the lid off the box – or help the reader remove the lid for themselves.

The outcome of this process is this final edition. We the editors can see the history of these papers on history and acknowledge the enthusiasm with which this peer-to-peer opportunity seems to have enhanced the experience of offering ideas, words and labour for Charette to share and readers to react to. Please now remove lids.

## REFERENCES

1 Isabelle Priest, 'History Lessons', RIBA J, (2023), pp.75-76

History Lessons – RIBA J article Isabelle Priest interviewing Gillian Tindall May 2023 p75-76.

2 SPAB, The SPAB Manifesto. (SPAB, N.D) <<https://www.spab.org.uk/about-us/spab-manifesto>> [accessed 21 March 2024]

3 Isabelle Priest, 'History Lessons', RIBA J, (2023), pp.75-76

4 Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 2nd ed (Routledge, 2002)

5 Comments made by the guest editors, Alan Chandler and Neal Shasore during the editorial process on: Hugh Strange, 'Recorded Experiment in Building: William Lethaby and the teaching of architectural history', *Charrette*, 9.2 (2023), pp.79-98

6 Willa Granger, 'Teaching Architects to Construe: Institutionalizing cultural landscapes within architectural accreditation in the United States', *Charrette*, 9.2 (2023), pp.157-74, p. 160