

excerpt from Fitch, J.M. *Architecture and the Aesthetics of Plenty*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.

16. THE USES OF HISTORY

We are all aware of the general cultural benefits, not to say the civilizing effects, of the study of history. But even professional historians might hesitate before so sweeping a claim for their metier as that offered by a contemporary American novelist: "Man has no material other than his past out of which to make his future." Yet this does not really overstate the case, for the greatest natural resource of the human race is its experience. Both conceptually and materially, our past is our principal building material. And the science of history is a tool which we can use, like the Geiger counter in prospecting for uranium, to discover and exploit the great deposits of our cultural past.

Today's architect has, in his schooling, been exposed to a certain amount of the history of his profession. Rather too much history, some of the older men would say, bearing in mind the esthetical and antiquarian overtones which architectural history carried until the very recent past, or remembering the disastrous stylistic eclecticism into which the study of history carried us in the nineteenth century. Such protests, however, are the result not of the proper study of history but of its misunderstanding; such protestors are the victims of a primitive phase of historiography. The past is not just one vast deposit of shining success and prefabricated precedent, as the Victorians fondly imagined it. On the contrary, it is formed geologically in strata of truth and falsehood, accuracy and error, cold fact and disappointed fancy. Modern history is the instrument with which we can analyze and separate; the two bearing in mind, of course, the odd fact that the past, viewed in this light, is often quite as valuable for what it warns us against duplicating as for what it advises us to repeat.

That the study of history has immediate practical utility is being demonstrated in many fields other than architecture. Dr. Henry E. Sigerist, the famous historian of medicine, studied the practice of Alexandrine medicine, not out of esoteric scholarship but in search of guides to modern psychosomatic theory. Dr. Lazlo Schwartz, the historian of dentistry, investigates the mechanic craftsman origins of his profession to demonstrate how they led to certain mechanistic, anti physiological tendencies in modern dental thought. The pharmaceutical industry launches extensive research into the folk pharmacopeia of primitive peoples, first to discover drugs of known effectiveness, and then to isolate them from the medicine man's brew. And archaeologists since Schliemann have learned to study myth and folk tale attentively as guides to new sites.

In one way or another, these are all planned expeditions, scientific treasure hunts, into the past. Their results are known: they serve to illuminate general theory in their respective fields at the same time that they yield discoveries of real and immediate practicality. When the architectural past is similarly exposed to the light of modern historical investigation, equally new and fruitful discoveries are revealed.

Of course, the study of the artistic past does present some rather special complications. The history of science or medicine, for example, has little or no esthetic dimension. Sigerist can discuss Hellenistic medicine, or Schwartz can study Confederate dentistry, without becoming enmeshed in a network of esthetic value judgments. Moreover, the history of science shows real development and records

objectively provable advances. There is no such progression in the field of art. Each epoch differs from all others. The artistic production of one may be rated higher than another though this always involves subjective judgments but no continuously rising curve can ever be plotted though many an art historian has tried to in the past .

Not only do architectural historians have more disparate materials to work with than historians in other fields, they also have a more difficult audience to address. American architects today tend to display one of two characteristic attitudes toward the past, both of them highly charged with emotion. The older generation, generally speaking, tends to look at it through the rosy glasses of romantic antiquarianism. The younger men, on the other hand, wear the blindfold of simple prejudice and refuse to look at it at all. Both attitudes, are, of course, mistaken Both prevent our exploiting the great resources of history for the enrichment of the future. Fortunately, there is an escape from the cul de sac into which such attitudes have led us, and it should be the task of the historian to point it out.

For example, the historian might well act as guide to the architects whom the rise of American power has catapulted into global activity and international prominence. These men are being called upon to design buildings for the Arctic, the Middle East, South America, Polynesia. They are confronted with cultural and environmental conditions of unprecedented complexity and diversity. In designing for them in a context of emergency real or imagined the architect is apt to protest that he has no time for a history of the place. Yet history is the first thing he should make time for, if his ambitions include genuinely successful architecture. He is being asked to design for unfamiliar cultures, geographies, climates. In such a context, the catalogs and handbooks of American technology are of surprisingly little value. A first rate historical analysis of the local culture and its architectural response to local conditions its materials, structures, and design principles would be of much more immediate utility.

Thus, when the American designer, floundering in the Arctic, is confronted with such problems as building on permafrost or resisting Arctic gales, he should be given not a Detroit handbook on insulation or structural steel but a first rate analysis of traditional Eskimo building practices. For, as Stefansson long ago pointed out, the igloo is an example of an extremely sophisticated regional architecture, quite remarkably adapted to the climate, resources, and needs of the area. Its combination of ice lined snow blocks, fur lined spherical form and pin point radiant heat source constitutes a comfort formula which stands up to the strictest scrutiny of science. These principles, though naturally not necessarily these materials, should be the springboard for Arctic design.

Or again, when an American architect builds new oil towns in the Middle East, he should study first the traditional forms of Arab building and only after he has mastered them turn to texts on air conditioning. In the high heat capacity of Arab mud and masonry construction, he would find the best thermal formula for handling the diurnal temperatures extremes of the desert.

Finally, when the architect is called upon to build in the South Pacific' with its continuously high humidity and heat, the historian should provide him with factual studies of the local architecture. No better comfort formula could be found than its airy, stilted, wide roofed pavilions. These primitive buildings represent not forms to be copied but principles to be understood. They are principles distilled from millenia of experience on the part of men quite as intelligent as ourselves. It is a matter of

elementary culture as well as of technical proficiency that the architect master these principles before he begins to design. Who but the historian should discover them for him? It can, of course, be argued that these are farfetched examples or that American architects have no business being in such outlandish places anyway. This may well be true. But the same thing holds for our own country as well. The technical problems of building around the world are duplicated, in climate if not in culture, right here at home. We also have Saharas, tundras, Melanesias, and steppes all around us. Furthermore we have behind us from three to four centuries of experience in dealing with them our own "primitive" period. This indigenous experience constitutes a real wealth which goes largely unexploited because of blindfolds and rose tinted glasses.

One of our richest regional architectures, for example, lies in the deposit of eighteenth century houses in and around New Orleans. It has been fairly well explored by historian and amateur antiquarian alike; and while much of the resulting literature many seem either snobbish or parochial, there is no need to belittle its importance. It has proved necessary and useful work, and many an important landmark has been preserved, either in records or reality, because of it. Yet despite this work, the true significance of this architecture goes largely unnoticed by practicing and student architects alike.

It happens that this same body of work can be analyzed from quite another point of view, a much more fruitful and exciting one namely, the point of view of social and technical invention. An examination at this level will reveal an impressively sophisticated design for comfort and amenity in a very difficult semitropical climate. Here are the characteristic features of these eighteenth century houses:

1. Elevated living floors, raised above floods and animal and insect pests and offering maximum exposure to prevailing breezes.
2. Huge, light mass, parasol type roofs to shed subtropic sun and rain.
3. Continuous porches and balconies to protect walls from slanting sun and blowing rain.
4. Large floor to ceiling doors and windows for maximum ventilation.
5. Tall ceilings, central halls, ventilated attics for warm weather comfort.
6. The louvered jalousie, providing any combination of ventilation and privacy.
7. Building materials highly resistant to water, fungus, or insect attack.

In short, the characteristic features of this architecture show a deep understanding of the local relationship between climate and comfort and a most intelligent use of a limited range of simple materials and technique to manipulate this relationship. Neither the climate nor the people of this region are much changed today, a century and a half after the Louisiana Purchase brought an abrupt end to this particular architectural idiom. There has been much subsequent invention, both social and technical. But to what sort of use has it been put in the New Orleans Gulf Coast region? Can we honestly say that the level of contemporary architecture measures up to its historic precedent? Unfortunately, we cannot. Instead, we find a qualitative deterioration in standards. The antiquarians mimic the forms of the past, with no real comprehension of their content and function. The younger men display a

hostility which is little short of psychotic to the parasol roof and the wide overhang, the balcony and the jalousie. And the average level of domestic architecture is lower in grace and amenity than it was in Napoleon's day.

It is currently argued by the blindfold set that modern technology has made obsolete the principles on which this earlier idiom was based. But this is patently untrue: the Louisiana sun shines with undiminished ferocity, and a moment with a slide rule should convince any architect that an air conditioning system requires a cool roof and shaded walls even more urgently than he does. Such a vulgar underestimation of the value of tradition and overestimation of the powers of technology is exactly what explains so many current American failures. Such an attitude is not only not scientific, it is not even civilized.

So here we face a paradox: a rich tradition, valid by all objective tests, useful for the present, yet abused or ignored by all. It is the task of the historian to intervene in this absurd situation, to place the past into a new perspective. We must admit that historians are themselves largely responsible for this paradox since, until recently, they have tended to paint the past as a vast treasure trove of prefabricated architectures. The architects of this century have been right to reject this approach. We all know now that the past does indeed have its riches but only, so to say, in the form of raw materials: tested principles and proven concepts which must be distilled by modern knowledge before they can take useful form. Of course, not all of the past will prove immediately useful; nor is the immediately useful the only goal of the historian. On the contrary, he must organize scientific expeditions to every region of the past, irrespective of its apparent promise at the start. Only thus will his new histories achieve the combination of depth and comprehensiveness so needed today.

What will the criteria for the writing of these new histories be? The first will obviously be that they observe the same standards as those of modern historiography in other fields. The work must be objective, precise, factual. It must have a comprehensive knowledge of the forces at work not only in its own but in adjacent fields. It must have a truly world point of view, not a parochial one, no matter how restricted the epoch or locale involved. What happens to history when these standards are not observed is painfully apparent in a great nineteenth century work like Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. This was the first attempt in English at a comprehensive picture. It is still unique: ten or twenty specialized works would be required as a substitute. It is certainly factual—the production of the measured drawings alone would grace the lifetime of a lesser man. It is precise to the point of dullness. It is, within certain limits, objective: Sir Banister obviously loved all architecture and showed no particular bias for or against the great European styles. In its method, his *History* marked a real advance. One gets a first glimpse in English though Viollet le Duc preceded him in French of the evolutionary process at work in architecture, of the conditioning effects of time, climate, and resources upon each great style.

Yet this monumental work is today not merely obsolete, it is actually harmful. This is due not so much to subsequent historical and archaeological research as to a fundamental flaw in its conception. The *History* is not, as its title clearly suggests, a world history. It is a history of the Western world alone, beginning with the Egyptians and ending in the most recent, 15th edition with the Empire State Building. It classifies the stylistic epochs between these two points as the "Historical Styles." In its earlier editions, it neglected entirely the architectures of Asia, Africa, and pre-Columbian America. It omitted any consideration of primitive or prehistoric building. And it ignored the folk or popular building of the West itself. In recent

years, efforts have been made to correct some of the more glaring of these omissions. But the basic structure of the book remains unchanged; thus it still defines the great architectures of India, of China and Japan, of Mexico and Peru, as the "non historical styles"!

The mortal flaw in Fletcher is thus the very parochialism which has marked most of the dealings of the West with the rest of the world. Of course, this flaw can now be seen in its own historical context as being nothing more than the esthetic aspect of nineteenth century imperialist policy. Culture, civilization, and history itself were taken to be the exclusive property of the white man. If we no longer run the risk of such egregious errors, it is largely due to the hard, continuous work of the art and social historians, the archaeologist and anthropologist, even the explorer and the psychologist. Such men have given us a broader and deeper perspective of the field of architecture. Thanks to them, world history is coming into focus as a unified whole. The day seems safely past when another "world" history will devote 887 pages to the West and 46 to all the rest of mankind's total experience.