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## Interrogating Values and Assumptions

A Postmodern View of Cultural Production, Relativism, and the Use of the Canon in the Classroom

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# Interrogating Values and Assumptions

## A Postmodern View of Cultural Production, Relativism, and the Use of the Canon in the Classroom

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Architecture and design students are not necessarily or immediately interested in history. It cannot be assumed that the typological or stylistic evolution of form and ornament over time, or lists of acknowledged masters and their works, will be viewed as having any relevance to a contemporary designer. Teaching architectural history within design forces a reappraisal of assumptions and hitherto unquestioned values. The artist-and-object, art-historical tradition excludes all architectures considered to be outside of the canon: the anonymous, the vernacular, the marginal, the everyday, even the non-Western. They are other: alien to the authorized discourse of architecture. Teaching a Western artist-and-object canonical approach restricts the exploration and understanding of buildings, spaces, and places in contexts other than that of art history—non-esthetic approaches to architecture such as anthropology, cultural theory, and philosophy—contexts which consider people and place as well as form.

Interrogating the Western canon raises questions about the construction of cultural boundaries: this is architecture, we are architects—that is not and they are not. These boundaries, not just of the canon but of canonical architecture, are predicated on the relative cultural values of architects, critics, historians, and students. This architectural establishment polices its boundaries. The principal criterion for inclusion on the list is a verdict of esthetic success; an entry is both an exemplar of its type and a lesson in good design to architects of the future (the precedent study). It is the private members' list of an educated architectural establishment presented to enrollees as an unquestioned, unchallenged truth.

This simple interpretation of the canon carries many assumptions. Who selects the entries? The answer is possibly a mixture of initial critical acclaim and emerged consensus within the architectural establishment (architects/critics/educators/students). At root the canon is a contract stipulating acceptable esthetic tastes, drafted by people of similar education and professional interests. As an instrument of measurement or judgment, it lacks an essential element: the admission that taste is culturally relative and highly subjective. What is remarkable is the supreme confidence of the builders and promoters

80 | of the architectural canon (especially architectural historians, from Vasari to William J. Curtis or David Watkin). Although the formulators of the canon occasionally express some doubt over exactly which buildings should be selected, the fundamental authority of the canon is never challenged. Self-awareness is lacking. Informed by the canon builders' sense of self, most Western architectural history surveys recommended to students have three areas of exclusion: gender, class, and ethnicity (broadly speaking, Western and non-Western). The canon was/is constructed by white Western men: women, poor people, and non-Westerners—and the buildings and design they produce—are “other,” they are outside the professional boundaries of architecture.

This is obvious enough. Buildings that are familiar to the writer's own experience and knowledge are chosen for inclusion. It is therefore no surprise that the narrative of classicism—of antiquity to modernism—dominates Western architectural histories. However, it is a Western assumption of cultural superiority, compounded by a legacy of global colonialism, which has gone further and rated European classicism above all other world architectural traditions; although more recent histories have attempted to reformulate the canon in global terms such as *A World History of Architecture* and *A Global History of Architecture*.<sup>1</sup> Canon-building has deep roots in Western culture. Indeed, the predisposition towards canons and categorization, the drawing up of boundaries and territories, can itself be interpreted as a peculiarly Western intellectual activity. Such practice is endemic to Western academic discourse, wherein boundaries define disciplines and their operations. This tendency towards categorization is a reductive act which ignores the individuality, complexity, and shift of knowledge. Moreover, this cataloguing runs the danger of putting all concepts, paradigms, and approaches into one rigid, restrictive structure, and ultimately homogenizing them while reducing their distinctiveness. Although taxonomization is useful for navigating conditions and negotiating meaning, it involves setting up narrow, fixed definitions and unbending boundaries. They limit the thinker's ability to deal with ambiguities that defy easy explanation or organization.

Gender and class represent the “other” within Western architecture itself. The definition of “Architecture”—those buildings admissible to the canon—has to a large extent been formed out of historic professional, academic, and social constructs. Distinct from the operative Masonic lodges and apprenticeship systems of builders and the building industry, “Architecture” as a male, artistic, scholarly, and socially exclusive activity can be identified in Abbot Suger's conception of the medieval royal abbey church of Saint-Denis, in the Renaissance humanist writings of Alberti, and in the works of eighteenth-century gentleman-architects such as Lord Burlington and Thomas Jefferson. However, “Architecture” emerged fully as a male profession with the foundation of governing bodies across Europe and North America in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. By setting up these agencies, the profession established itself as the gatekeeper of not only who enters into the

1 Michael FAZIO, Marian MOFFETT and Lawrence WODEHOUSE, *A world history of architecture*, Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2004; Francis D. K. CHING, Mark M. JARZOMBEK and Vikramaditya PRAKASH, *A global history of architecture*, Hoboken, NJ: J. Wiley & Sons, 2007.

profession, but also of what constitutes “Architecture”: women and poor people were out. This delineation has been sustained by a self-referential architectural press and the architectural awards system, each of which has helped to define and reinforce what “Architecture” is. In the case of women, exclusion from the profession marginalized female design activity to interiors and their derision by “professional” architects. While the activities of the “uneducated” ordinary builder were subordinated and those of the self-builder and home improver patronized or mocked—their activities located outside of the boundaries of architect-defined good taste.

The maintenance of cultural boundaries is enforced by the prevalent definition of “what architecture is” agreed upon within those boundaries. “Architecture” at its “highest” level continues to be defined by the architectural establishment as a formal esthetic concern: the relationship between architect and building (or ideas and designs for buildings), akin to that of artist and object: buildings are individual art objects, and architects their artists. Central to this interpretation of architecture is authorship: The artist signs his or her work, produces more works, and eventually has a body of work. The canon is dependent upon this artist-and-object approach. Many British architectural historians continue to see the primary purpose of their work to be the addition of architects and their works to this list (primarily through archival documentary research). Perhaps the current canon is Howard Colvin’s self-explanatory *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* (2008).<sup>2</sup> Much of the impetus for this approach to architectural history in Britain originates in the postwar activities of the Warburg Institute in London, which sought to align buildings history with art history and its academic traditions. Through British architectural education the same view remains commonplace among many contemporary architects. However, authorship is the very device whereby the exclusions of gender, class, and ethnicity are made. Homemakers and builders (Western and non-Western) did not/do not sign their work. They may not share the architect’s self-image as an artist but they are also excluded because as “non-professionals” they have no place to record their work.

By interrogating the values and assumptions of the canon—of artist and object—we can then look towards alternative architectural discourses that include those excluded cultural constituencies. Bernard Rudofsky’s highly influential 1964 MoMA exhibition and best-selling catalog, *Architecture without Architects* (1969), was criticized for categorizing many non-Western monumental works of architecture as vernacular (i.e., evolved, traditional building types).<sup>3</sup> But the subtitle, “a short introduction to non-pedigreed architecture,” makes clear Rudofsky’s intention were not the vernacular, but esthetic and canonical: he sought to position his selection of anonymous buildings from around the world within “Architecture” through the interrogation of the value of authorship. However, using vernacular studies as a map (notably writers such as Paul Oliver and Amos Rapoport), we

2 Howard COLVIN, *A biographical dictionary of British architects, 1600–1840*, [4th edition], New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

3 Bernard RUDOFSKY, *Architecture without architects. A short introduction to non-pedigreed architecture*, New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art [distributed by Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y.] 1964.

82 | can go further and ask different people-oriented questions about anonymous architectures (and subsequently of all architecture). Our horizons are open to cultural questions about use, occupation, dwelling, social rituals, display, and the meaning of buildings related to identity: Why was this building built? What does it tell us about its users? The artist-and-object interpretation of architecture also views buildings as fixed and allows for no meaningful discussion of their afterlife; but buildings change with use and can be interpreted as always incomplete. The pioneering work of Oliver and Rapoport established links between architecture and other areas of cultural studies. The study of traditional buildings has always been common to a number of academic disciplines outside of architecture. Across subjects such as ethnography, cultural anthropology, cultural geography, social history, and material culture, vernacular architectures are considered as aspects of human settlement.

Similarly, in Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's *Learning from Levittown* (1970), a study of mass production and suburban housing, "the ugly and the ordinary" did not aim to claim the status of art for those houses but to value them as cultural artifacts that provided "signs" by which we can understand the post-industrial consumer.<sup>4</sup> The practices and places of everyday discussed by cultural theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, and commentators like Umberto Eco, an enthusiastic explorer of the world of kitsch, logically include ordinary and anonymous buildings as indicators of mass-consumer practices, a way to understand the activities and values of "ordinary" people. Ideas such as de Certeau's notion of "bricolage" have filtered into architectural thinking and provided a cultural framework within which we can consider the evolved, non-designed conflation of structures and spaces that create places such as the city neighborhood.

The canon has a useful role to play. People find recommendations helpful—"customers who bought this item also bought." But it is advisable to pair the canon with an awareness of the restrictions of canonical thinking. Questioning the cultural boundaries that support the canon is an opportunity to consider the "other" in relation to "architecture." It is a starting point for the discussion of more profound questions in architecture, building production, and building life-cycle, such as: What is architecture?

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4 Denise SCOTT BROWN and Robert VENTURI, *Learning from Levittown or Remedial Housing for Architects*, New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1970 [unpublished].