Response to Murray Fraser

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Murray Fraser and I agree about the importance of teaching architecture students a history of architecture that is global in scope. We believe in this as a matter of inclusiveness, as we teach students who come from all over the world, and as a matter of practicality, as we train global citizens, who may work almost anywhere. But above all, we do not believe in the inherent superiority—as both Banister Fletchers certainly did—of a line of descent that extends from the Greek temple to the American skyscraper by way of the Gothic cathedral and Renaissance palace.

All but the very early and very late editions of Banister Fletcher testify to the long shadow the patent racism of the junior Fletcher, not to mention the institutional racism of the University of London, where he taught, and of the Royal Institute of British Architects, of which he was president, cast for much of the twentieth century across architectural education in much of what was once the British empire. Fraser is not the first to acknowledge this. For instance, the centennial twentieth edition, edited by Dan Cruikshank, addressed the architecture of various parts of the world, although the emphasis in later periods, clearly targeted at students in South Africa, Singapore and Hong Kong, remained very much on buildings erected by Europeans. This clarifies that Francis Ching, Mark Jarzombek and Vikramaditya Prakash's A Global History of Architecture was not particularly novel a decade later, especially since both focused on formal description without offering the degree of cultural context commonplace in the field since at least the middle of the last century.

The Fletchers’ approach targeted architecture students in programs where exposure to the liberal arts was uncommon. For the Fletchers, if not for all of those who edited posthumous editions, architectural history was largely a matter of illustrating historical buildings. Theirs was the British counterpart to Auguste Choisy’s Histoire de l'architecture, although Choisy’s pioneering use of axonometrics made his book much more compelling visually. Both handbooks provided basic compendia for architects working in historicist styles—essentially so that they could copy the illustrations, a common exercise in British architectural schools right up to the 1950s. Later editions did not include new plates in the characteristic style of the original, diagrammatic.
ones, with most nineteenth and twentieth century buildings instead depicted solely through black and white photographs, without the plans and sections that were originally one of the book’s most informative features. The text, which it is difficult to imagine that students ever read, although some of their instructors undoubtedly relied on its compendium of facts, is descriptive and dull as if intended to discourage anyone from thinking about why canonical buildings appeared the way that they did. The Fletchers and most of those who contributed to subsequent editions did not understand the question of how historical structures were designed, constructed or used, all central to the discipline of architectural history, to be part of the education of the architect.

In consequence, Banister Fletcher played little role in the intellectual formation of most architectural historians, and none whatsoever in mine. For me, the model survey was Nikolaus Pevsner’s *Outline of European Architecture*, whose geographic scope was clearly limited; Europe certainly ended for him well before the Urals or the Bosporus. By 1985, Spiro Kostof’s *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* offered a compelling cross-cultural alternative to Pevsner’s well-defined remit, although already by that time I had been required to study art from Asia, Africa or Latin America. I have always appreciated both volumes as examples of precisely the authorial authority Fraser professes to eschew. A strong point of view gives coherence to narratives that necessarily range broadly across time and space. It also enables one to weave together seemingly disparate examples of individual building types, identifying, for instance, the way that early modern palaces across Europe and Asia were designed to support the authority of the ruler, even if they relied on different spatial systems and styles of ornament to achieve this shared goal.

That Banister Fletcher survived the emergence of the modern movement and the impact of the arrival of university-trained German art historians like Pevsner in the United Kingdom is more a tribute to the enduring impact of the continuing importance of RIBA accreditation throughout much of the former empire than the quality of its content. Fraser, well aware of its deficiencies, promises that his new edition will employ many types of representation and will also incorporate the range of intellectual tools employed by contemporary architectural historians. Whether or not this will be enough to make a multi-authored million word compilation of the architecture of the last six millennia compelling to students, even if they can download it onto their smart phones, will depend on the degree to which he can craft something as handy but far more engaging than the Wikipedia pages to which they have such rapid access.

The balance between relevance and imparting an established—or even a changed canon—is never easy to strike. Take gender and sexuality. An inclusive profession is built on acknowledging the diversity of those upon whose accomplishments it is built. To boast that one third of the authors will be women when the majority of scholars in the field are female is condescending at best and insulting at worst. Architectural history is frankly misogynist when, as defined by the Fletchers, it does not include women as clients, artisans and users as well as architects. Indeed, there are almost no women listed in the indices of the twenty-first century surveys written by men, which have also done almost nothing to incorporate the insights generated by two generations of feminist scholarship beginning with the work of Dolores Hayden and Alice Friedman. The long history of women such as Louise Tuthill and Marianne Griswold van Rensselaer writing about architecture has been systematically ignored, too, as well by
authors determined to retain male authority, even when they turn to graduate student ghost-writers. Furthermore, whether Fraser will frankly address the contributions that gays have made to shaping the buildings he includes, even if this risks it not being assigned in places like Singapore and Uganda where homosexuality remains illegal, will make an excellent test as well of the degree to which the volume takes real risks.

7 Form alone can never tell the full story of the relationship between architecture and the society in which it is embedded. Thus, another key question will be how Fraser and his team treat style, which has—along with geography—provided much of the structure for Banister Fletcher's twenty previous editions. Take, for instance, the Renaissance. Christy Anderson included both western European structures in which Gothic approaches and motifs still predominated over classical ones, as well as the work of the great Ottoman architect Sinan in her Renaissance Architecture. This approach redefines modernity according to chronology and purpose. It also makes ample allowance for the patronage of court women, such as Mihrimah Sultan, whom she did not include, and Margaret of Austria, whom she did. Addressing "European" styles as global phenomena is another way to write a more inclusive history.

8 Geography also matters. Simply including the architecture of the entire world is not the same as constructing a means of understanding when it should or should not be woven into a single story. In defining his aim as writing "A global history of architecture for an age of globalization," Fraser ignores the fact that globalization is not a recent phenomenon, even if it has taken distinct form since the collapse of communism. The Fletchers focused on buildings as the products of the place in which they were erected, whatever the combination of local and imported (or indeed imposed) knowledge and capital was involved in their creation. A narrative structured around where a building stands cannot account for the global flows of capital, labour and knowledge that have for centuries produced much of the built environment. A comparative method is crucial to understanding much of the architecture of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Already in this period some of the most "up-to-date" buildings in the European tradition, including churches in Mexico, Peru, Goa and Macao, were erected outside of Europe. New environments created as a product of Europe’s economic exploitation of the Americas in particular provided much of the capital that fueled the industrial revolution and the not really so new pragmatic approach to architecture to which it gave rise, while gracious and experimental British country houses alike were often funded by the work of slaves in distant Barbados and Jamaica. More recent structures pose other challenges as two buildings emanating from London-based practices demonstrate. Although designed by George Gilbert Scott, a British architect who never traveled to India, the University Library and Clock Tower in Mumbai were paid for by local businessmen and erected between 1868 and 1878 with the assistance of Indian as well as British engineering and construction expertise. More recently the Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku was completed in 2013 by the office of the Iraqi-born Zaha Hadid, who employed a multi-national staff. Such buildings do not simply belong to the history of the places where they stand.

9 There are multiple reasons for writing global art histories. In the United States, research into the architecture of the Global South has often been anchored in Cold War efforts to learn about the rest of the world in order to influence it. More recently it has been a response to the increasing diversity of students, many of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants. In Europe the inclusiveness of recent exhibitions in
Berlin and Düsseldorf, in which art and design from the Global South was accorded the same respect as European and American modernism, is often tied to the search for global markets, including for international students (nearly half of the students at University College London, where Fraser teaches, come from abroad). Charged with up-dating a deeply damaged brand, Fraser and his team have the additional motivation to redress the enormous damage wrought by the junior Fletcher’s egregious Orientalism. Let us hope the task is not beyond them.

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