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From Archive to Office: the Role of History in Theories of Architecture Practice

Aaron Cayer

Abstract

In the forty years since “practice theory” emerged within cultural anthropology, views of architecture have expanded to include a wider entanglement of actors, materials, and societal forces, rather merely individual architects and their resulting buildings. However, recent investigations of architectural practice by both historians and anthropologists reveal an emerging schism in theories and methods of analysis – between historical studies of the past and ethnographic studies of the present. This article traces the formation of “practice theory” as it emerged within cultural anthropology as an explicit theory of history during the 1970s and 1980s, and it examines the ways in which history has since been embraced or resisted within studies of architecture practice, including those informed by science and technology studies, cultural anthropology, and architectural history. Sensitive to epistemological frictions and disciplinary allegiances, this article reveals methodological intersections between these approaches that may serve as a common discursive ground upon which to connect the past to the present, the archive to the office, or the discipline to the profession.

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1 - The employee number has been altered for purposes of anonymity.

The last architect to dash into the conference room referred to himself not by name, but by number.

Introduction

Centered in a sea of pristine white tables and computer desks, two architects sat patiently waiting inside a small glass conference room for a third architect to join them in preparation for a client meeting. Although it was the end of the workday, nearly all of the 500 practitioners surrounding the glass box – both above and below – were still glued to their computer screens. The last architect to dash into the conference room introduced himself as a “recent hire,” nodding nervously to the two architects already seated, and he referred to himself not by name, but by number. “I’m 21302,” he announced as he sat down, and the others nodded with subtle murmurs of acknowledgment while they opened their sketchbooks¹. As an apparent internal code, the number was his assigned company-wide employee name that followed both him and his work; the lower one’s number, the higher his or her seniority. On shared computer drawings, employee numbers appeared next to revisions and edits in real-time, revealing the ways in which hierarchies and interactions of power were documented and embedded in the work itself. As striking as it may seem, these observations were made at Gensler, one of the largest architecture firms in the United States. Taking cue from existing theories and methods for studying architecture practice, there are several ways to interpret such a scene. One way would be to draw on theories of science and technology studies to describe the process of architectural design as a web-like entanglement of workers and their work, blurring historical distinctions made between “subjects” and “objects” to demonstrate how architects, drawings, models, and technology are inextricably linked. A second way would be to describe the scene as a historical, political, and cultural construction by interpreting the architects’ practices as expressions of capitalist pressures, professional standards, or institutional beliefs shaped over extended periods of time. These contrasting epistemologies reflect an emerging schism in current scholarship about the practice of architecture. On one side, a stream of detailed ethnographies by anthropologists influenced by science and technology studies describe the intricate processes of design on the ground (such as Houdart, Minato, 2009; Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b; Loukisass, 2012.). On the other

side, architectural historians primarily based in the United States have similarly shifted their attention to architectural practice, examining the ideological, socio-economic, and technological formations undergirding architectural work (such as Woods, 1999; Colomina, 1999; Martin, 2005; Harwood, 2011). However, when ‘practice theory’ formed within cultural anthropology in the late 1970s and 1980s, it sought to overcome a similarly reported dichotomy between history and ethnography; therefore, the emergence of practice theory in cultural anthropology provides insight into the ways in which a confluence of contrasting epistemologies and methodologies might also be productive for architecture. For practice theory, history was embraced as a way to challenge the potential timelessness of ethnographic inquiry, helping to reveal the deeply rooted structures of power and distinction that were not always discernible in observations of the present. History was described as a lens through which ethnographers could understand how on-the-ground practices had come to be – shaped over time by political, economic, and social forces (Ortner, 2006). Yet the turn to history in cultural anthropology did not have the same influence on anthropologists of science and technology studies. Instead, they braced against historical analysis to afford more intricate views into the emerging dynamics of the present. Without diminishing the importance of recent contributions by both anthropologists and historians to architectural practice, nor their respective epistemological underpinnings, this article reveals methodological intersections between these approaches that may serve as common discursive ground. While the epistemological allegiances of architectural historians risk shielding accounts of the past from the urgent promptings of the present, those of anthropologists conversely risk eluding the very forces of the past that might explain how the conditions of the present came to be.

The role of history in theories of practice

The motivation of (predominantly European) ethnographic inquiry into architecture over the past fifteen years, as indicated by this volume, has been to productively re-think knowledge of the ‘social.’ Drawing on science and technology studies, and,

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Cultural anthropologists began to fold history into their work by grounding actors in broader social, cultural, and political contexts – interpreting practices as either productions or reproductions of history.

It is into this same theoretical web of 1980s discourse that sociological and anthropological studies of architectural practice were cast.

more specifically, the Actor Network Theory (ANT) as foundationally described by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, these important studies describe the processual socio-material networks that practitioners operate in. For architecture, as Bruno Latour and Albenya Yaneva (2008) have outlined, ANT has offered a re-framing of building design as ‘projects’ ever-changing in their shape, meaning, and value, rather than as static objects. Although the followers of ANT assiduously acknowledge the historicity of the subjects they study, such as Latour’s recognition that some elements of society originate from ‘other’ times and locations that are entwined with the present (Latour, 1999, 2005), or Callon’s acknowledgement that systems such as market economies are historical processes (Callon, 1999, p. 192), they unequivocally distance themselves from historiography and historical objects to afford a more intricate view of emerging local dynamics, leaving the construction of historical knowledge to ‘professional’ historians (Latour, Woolgar, 1986; Latour, 2005). From the vantage point of a historian, this distancing can be understood as a result of history’s disciplinary formation in the early nineteenth century, which became stronger and more defined by disassociating itself with rhetoric and “realism” (White, 2010, p. 14). For architecture, Beatriz Colomina (1999) has similarly argued that as a result of architecture history’s art historical foundations, historians and critics have, at least until the late 1990s, found reassurance and confidence in studies of objects and built form, rather than in the messiness of practice. Through an alternative anthropological lens, however, a number of cultural anthropologists in the 1980s specifically turned to history, hoping to resist traditionally static ethnographic frames of timeless, motionless objects, which, at the surface, represented an ambition not unlike that of ANT. However, for them, culture itself was understood to be the object of inquiry, rather than the direct linkages between people and things. When ‘practice theory’ was first developed in the 1970s, with which cultural anthropologists hoped to overcome the functionalist opposition between structure and agency, the role of history was implied at best. The new and important term, ‘practice,’ as founding sociologists Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Anthony Giddens (1979), and anthropologist

Marshall Sahlins (1981) collectively described, was used to describe practitioners and their actions “on the ground,” as well as the “structures” that both constrained and could be altered by them. Cultural anthropologists began to fold history into their work by grounding actors in broader social, cultural, and political contexts – interpreting practices as either productions or reproductions of history. These studies ranged from Eric Wolf’s political-economic history, *Europe and the People without History* (1981), to Clifford Geertz’s cultural history *Negara* (1980), to Bernard Cohn’s colonial history (1980, 1996). As anthropologist Sherry Ortner has argued, these turns to history were important to the formation of practice theory as such, precisely because they:

destabilized traditionally static modes of ethnographic inquiry, and substantively, in insisting that the traditional world of anthropological objects – ‘cultures’ – were not timeless and pristine objects, but were themselves products of the restless operation of both internal dynamics (mostly local power relations) and external forces (such as capitalism and colonialism) over time (2006, p. 9).²

More assertively, in her own study of the founding of Buddhist temples and monasteries among the Sherpas of Nepal, Ortner concluded that “a theory of practice is a theory of history” (1989, p. 199).

It is into this same theoretical web of 1980s discourse that sociological and anthropological studies of architectural practice were cast, carefully unfolding the actions and beliefs of architects by using histories of the American architectural profession (Blau *et al.*, 1983), academic institutions (Cuff, 1991), or economic markets (Blau, 1984; Gutman, 1988) to both contextualize and make sense of observed everyday actions. To be sure, the goal of such works, much like that of cultural anthropology, was not to overcome the gap between objects and subjects, nor to engage in historiography; rather, it was to study and interpret the culturally constructed sets of beliefs, actions, and procedures ‘on the ground’ to reveal the ways in which architects and their organizations were historically conditioned and stratified. Dana Cuff’s ethnography, *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (1992), for instance, described how building projects within architecture offices

2 - In studies of architecture, ethnographic frames are not inherently static, even when substantively informed by history as well as science and technology studies and history, as evidenced by several recent studies of infrastructure, including De Boeck and Plissart (2006), Easterlin (2014), Larkin (2013), and Hirsh (2016). However, such studies take form and material assemblages as their starting points, rather than the actors that make them possible.

were the centerpieces of complex social negotiations between architects, their clients, and consultants. Cuff understood “practice” to mean “the embodiment, indeed, the expression, of a practitioner’s everyday knowledge” (ivi, p. 4). As accumulations of history, Cuff’s framing of embodied knowledge closely resembled political philosopher Michael Oakeshott’s (1999) concept of a “practical past,” which he described as the form of the past shaping a person’s everyday tasks, actions, and decisions, or what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) described as a person’s “habitus.” A “habitus,” according to Bourdieu, was the set of societal forces written into one’s body; a system of acquired dispositions functioning as “categories of perception and assessment,” “classificatory principles,” and the “organizing principles of action” (ivi, p. 13). As deeply internalized habits, know-how, and competencies, embodied knowledge was thought to be a form of drag on the present, through which culture and society could be produced and reproduced through in-situ actions.

More importantly, the influential concept of habitus became one of the few points of agreement between Bourdieu’s theory of practice and that of Latour’s, and it serves as a potential site of common ground between cultural anthropology and science and technology studies and, by extension, between histories and ethnographies of architecture practice. In his own interpretation, Latour described the habitus as “circuitry through which plug-ins lend actors the supplementary tools – the supplementary souls – that are necessary to render a situation interpretable” (2005, p. 209). Following Bourdieu, Latour asks: “Doesn’t reading novels help you know how to love? ... Without the avid reading of countless fashion magazines, would you know how to bake a cake?” (*ibid.*). The sources of contention for Latour, however, are what he refers to as the broader ‘dark’ social forces (structures) not directly connected to the body politic nor easily reducible to a tangible object to study within an ethnographic present:

If you remember that there is nothing beyond and beneath, that there is no near-world of the social, then is it not fair to say that they make up a part of your own cherished intimacy? (*ibid.*)

Using the terms of ‘practice theory,’ so-called ‘dark’ social forces would constitute the ‘external forces’ described by Ortner, including state, professional, or capitalist pressures that help to explain how a practice came to be, and whether or not it indicated either historical continuity or change. Practice theory used ‘dark’ forces to explain *why* certain love novels, fashion magazines, or cookbooks may have been read in the first place, which, for a field of cultural production such as architecture, Bourdieu would have argued, were all part of a practitioner’s context-specific struggle – either for economic survival, power, or distinction (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 106).³ Despite the imperceptibility of historical objects in-the-making, their very materiality, their direct connections to actors, and their records of prior negotiations and actions, even if in the past, highlight a methodological intersection of practice studies. Despite a fundamental disagreement about the means by which outside structures are embodied, either subconsciously absorbed like Bourdieu imagined or volitionally ‘downloaded’ as plug-ins as described by Latour, both are frameworks that recognize and are equipped for studying objects – historical or contemporaneous – in tandem with everyday practices. By connecting historiography to either theoretical framework of practice, then, might also mean to study the magazines, drawings, books, academic curricula, contracts, or documents of professional standards in archives that were once read or produced by an architect, or those with whom one may have been associated.

Historical ethnography as method

Historian Hayden White has described the interlacing of history and ethnography as the foundation of a “theatre of ‘practical reason’... in which human agency [is] displayed in the activity of making a world rather than simply inhabiting one” (2010, p. 14). Taken together, “historical ethnography” offers an interdisciplinary method that draws from both history and anthropology to understand the ways in which the past informs the present. Sensitive to the ethnographic imperative of cultural anthropology to connect everyday practices to broader social, economic, and political forces of history, as well as that of science and technology studies to connect humans

3 - I recognize that there have been several theoretical explorations of architecture using Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, including Jones (2009, 2011); Stevens (1998), and Lipstadt (2003). While these are important and useful theoretical explorations, their primary focus is on Bourdieu's macro concept of the "field." Though central to his theory, the field is easily misconstrued as a reified entity, which runs directly counter to Bourdieu's definition, and which distracts from the study of local "practices" that operate within it. For an excellent critique and overview of these contributions, see: Magali Sarfatti Larson (2015).

Sensitive to the ethnographic imperative of cultural anthropology to connect everyday practices to broader social, economic, and political forces of history, as well as that of science and technology studies to connect humans and material objects, historical ethnography offers architecture a particularly unifying research method.

and material objects, historical ethnography offers architecture a particularly unifying research method. This approach has been theorized most notably by anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1992), and expanded upon by a number of recent scholars (Des Chene, 1997; Stoler, 2002; Hunter, 2013). Citing the historical malleability of ethnography's disciplinary claims, the Comaroffs suggest that the study of history may indeed rattle the age-old epistemological credo of ethnography that "seeing is believing," and they offer a reminder that ethnography is:

not a vain attempt at literal translation, in which we take over the mantle of an-other's being, conceived of as somehow commensurate with our own. It is a historically situated mode of understanding historically situated contexts, each with its own perhaps radically different, kinds of subjects and subjectivities, objects and objectives. (1992, p. 10)

Following Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1963) assertion that ethnographers and historians are united in an effort to represent societies other than those in which they live, whether removed in time or in space, the Comaroffs clarify that while ethnography constitutes a specific epistemology, it is also a set of methods for qualitative research capable of extending beyond the immediate site of a practice as it unfolds. They continue:

Ethnography surely extends beyond the range of the empirical eye; its inquisitive spirit calls upon us to ground subjective, culturally configured action in society and history – and vice versa – wherever the task may take us... In this sense, one can 'do' ethnography in the archives... one can also 'do' the anthropology of national or international forces and formations: of colonialism, evangelism, liberation struggles, social movements, dispersed diasporas, regional development,' and the like. (1992, p. 11)

In other words, while the epistemological underpinnings of ethnography as a way of seeing may be limited or in some ways undermined by historical analysis, both ethnography and historiography are *methods* of research applicable to architectural historians and anthropologists alike.

In order to make sense of the complex systems and widening array of sites ripe for ethnographic analysis, anthropologist George Marcus (1986, 1995) has argued that ethnographers should develop a “view of a system,” prior to providing an ethnographic account of it, “showing the forms of local life that the system encompasses, and then leading to novel or revised views of the nature of the system itself, translating its abstract qualities into more fully human terms” (1986, p. 171). While Marcus was not concerned with history as such, recent ethnographers have suggested that, among the sites anthropologists now visit when they go to “the field” is the archive – the very site where Foucault (1972) suggested “rules of practice” were established – to reveal the multiple entanglements of people and structures of power, such as those with states and institutions (Des Chene, 1997; Stoler, 2002). Bracing against skepticism from both historians and other anthropologists, who argue that archives are, at best, supplements to sites of ethnographic observation, anthropologists including Mary Des Chene and Ann Laura Stoler demonstrate how archival work can itself be understood as a wholly ethnographic endeavor in their studies of colonialism – using arrival objects to determine structural principles of organization, explain why certain practices came to be, and how certain conditions determined who and how one could speak or act. Finally, if, as Lévi-Strauss asserted, historians and ethnographers are similarly committed to representing societies other than those in which they live, then the *work* of a historian and ethnographer might be viewed in parallel: the task of writing notes about archival objects or documents is an interpretive task not unlike that of writing ethnographic field notes. As Des Chene concludes, when notes of either sort are expanded into prose, then the work of studying the past and the present is much the same (1997, p. 77).

Historical ethnography of architecture firms

If one of the central benefits of bridging between historical and ethnographic accounts of practices within cultural anthropology in the 1980s was to reveal the ways in which actors produced or reproduced history, then historical ethnography in architecture might be especially useful to help explain how and why certain

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Historical ethnography in architecture might be especially useful to help explain how and why certain structures of distinction, power, or exclusion were historically configured, but also if and how they continue to play out in the present.

structures of distinction, power, or exclusion were historically configured, but also if and how they continue to play out in the present. Returning to the opening observations made at Gensler, the corporate architecture firm is one possible site, among others, upon which to base a historical ethnography, but it offers insight into the often-overlooked dynamics of economic power, hegemony, and globalization. While the complexity of large-scale work was reflected in sociological studies of architecture during the 1980s (Blau, 1984; Gutman, 1988; Cuff, 1992), they compared architecture firms based on macro conditions of scale and relative complexity, developing organizational characteristics that stratified them in various ways. “Large” architecture firms, for instance, were characterized as those employing more than fifty people; as best suited for large-scale projects; as having complex clients such as corporations and government organizations; as providing a wide array of services with sophisticated management; and by prioritizing service and entrepreneurialism over “design” (Cuff, 1992, p. 46).

Yet with the number of architects nearly doubling over the ten-year period in the United States between 1960 and 1970, and with the majority of growth taking place within corporate offices, sociologists including Robert Gutman (1992) grew anxious by the 1990s about the ways in which the distribution of architectural work across the field was becoming heavily weighted toward the top of a pyramidal structure, with larger, entrepreneurial, and service-driven firms taking an increasing share of projects. However, as scholars have noted, in the thirty years since Gutman’s analysis, radical redefinitions of labor under neoliberalism and a pervasiveness of commercial ideologies have begun to defy historically constructed categories of differentiation, such as the Bourdieuan binary of ‘commerce’ and ‘art,’ which has pressed scholars to reveal more finite structural differences and similarities between various forms of practice – contemporaneously and historically (Deamer, 2009). For instance, Gutman (1988) revealed that in 1972, 93.3 percent of all architects in the United States worked in small firms of less than twenty people; however, this percentage has remained unchanged: in 2012, the percentage held constant at 93.2 percent. At the same time, while small firms accounted for 58.4

percent of all architectural receipts in 1972, they only accounted for 38.8 percent of revenue by 2012.⁴ While the number of architects working in small firms has remained relatively unchanged and the divisions of practice in terms of size (e.g.: small, medium, and large) have upheld, a greater number of practitioners are competing for an increasingly smaller pool of projects. Therefore, macro divisions of practice fail to describe the shifting dynamics of practice on the ground and the individual struggles for economic survival or distinction.

Perhaps as evidence to Manfredo Tafuri's claim that architectural historians are necessarily fueled by continual promptings from practice, architectural historians in the US over the past two decades have specifically turned to large-scale architectural firms and corporate formations to determine why and how such conditions emerged. Two examples are Reinhold Martin's *Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space* (2005), which examines the totalizing power of corporate ideologies during the 1960s, and John Harwood's *The Interface* (2011), which explores the impacts of computation systems on corporate architecture between the mid-1940s and 1970s. Moreover, doctoral programs of architecture in the United States, the majority of which are pedagogically devoted to the study of history, reveal a similar attention to large-scale organizations of economic power, as evidenced by a series of recent and forthcoming dissertations, including Avigail Sachs's *Environmental Design and the Expansion of Architectural Practice, 1937-1973* (UC Berkeley, 2009); Alexandra Lange's *Tower Typewriter and Trademark: Architects, Designers and the Corporate Utopia, 1956-1964* (NYU, 2005); Hyun-Tae Jung's *Organization and Abstraction: The Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill from 1936 to 1956* (Columbia University, 2011); Michael Kubo's *Architecture Incorporated: Authorship, Anonymity, and Collaboration in Postwar Modernism* (MIT, 2017); as well as my own, *Design and Profit: Architectural Practice in the Age of Accumulation* (UCLA, forthcoming), which makes an explicit effort to bridge between ethnography and history by using Los Angeles-based architecture and engineering firm Daniel, Mann, Johnson, & Mendenhall (DMJM; now AECOM) as a case study.

4 - These calculations are based on data sourced from: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census of Selected Services, 1972; and US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census of Service Industries, 2012.

Examining an architectural firm using the methods of historical ethnography first requires a reimagining of the possible sites and subjects of investigation.

Yet examining an architectural firm using the methods of historical ethnography first requires a reimagining of the possible sites and subjects of investigation. A historical ethnography, the Comaroffs argue, “must begin by constructing its own archive. It cannot content itself with established canons of documentary evidence, because these are themselves part of the culture of global modernism – as much the subject as the means of inquiry” (1992, p. 34). Drawing from my research, the assembling of an archive for the corporate firm DMJM and its umbrella successor, AECOM, for example, immediately reveals a broader definition of architectural work. Formed as a turbulent, profit-sapping partnership in California in 1946, the three founding architects (DMJ) were entrenched not only in the production of drawings and models, but, in an effort to brace against the volatility of a speculative urban economy, they also designed a corporate ladder, wrote business procedures, office standards, and growth plans that shaped and made possible the forms of conglomeration that have since come to characterize AECOM. Moving from archive to office, the study of DMJM leads one first to the doorstep of the archives of the University of Southern California, where the founding architects were educated alongside noted Hollywood Art Directors during the tail end of the Great Depression, to the classified archives of the US Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to uncover government alliances, contracts, letters, and project documents related to Cold War national defense, to the US Security Exchange Commission where legal corporate documents were filed, to trade journals of business and management where organizational plans were published, to private residences of retired architects and business leaders to gather oral histories, and finally to the present office to conduct open-ended interviews and to observe. As its own collection, the documents, drawings, objects, and stories begin to explain how such a firm emerged, growing slowly between the 1950s and the 1990s by acquiring firms and their attendant embodied histories – a practice of resilience that was directly informed by Cold War military strategies predicated on deterring potential aggressors. While for DMJM, accumulating embodied history implied acquiring individuals and firms with proven experience and diverse exper-

tise, accumulating embodied history for the military implied acquiring tried, tested, and indestructible materials and weapons, such as ballistic missiles and their impenetrable concrete bases – layers of brute force that were designed by the same architects that designed DMJM. Therefore, a historical ethnography of DMJM reveals that architecture practice might not only be understood as a social negotiation between architects, their collaborators, and clients (Cuff, 1992), nor a socio-material negotiation between the various actors and material objects (Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b), but rather a negotiation between actors, objects, and – importantly – their embodied histories.

Conclusion

A renewed interest in architecture practice over the last two decades indicates an important shift in attention away from architects as individuals and buildings as objects, to broader and more complex views of architecture as an entanglement of actors, materials, and historical forces. With it, this shift has also ushered in new theories and methods for research that reveal an emerging divide in analytic approach – between ethnographies of the present and histories of the past. While this schism reflects epistemological and disciplinary allegiances of scholars, there are productive methodological intersections between them. By turning to the formation of practice theory as it developed within cultural anthropology in the late 1970s and 1980s, when a similar debate between ethnography and history surfaced, the role of history and historical objects can be understood as a means by which to reconcile the formations of the past with the exigencies of the present. For practice theory, the turns to history in the 1980s helped to explain whether or not contemporary practices constituted reproductions of history, carrying with them deeply rooted structures of power, ideologies, or institutionalized inequalities that might otherwise be indiscernible in observations of the present, or if they indeed represented a form of historical transformation. While anthropologists informed by science and technology studies have braced against engagements with history to afford more detailed views into the dynamics of the present, historical ethnography sensitively unites the concerns of ethnography and historiography in

A historical ethnography of DMJM reveals that architecture practice might not only be understood as a social negotiation between architects, their collaborators, and clients nor a socio-material negotiation between the various actors and material objects, but rather a negotiation between actors, objects, and – importantly – their embodied histories.

such a way that guards against tendencies to detach architects and architectural workers from the political, economic, and material realities in which they are inextricably embedded.

In 1995, Robert Gutman argued that the field of architecture was comprised of two seemingly disjointed discourses: one centered on the history and theory of architecture and was based in the academy, while another centered on practice and was based in the architecture office. The strength of architecture as both a discipline and profession, he suggested, was predicated on productive bridges between the two discourses. Similarly, Dana Cuff argued that the forward momentum of architecture was founded on a dynamic feedback between historically constructed “beliefs” of architects and the “circumstances found in everyday architectural practice” (1992, p. 56). Therefore, uniting the terms of history and ethnography as a method for studying architectural practice offers an important unifying effect for revisionist thinking: for both, the engagement with history guards against the potential timelessness of practices by defining architects as consequential contributors to a world perpetually in-the-making, rather than merely inhabitants of one.

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