

Architectural History, Architectural Education, and Multiculturalism

CHRISTOPHER L. YIP

University of Hawaii at Manoa

It is time to move away from the study of just a highly selected canon of great monuments and towards a more inclusive study of the history of the built environment. This in part means taking seriously the challenge of creating a truly multicultural approach to American architectural history.

The field of architectural history has made only a modest beginning at examining and incorporating material around the topics of gender and multiculturalism. As a field of enquiry, architectural history owes a great debt to art history from which it emerged. Art history in the nineteenth century was heavily influenced by the desire to separate the finest works of art from the production of the crafts of painting and sculptural production, and to distinguish a few works of the high culture of the Western civilization from the everyday production of craftspeople and the vernacular cultures of the West. Late nineteenth century art history became fascinated with connoisseurship which was passed on to the emerging field of architectural history. Scholars studying the history of architecture sought to identify the "greatest" works and to shower them with attention. It was equally important to valorize the great geniuses who created the great monuments. Inclusion in the canon of great works was critical for a building or designer to be presented to students in architectural history classes. Builders and designers deemed innovative, or the greatest examples or proponents of a style or approach were given the stage, and the rest of the built environment disappeared from view, as if great monuments existed without settings.

This led to the emergence of an architectural history that tended to become a chain of chronologically linked masterpieces that often seemed to float independent of either a specific physical or cultural landscape. In the important work of many scholars, such as Henri Focillon, the forms of great buildings influenced the forms of other great buildings in a chain through time. This causal chain was the essence of architectural history. Buildings tended to take on the qualities of paintings and sculptures which only incidentally were related to specific sites. Just as a painting was not to be understood by the room or outdoor location in which it

was painted, the great monument was primarily tied to the great masterworks in the chain from which it emerged and only secondarily was it associated with the particularities of the locality, the local history, and vernacular culture in which it arose.

This tendency, to treat architectural monuments as purely works of art to be viewed aesthetically, is limiting. The importance of the physical landscape, politics, intellectual history, and technology (among many factors) over the course of the twentieth century has led to a broadening out of the way in which the great monuments and their influences have been treated and examined. This is not enough. There is a problem with relying on an approach directed to only a small canon of great monuments.

In many general surveys of architectural history, the canon of great monuments approach has tended to limit the presentation of material to Western Europe and a little about North America in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was as if the many major cultures of the other continents had done nothing of design significance. Even Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America are usually left out as insignificant epiphenomena.

Similarly, the history of American architecture has developed in the shadow of art history and the great monuments approach, and it fits even less well on North America than it does on Western Europe. American architecture is largely to be understood in terms of vernacular building and popular culture. North America is a land settled by a large number of different ethnic groups who have attempted in various ways to implant aspects of their native cultures into the built environments to which they immigrated.

The great monuments and design geniuses approach to architectural history does not lend itself to a multicultural revision. There are very few "ethnic" monuments or non-Euro-American (a term used by Suchang Chan) architects to be found in the traditional works on American architecture. Histories concerned with only the procession of great monuments and designers will have a hard time adding African American, Asian American and Latino American architects

to the canon and creating a multicultural panorama. In fact it would be hard to imagine adding to the canon if the standards of judgement remain unchanged. The question is, do the practitioners of a particular ethnic heritage represent that group's impact upon the American built environment? No. Do these ethnic practitioners were particular works by them adequately represent the adjustments and transformations an ethnic group has wrought in the American built environment? No. Can architectural history limit its examination of the impact of multiculturalism on the American built environment to the study of a few registered architects of ethnic descent? No. For instance figures, such as I. M. Pei and Minoru Yamasaki, represent an important part of the Asian American contribution but only a part.

The development of American architecture and the built environment is at least as much about vernacular architecture and popular culture as it is about the productions of a high culture. Scholars from J. B. Jackson to the late Spiro Kostof sought new approaches to understanding how the American landscape was transformed, and with the advent of Robert Venturi and the late Charles Moore, the design avant garde began to take the popular and the vernacular more seriously.

The transfer of ideas and forms from other lands and peoples to the United States must be taken into consideration in creating a more insightful and valuable history of American architecture and the built environment. What is automatically done in the study of the English colonist to New England should be done for many of the other groups who shaped the American landscape. One can well imagine significant influences on American architecture and design coming from the unwilling African immigrants as has been suggested by the work of John M. Vlach and others. Asian-North American interactions deserve more investigation. The impact of various Asian influences on American design and built environment go beyond the impacts of Japanese architecture upon Frank Lloyd Wright and the Greene brothers.

The Asian American experiences of making places in the landscape are hardly addressed at all if one focuses solely upon the the works of Asian American licensed architects. The Chinatowns, Nihonmachis, and Koreatowns have other origins for the most part. Who made these places? What role did the residents of these communities play? How did design professionals respond to these communities? What impact and role did these communities have in the shaping of the American landscape?

There are many questions that have not yet been addressed. For instance, how did these and other ethnic communities integrate their cultural pasts into the American context, and what was the role of ethnic women in this process? Another set of questions deals with the relationship of the building industry and ethnic communities. In what ways did architects, builders and designers participate in the creation of ethnic landscapes?

Discovering the answers to these questions and others will

help us to broaden and deepen our understanding of the built environment of the United States and help us to see how immigrant groups have effected the course of American architecture. Conversely, it will help us to see how design and designers have shaped the attitudes and physical environments of ethnic immigrant communities.

A transformation of architectural history would benefit design education, especially a history that shifts the emphasis from great monuments and designers to the broader study of the multicultural built environment. As architects confront a population of ever increasing diversity and variety, it becomes all the more important to give designers an understanding of that diversity with which they must deal. It is important for them to recognize the existence of a great variety of user-clients of many ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

Architects also need to understand how American streets, neighborhoods (ethnic and otherwise), towns, and parks have come to be. They need to have a sense of the richness and variety of forms and design ideas that inhabit the vernacular and popular landscapes of America, and not just the highly selected examples posed by the standard canon. If history is to be our compass, and help us to understand the built environment, we must have a much more inclusive understanding of the past that transcends the study of only a few elite architects and their buildings. We need to know how architects fit into the larger picture, and how various immigrant groups sought to reshape their physical environments with, without or against the efforts of design professionals. A multicultural architectural history, that includes the vernacular and popular culture, will give the student (and future architect) a better understanding of how the American landscape has developed, and continues to change. It will also prepare them to design in and for the diversity of communities that make up our country.

There is another important reason for a multicultural architectural history. The understanding of the built environment, that results from the great monuments approach, is both distorted and leaves many (if not most) students alienated from their own personal histories and experiences. Most immigrants to the United States came from the middle or lower classes of the countries they left behind. Their experiences and those of their offspring are not of an elite high culture of Western Europe origin. Many are products of suburban rather than urban or rural life. Their personal histories and experiences differ greatly from that of the great patrons of the east and their architectural monuments which dominate the architectural history surveys. In essence the histories presented leave out the common buildings and environments that habit the personal histories of most architecture students. A multicultural history, that includes the common built environment, would better show students how their experience relates to the history they are studying. This might make it easier for them to appreciate and understand the content of architectural history, both multicultural and monumental.

Finally, in a time when designers are continually seeking new content for design, why limit the diet to just a canon of great monuments? Why not present more of the messy diversity of the actual built environment and its history?

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