

On the Use Value of History: Historiography in the Global Information Age

AMIR AMERI

University of Colorado

I. Over the course of the past two decades the digital information revolution, coupled as it has been with economic globalization have radically transformed the practice and the profession of Architecture. The consequences of this transformation for architectural pedagogy are measurable and direct.

Economic globalization's drive to overcome geographic divides and boundaries in effect has and will continue to force diverse cultures into unprecedented proximity, and an unavoidable dialogue. World cultures, in all their diversity and differences, are no longer or in the least not readily afforded space and time as literal and conceptual implements of mutual separation and distinction. The cohabitation of diverse cultures, both virtual and actual, induces a tense and difficult dialogue that is transforming world cultures at a scale and a rate that is impressive, if not unprecedented. The question and challenge that this change directly and forcefully poses architectural education is how to educate future architects to meet not only the unique demands of a plurality of cultures, but more important a plurality of cultures in a state of flux and change?

Assuming that architecture, as a spatial, formal, and material language, is an indispensable medium that allows a culture to form and transform its assumptions, beliefs, views, and ideas about the world into a factual, lived experience, the pedagogical challenges of global information age are formidable and immediate.

In spatial and temporal seclusion, a culture may readily maintain a prolonged and effective synthe-

sis between its assumptions about the world and its experience of the world through the agency of, among others, its architecture. Maintaining this synthesis in the global information age is a formidable and perpetual challenge. A direct effect of the global reach of the information age is an inevitable and challenging discrepancy between life as various cultures have previously defined and imagined it to be and life as various cultures presently experience it to be. This is a direct consequence of the proximity and the inevitable dialogue that are the immediate legacies of globalization and its reliance on information technologies.

The ramifications for and the specific demand on architecture pedagogy in the global information age are the effective education of a new generation of architects who, practicing within a global economy and faced with multiplicity and diversity of cultures, will not blindly facilitate the hegemony of their own (sub) culture, or what is not absolutely different reduce cultural and ideological differences to facile and stereotypical imagery in the name of regional identity. What is required more so than ever from architecture pedagogy in the global information age is instilling a heightened understanding of the complex dialogue between architecture and culture and along with that a spirit of exploration, experimentation, critical engagement, creative thought and innovation.

What is certain in the global information age is cultural change. What is essential in the face of change is constant analytical examination and thorough re-evaluation of change with an eye toward creative solutions that directly and critically address the change. Falling back on ready-made

formulas, indigenous or imported, without close scrutiny is at best unproductive.

The broader implication of the global information age for not only architecture education, but higher education in general is a necessary shift away from the traditional emphasis on the acquisition of bodies of knowledge to a greater emphasis on the development of analytical, critical, and creative abilities that are essential to engaging and effectively addressing diverse bodies of knowledge.

The history of Architecture will have an indispensable role to play in any curriculum that seeks to instill a heightened understanding of the complex dialogue between architecture and culture, along with analytical and critical skills applied to the understanding of complex formal and spatial architectural compositions. Yet, to play a pivotal role in fostering a spirit of exploration, experimentation, critical engagement, creative thought and innovation, that are necessary skills for architects in the global information age, the history of architecture has to engage and exert a measureable impact on design studios.

At the risk of generalization, for the better part of the past hundred years the potential contribution of architectural history to design studio has been overshadowed by two distinct uses of the subject. History has been put to use as precedent either in defense of originality and the need in each age for unique architectural forms - from a social evolutionary perspective - or else it has been put to use as a repository of forms meant to be borrowed and manipulated at will - from a nostalgic historicist point of view. In either event, the use value of history has been determined by its strategic value to a specific ideology. There is, however, an alternate use value to history that is not determined by lessons in history of form, but the genealogy of formation. It is this latter use value that I wish to pursue.

II. Although secular institutional buildings may not readily appear as patent ideological constructs, this is not for want of participation in the construction and objectification of culture. If the link between the formal and spatial properties of secular institutional buildings and a particular view of the world, or a pervasive metaphysics is rarely, if ever, explicit, this may well be because these buildings manage all too well in formulating a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific

(if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other. Their opacity silently betrays their success.

Since secular institutional building-types are the core focus of design studio instruction, engaging the history of their development and revealing their ideological underpinnings systematically and critically will inevitably establish a strong link between history and design pedagogy as complimentary practices. This critical engagement will not only help instill a heightened understanding of the complex dialogue between architecture and culture, it can also help foster a spirit of exploration, experimentation, critical engagement, creative thought and innovation. To demonstrate, I'll use the library as a case study.

III. To illustrate the historic link between the specific formal and spatial properties of the library as a building-type and the specific ideational agenda of the cultural institution it serves, I will begin with an overview of the genealogy of the library as a building type. I'll primarily focus on two formal and spatial characteristics of the library as a type: first, the specific processional organization of the library and second, the special qualities of the space and the place of the books. I'll try to point out that despite various manifestations and numerous stylistic discontinuities, that are often the primary focus of history courses, the processional organization and the spatial characteristics of the library have remained essentially the same.

This similarity stems, in part, from a common aim or logic that is perhaps best summed up by Michael Brawne in his book "Libraries, Architecture and Equipment." Referring to a small painting by Antonello da Messina that shows St. Jerome in his study, as an accurate and brilliant portrayal of the characteristics most needed in a library, Brawne tells us that the purpose of the library is not only to afford shelter and protection to books, but also "to aid the communication between the book and its reader." To this end, Brawne contends, it is necessary to manipulate, as the painter has done, "the furniture, enclosure, space, light, and outlook," to create "an individual and particular space delineated and in some measure separated from the greater space beyond." A successful library, he tells us, allows the reader to make not only "a place for himself," but at the same time "detach himself," as Saint Jerome has done from an inhospitable

pitable ground that is in turn clearly delineated and separated from the greater landscape in the background. Brawn's is a telling example of using history as a repository of patterns that may readily be adopted without necessarily knowing why or having to justify one's choice, other than its historicity.



Figure 1. St. Jerome in his study, Antonello da Messina (c. 1430-79)

We may ask, of course, why these particular, if not peculiar, processional and formal characteristics should be required of a building whose primary purpose is to shelter books or more appropriately what the books themselves are a well delineated shelter to: writing? Before we postulate an answer, it is important to trace the history of this logic of delineation from the Medieval book-press to the modern stack-system library.

The Medieval book-cupboard or press is a simple, though not a simplistic example of the logic of delineation at work in the formation of the library as a type. From the outset, the book, as we know it, was not given to any place, but confined to a well delineated, separated, and defined place. Transi-

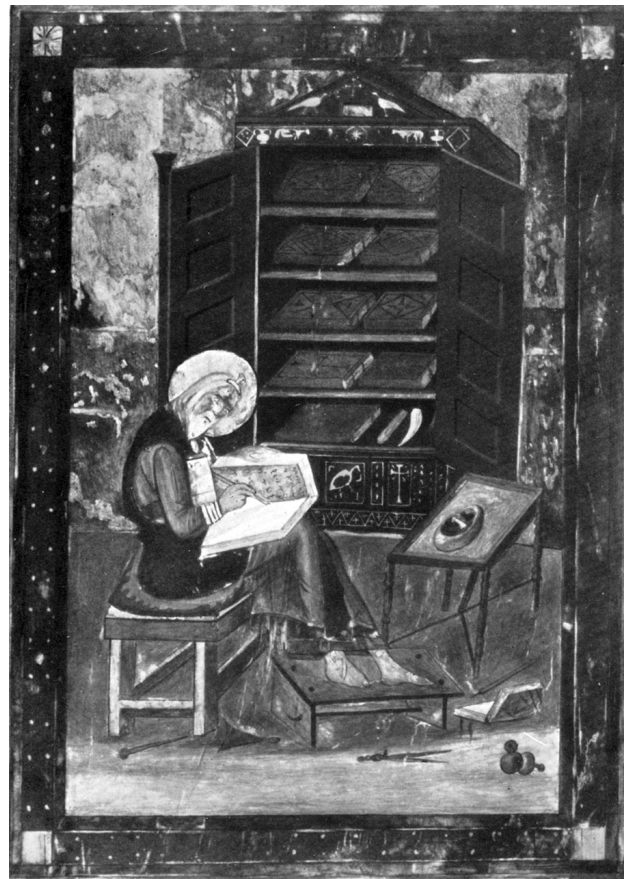


Figure 2. Ezra writing the law, Frontispiece, codex Amiatinus, 6th Century A.D.

tion and access to this particular place was subject to a simple, though effective ritual of retrieval and return, that is, of locks and doors that had be opened and closed.

The practice of keeping books in locked cupboards continued, as evidenced by Fontana's Vatican Library, well into the sixteenth century, and to an extent, much beyond that. The book-shelf, as we know it, is, in a manner, an extension of the logic that informs the Medieval book-press. The book-shelf too is a delineated and defined place, that though open to the gaze, nevertheless, retains the book in place, by affording it a particular place.

The post-medieval chained book, lectern and later stall-system library is a literal, if not an exaggerated expression of the logic of delineation. In this particular expression of the type, as best represented by Leyden University Library and the Lau-

rentian Library, the delineated shell of the medieval book-press assumes human proportion, as the shelves of the old press take on the form of lecterns. The books are no longer locked away, but being exposed to the gaze, they are now chained in place, less, it appears, they venture out of their new delineated and detached place.

Should these chains appear to be a simple safeguard against theft, reflecting the high material value of the book at the time, it is important to keep in mind that this admittedly cumbersome and to an extent self-defeating practice continued well into the 18th century. This is nearly three hundred years after the invention of the printing press that radically diminished the material value of the book. The perceived value of the chain, in other words, may well have exceeded the protection it afforded the book against theft. The chain not only kept the book in place, but it also literally tied the book to its new, though equally "delineated" and "particular" place.



Figure 3. Laurentian Library, Michelangelo, Florence, 1523-71

As the shell of the medieval book-press assumes human proportion in the post-medieval library, the doors and the locks of the old press also assume a new spatial dimension. They give way to a new heightened sense of procession and transition to the

world of books. A telling example is the Ricetto of the Laurentian Library. The drama of delineation, separation, and processional transition can hardly be given to greater exaggeration, and for that matter greater economy of space and form, than it is here. The sole purpose of this tense and complex space is to detach the particularized place of the book behind from its greater monastic context.

In glaring contrast to the slithery vestibule in front, in the resting place of the book, order, clarity, and stability prevail within a highly articulated frame. As compared to Michelangelo's library, Messina's delineation and articulation of Saint Jerome's reading room may well appear subdued, if not anticlimactic. Both are, however, equally effective.

The heightened sense of transition to the world of books, with an emphasis on a clear perceptual and experiential separation, in place of the literal separation of the medieval press, was to remain a requisite part of the library in each of its future modifications. The bureaucratic and technological apparatus overseeing access to the Modern stacks is, in a manner, a contemporary supplement to this experiential separation.

From the post-medieval lectern and latter stall-system libraries to the 'Saal-System' libraries of the 18th and 19th centuries, with their impregnated walls of books en masse, we witness at once a simple extension and a major transformation of the post-medieval book-stall library. The informing logic remains, nevertheless, fundamentally the same. In the 'Saal-System' library, the books, withdrawn from the middle to the inner edges of the reading room, and in the process having shed the chains that literally tied them to their place in the previous example, become an integral part of the frame that delineates and defines their place.

A telling, though late example, of the 'Saal' or 'wall-system' library is Labrouste's Bibliothèque Ste.-Geneviève. In this particular expression of the logic of delineation, the ritual procession to the world of books takes the form of a dark corridor that takes the participant, from the front entry, through the entire width of the building, before leading up to a vestibule filled with light and a characteristic monumental stair-case. This processional move up into the place of writing is a well-precedented gesture of delineation, found not only in Messina's picture

or Michelangelo's library, but in numerous other examples as well. In effect, the stairs detach the place of the book from the ground, as the corridor, in this instance, divorces it from the greater space in the background. This double gesture of exclusion, in effect, displaces and then re-replaces the participant in the delineated and detached place of writing.

Entering the reading room, past the watchful gaze of the librarian at the circulation desk, that is, the 19th century equivalent of the key to the medieval-press, at the center stage of this supreme amphitheater, where the book is as much the subject of spatial manipulation as the reader, we are surrounded with rows upon rows of books on shelves that form a sublime self-enclosing frame. Superimposing the logic of sublimity on the logic of delineation, the 'Saal-system' library sacrifices the individuality of the book to the sublimity of a collective expression. If the chains of the old library are superfluous to the new, this may be in part because, what is now held inescapably in place within the renewed bounds of the library is, with greater economy, the identity of the book, as opposed to its individual expressions. As an integral part of the frame that delineates and defines its particularized place, the book no longer requires a chain, in part, because it is now chained to itself.



Figure 4. Bibliothèque Ste.-Geneviève, Henri Labrouste, Paris, 1850.

The modern stack-system library is both an extension of the 'Wall-system' library and a reversion to the lectern and stall-system libraries. It assumes and further delineates the three operational parts of the 'Wall-system' library: the circulation space, the reading space, and the stack space. However, as

yet another manifestation of the logic of delineation, the modern Stack-system library achieves its predecessor's end, not by integrating the books within its protective frame, but by separating and enveloping itself around the books, in a manner reminiscent of the post-medieval library, with its clear divorce between the books and the library's enveloping frame.

As exemplified by Louis Kahn's Exeter Library, and virtually all modern university libraries, and such recent examples as Rem Koolhaas' Seattle Public Library, the reading space and the resting place of the books exchange position in the Modern Library. In a variation on the theme of center and edge that are the building blocks of a well delineated and detached place, the books move away from the edge to the center stage of the old amphitheater, now multiplied and stacked one on top of the other. Having returned the books to the center-stage, in the post-medieval fashion, the modern library, in turn, substitutes the decimal system in place of the post-medieval chain. As opposed to a literal chain, the modern library inscribes the identity of each book within a figural chain. Although the books may readily leave their sanctified and entombed place within the modern library, pending the elaborate ritual of circulation and discharge, their identity never does.



Figure 5. Seattle Public Library, Rem Koolhaas, Seattle, 2004

IV. Thus far I have tried to point out that there is a common logic to the diverse manifestations of the library through time. Each manifestation is, at a certain level, a different expression of the logic of delineation and as such an attempt to purvey to the viewer a sense of confinement, control, and order. Each example in its own unique way seeks to assure

the participant that the books are in place and under control. The peculiarities of each solution directly reflect the peculiarities of the historic context within which it was formulated. These peculiarities have been the traditional focus of architectural history. Linking the unique formal properties of each solution to current formal and stylistic trends and explaining the latter, in the best of scenarios, as an expression of the culture, politics, economics and technologies of the age is indeed an essential and valuable exercise. However, what this historiography per force ransoms is the historic and ideational continuities that link the past to the present. It offers little resistance to the curricular marginalization of architectural history as a quaint fascination with the past that is not patently relevant to the present. Else it indirectly facilitates the type of essentialist and universalizing stance that characterizes traditional building-type studies, e.g., Michael Brawne's. In contrast, my point has been that there are not only continuities in the history of such secular building types as the library, but that these persistent characteristics are neither essential nor pragmatic per se. Rather, they appear as such, precisely because they are thoroughly ideological and should be critically engaged as such. To this end, I'll try to point out that the persistence of the logic of delineation in the formation of the library across time is, in no small measure, a reflection of the ambivalence of Western culture toward what the library seeks to place and keep in place: Writing.

Writing, Jacques Derrida pointed out long ago, has been the subject of simultaneous condemnation and praise throughout the history of Western culture for being the purveyor of life and the agent of death at the same time. It has been commended and censured for immortalizing and supplanting the author by preserving and dispensing with living thought at once.

Whereas speech functions in the immediacy of thought as a transparent and seemingly immaterial realization of its presence, writing entombs and defers thought. It makes the absent present, though devoid of the immediacy and the pliancy that are its distinguished marks.

Regardless of its immortalizing virtue, or rather because of it, writing has been consistently assigned a secondary, subservient role with respect to speech and condemned for being, among others, a bastardized form of speech, a "dangerous supplement," or

in Plato's term, a *Pharmakon*: neither simply a remedy nor simply a poison, but both at once.

If writing is deemed to be a precarious and pernicious drug, it is in part because its effect cannot be delimited in space and to its assigned place and role as the dead imitation of a living speech. If it is deemed to be a dangerous substitute for speech, it is in part because writing does not simply insinuate itself in the place of speech from outside. In the process, it also permanently displaces living thought and the speech that is presumed to be the privileged locus of its presence.

The "alleged derivativeness of writing, however, real and massive," Derrida notes, is "possible only on one condition: that the 'original,' or the 'natural' language had never existed, never been intact and untouched by writing, that it had itself always been a writing." Writing can take the place of speech as a poor substitute and a dead imitation of it, if speech itself is a form of writing, that is, if speech itself functions by virtue of the same difference and deferral that is presumed to be peculiar to writing. Speech can only be substituted, imitated, or represented by writing, if it has a repeatable, imitable or re-presentable form whose signifying function is not governed, or determined by what it signifies. If the seemingly transparent face of speech was indeed linked to the features of the landscape of thought it designates, it could never be substituted, imitated, or represented. If, on the other hand, the landscape of thought can only be located in the space of representation, if speech itself must necessarily defer the presence that it can only represent, then the living thought itself must forego its privilege as a simple presence in order to appear in representation, that is, to appear at all. In short, "what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence," along with, If I might add, the disappearance of a decidable place within whose demarcated boundaries writing may be put to rest as a substitute representation of speech.

Writing, in other words, has no decidable place. It cannot be readily placed, because what we shall find outside every assigned place is only more writing, or rather an "arche-writing" older than the speech of which writing is said to be a poor and dangerous imitation. The writing that "opens language and meaning," at once exceeds and defies any sense of place or any act of placement, predicated upon, in

the simplest terms, a clear boundary separating two opposite terms, for example, an interior and an exterior. Writing is, in a manner, that undifferentiated ground that precedes the act of delineation.

Should one wish, however, to retain the privilege of speech as the locus of a living, present thought - all the metaphysical, theological, and socio-political implications of this assumption withstanding - then one must indeed make every effort to delimit the dangerous effect of this paradoxical drug to a decidable place. One must make every effort to place writing: be this in a subservient supplemental position with respect to speech or within the protective cover of the book, held well within the bounds of the library. One must substitute a clear sense of place for the missing place of this dangerous pharmakon: a place from which speech can be withdrawn to the outside, safe and untouched by writing's effects.

The book is, of course, one such place. The "idea of the book which always refers to a natural totality," our contemporary philosopher notes, "is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and, ..., against difference in general."

The library constitutes another place: a supplemental, immobile, and generalized doubling of the book, encompassing and placing writing in place. This is to say that the logic of delineation at work in the formation of the library is, to a measure, an ideological response and an institutional solution to the enigmatic place of writing. It is, in a manner, a defensive measure against the "disruption" and "aphoristic energy" of writing: a defensive measure that sees to the confinement of the book in a "heterotopic space," that is construed to keep in place that which has no decidable place.

Much as writing confounds and defies a sense of place, the library systematically seeks to delineate, order, and place. In the space of a non-place - the undifferentiated space of representation - the library insinuates a defensive outpost. Mindful of the pernicious nature of the drug it is given to administer, the library, as a cultural institution, substitutes a formal, spatial, and experiential clarity of place for what writing fundamentally lacks and denies: a decidable place. This is not only a place for itself, but also and of greater concern, for the presence

it defers. Within the delineated, distinguished, and highly elaborated confines of the library, writing assumes a spatial dimension. It assumes an outside. As the library localizes and brackets the book, it also renders what lies outside its assigned spatial limits, immune to the disruptive energies of writing.

As a building type, in-formed by the cultural and ideological agenda of the institution it serves, the library provides the participants a conceptual vehicle for thinking the resolution of the paradox of writing in binary terms. It offers the participant - by design - a spatial experience that is profoundly alien to writing as the space of a non-place.

The careful delineation, separation, and processional transition that are the hallmarks of a successful library, put the relationship between writing and all that one may wish to escape its grip, in the proper ideational perspective. Following a totemic logic, within the confines of the library as a requisite "individual and particular space," writing is given to stand in the same relationship to the presence it defers, as inside stands to outside, path to place, foreground to background, open to closed, upper to lower, center to periphery, and all other binary spatial and formal terms that are called on to create "an individual and particular space," delineated and detached from its greater place. Should one even wish to conceive of the relationship between writing and the presence it defers, in any terms other than in binary terms, one must confront and contradict the immediate experience of the library. Much as writing resists a sense of place, the library successfully resists its defiance of a sense of place, to the point of invisibility.

If within the confines of the library writing is given to assume a spatial dimension, outside the delineated boundaries of this cultural and institutional construct, writing assumes a temporal dimension. There, it is a figure in transition and/or circulation by virtue of that "individual and particular" place to which its identity is irrevocably tied: the library. The production and consumption of this pernicious drug outside the bounds of the library has the assurance of a destination that keeps its malevolent and disruptive energies in check and under control.

V. To return to the initial question of the pedagogical use-value of architectural history in the global information age, my intent in engaging the history of the library as a secular building type was

twofold. The first intent was to point out that a complimentary focus on the history of secular building types can help instill a heightened understanding of the complex dialogue between architecture and culture, as it helps students develop the type of analytical and critical skills that are requisite to deciphering the intricate relationship between architectural form, function and ideology. The second intent was to explore how the historiography of secular building types may condition studio pedagogy and help foster a spirit of exploration, experimentation, critical engagement, creative thought and innovation, that are necessary skills for architects in the global information age. To this latter end, a critical historiography of secular building types may readily serve as an analytical foundation for a studio pedagogy that does not ask students to reproduce either the form or the logic of the type. The critical re-evaluation of the building type may readily form the parameters a new context for design, within which the link between the formal/architectural properties of the building type and its institutional/cultural presuppositions could neither be acknowledged nor ignored, neither reinforced nor discarded. A context within which there could be no intuitive and/or positive re-formulation of the building type in affirmation of the link, but only a critical de-formulation of the type in recognition of the link.

What, for instance, one may ask, would a library be like, that did not try to sublimate writing, but recognize its indecidable nature. If writing defies any singular definition, if every definition slips and slides into the contrary definition, can something of the same logic be taken to forming its place. If the library as we know it substitutes a clear distinction between a host of spatial and formal oppositions - center and periphery, path and place, container and contained, upper and lower, interiority and exteriority - can one conceive and design a library whose formal properties do not lend themselves to or support the conception of writing as the other of speech, and of representation as the other of reality. The pedagogical intent of such a design exercises is to promote a conscious re-evaluation of all the subconscious assumptions regarding spatial organization, the relationship of parts to whole, the inside to the outside, the particulars of volume and mass, solid and void, path and place, structure and material, ornamentation, proportion, scale, and others. This is with the intention of designing a building that in the end is all too familiar and yet all

too alien, one that is neither a copy nor strictly an original. A building that speaks silently of the designer's ability to willfully manipulate the language of architecture as opposed to faithfully re-produce its various speech acts. This latter is, perhaps, the most essential skill in the global information age.

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