Critical Appropriation: Discursive Networks of Architectural Ideas

The idea of architectural appropriation has been so deeply enmeshed with the colloquial definitions of postmodernism that it has become nearly impossible to theorize its disciplinary discursive function without conjuring up images of pastiche, both well and badly executed. Yet if we look beyond this recent chapter in architectural history, we realize that an engagement with the past has long been understood as a legitimate and indeed

Ana Miljacki
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Amanda Reeser Lawrence
Northeastern University

requisite aspect of the creative act in architecture. Appropriation is as much part of the architectural unconscious as the expectation of novelty, and could thus be said to be at the very core of its disciplinarity.

DISCIPLINARITY

An architect's engagement with the past is both a means of legitimating her architectural investigation and of claiming originality against the codified material of preexisting architectural discourse. T.S. Eliot's well-known adage—"Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" (itself appropriated from earlier aphorisms)—suggests that all creative acts are inevitably indebted to predecessors; the distinction he makes is not between those who are and those who are not influenced by the past, but between those who make the past their own and those who simply repeat it. This paradox—that the new must always emerge in some relationship, contested or otherwise, to the old—seems to us a still untouched realm of theoretical inquiry in architectural discourse. More specifically, acknowledging appropriation as a means and not an end, as a creative *act* that can take many forms and produce any number of results, suggests an opportunity to identify specific strategies of appropriation as critical tools within the discipline of architecture.

At its most banal, appropriation is viewed simply as the result of a necessary and inevitable relationship to a preexisting discourse, a given within the field. As Renzo Piano recently wrote of his addition to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, "Architecture is an art that takes from everything, like music does. It's really robbery, but robbery without a mask. You don't really care where ideas come from. You pick and take

from yourself and others.''[1] Piano's notion of the unconscious "theft" (with its unacknowledged echoes of Eliot) elides the richness and possibility of the "picking." What if you *do* care where the ideas come from? What if that "robbery"—either from yourself or others—sets up the chain of questions and decisions that prescribe the future and rewrite the history of an idea, and the architectural object that embodies it? What if appropriation is not just the means of accomplishing an object, not just the trope that ultimately produces a museum, but the thing that demands the most nuanced and specific of attitudes: the register of disciplinary innovation itself?

Piano's shoulder shrug echoes much of contemporary baggage-less (and perhaps anxiety-free) facility in running through formal options that would formerly have seemed diametrically opposed, or it should be taken as a sign of wisdom earned in years of experience. But beyond this—both temporally and conceptually—lies a deep intellectual history, offering myriad conceptual models and rigorous analytical frameworks for understanding questions related to artistic appropriation and related ideas such as mimesis, quotation, influence, revision, as well as originality and its contemporary guise—signature. How ideas travel across culture and specific discursive formations as well as broadcasting media is a lively area for debate among contemporary philosophers and critics. This includes the groundbreaking post-colonial work of Homi Bhabha, who has written extensively about mimicry, along with the musing of writer Jonathan Lethem whose "The Ecstasy of Influence" challenges notions of plagiarism and copyright, while updating the debate with 21st century pop-culture references.[1]

In the most recent examples, as the archives of architectural material have become flatter and faster at historicizing and easier to disseminate digitally (and "like" and "pin"), the discourse around appropriation has become largely litigious, with questions of copyright violations and intellectual property rights overtaking more intra-disciplinary emphasis on language. The simultaneously sensational and mysterious stories about architectural doppelgangers in China travel the web circles from Architizer to *The Guardian*. The same axis of popular architectural news is replete with the more sinister stories of the "you can advance my idea, but don't steal it or I will sue" variety. SHoP to Zaha, Zaha to "the pirates of Chongqing," first world architects to third world and sometimes back again.[2] And however scandalized or amused the readers of these global disputes over intellectual property in architecture might be, far more curious than an author's need to assert creative ownership is the way in which the copyright law, at least in the U.S., has rewritten the priorities of the discipline.

Installed in some form in practice only after the U.S. accepted the Berne convention for the protection of Literary and Artistic works in 1989, the Architectural Works Copyright Protection Act (passed a year later) comes with a specific (and, for architectural instructors, possibly scandalous) definition of "Architectural Work." Under the Architectural Works Copyright Act, "originally designed" elements are protected but functionally required ones are not.[3] When trying to illuminate the boundaries of

legal protection for architectural works, Congress invited Michael Graves as an expert witness, and Graves differentiated between "internal" and "poetic" languages in architecture. The former, he said, was "intrinsic to building in its most basic form—determined by pragmatic, construction, and technical requirements," while he described the latter, the poetic (which must be conceptually separable from the internal), as "responsive to issues external to the building" and incorporating "three-dimensional expressions of the myths and rituals of society."[4] If the two are fused, the work of architecture is not copyrightable. And even though this might seem "unfair," it nevertheless safeguards the space of competitive invention that copyright laws were initially designed to protect.

Whether or not the discipline of architecture needs this type of incentive for innovation is debatable. Should its entire archive of historical and contemporary works simply be understood as open source? Any debate on this topic would surely rehash those already played out in other realms of cultural and aesthetic production: who owns, pays, and profits from the monopoly of use? More interesting to consider is the strange definition of architecture that emerges, thoroughly anti-modern in its spirit, separating the appliqué of personal style (copyrightable) from the necessary and useful (uncopyrightable). And while this legal ratification of a very specific type of signature might even be in line with much of the contemporary global production of architecture, the legal battles over intellectual ownership in architecture (of which *Shine v. Childs* is still the most iconic)—together with less official versions of "who done it first?" (is the grid Eisenman's, Tshumi's, Liebeskind's, Rosalind Krauss's, or Sol Lewitt's?)—are a line of historical inquiry unique to the discipline. Not because an architectural lineage of court cases or gossip about unoriginality or wounded egos would be "truer" than other stories through which we write our history, but because they might allow us to redraw the network through which we map strategies of appropriation.

MECHANICS OF ATTRIBUTION AND REFERENCE

So what are the means by which an architect enters into conversation with a body of work or a single architectural example external to their own? What are the discursive networks within which architectural ideas resurface and are adapted? What are the different narratives of architectural reference, from mechanically and digitally enabled copying to the more elusive notion of influence? Who enforces and codifies them? How do they fade and resurface?

These questions lie at the heart of our interest in appropriation. In other words, we are less concerned with the "what" than with the "how." Rather than style spotting or source hunting, our investigation focuses on how material is transformed or revised or swallowed whole or plagiarized or any combination of the above, along with myriad other strategies of appropriation. The mechanics of these revisions are the stuff of an architect's anxiety, the productive panic that continually produces anew despite the impossibility of newness.

Consider the writings of Harold Bloom. In his seminal texts *Anxiety and Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975), Bloom offers a series of strategies or what he terms "revisionary rations" for understanding how "strong poets" misread their predecessors and create, in his term, a "misprision.".[5] Although Bloom's theory is articulated in relation to poets, its precepts can serve any creative discipline, including architecture, and particularly ones in which there are not only seminal "masters" but also seminal works that constitute a disciplinary history. Bloom's theory brings to the forefront an acceptance of the fact that poets, "strong poets" even, are profoundly indebted to their "predecessors."

To revision something is, as Bloom notes, to literally "see" it "again." This is a distinct idea, of course, from referencing, a more neutral act in which the element brought forward from the past is acknowledged as complete and left more or less intact. Copying similarly implies that the original element is unmodified; the later version is simply a repetition of the earlier incarnation. Revisioning, on the other hand, acts more violently and more decisively on the precedent, violating its initial terms. The act of revision necessitates some kind of change. Bloom provides powerful analytical tools for decoding acts of revisioning—the swerve, the corrective, generalizing away the uniqueness of history, etc. He challenges the primacy of the "original"—a "copy" can appear to predate its predecessor, to appear more original. But of course techniques of appropriation are many; they both predate Bloom's studies of literature and postdate him, and each brings its own cultural and historical baggage.

Mario Carpo has recently argued that specific drawing techniques, in particular Alberti's development of projective drawing, made it possible to think, and enact, originality and authorship in architecture.[6] Copy and replica might come with their particular printing press, or photographic film, or 3-D printer marks. Ideas about preservation and restoration and institutions dedicated to thinking about heritage respond to destruction unleashed by wars and by modernity's proliferation of multiples of various types. Cutup, sample, and remake have their more recent political, technical, and economic underpinnings. A study of the strategies of appropriation allows us to glean not only the inner workings of the genius producer (the "strong poet"), but also situate political positions and the movement and transformation of architectural ideas in the larger network of agents and situations.

POSTMODERNISM/RETHINKING/DECOUPLING APPROPRIATION FROM POMO

For over a generation, architects have been afraid or perhaps unwilling or even unable to talk about appropriation. Still wary from the facile postmodernist appropriations of historical pastiche, theorists and practitioners alike shy away from open acknowledgement of their status *vis-à-vis* the past. Increasingly, however, a resurgent scholarly interest in postmodernism has begun to problematize its definition and boundaries. Excellent books by scholars such as Reinhold Martin and Jorge Otero-Pailos are mapping architectural postmodernism as a more subtle and complex

New Constellations New Ecologies

phenomenon than the largely stylistic one put forth by Charles Jencks and others in its original codification.[7] Sessions at the most important conferences for architectural historians and designers are now turning to (and overturning) various aspects of postmodernism. This isn't simply an academic curiosity: Architectural firms such as FAT or Dogma (from entirely different angles) are unabashedly looking to the past, performing second-level derivations of postmodernism as the ultimate pas de deux with history.[8]

And yet, in this shifting cultural context in which an acknowledgment of the past and of our relationship to it now occupies center stage—or is at least inching its way there—there remains a dearth of vocabulary with which to talk about appropriation and more importantly a lack of conceptual frameworks through which to analyze and understand the use of the past. Most often, any overt use of the past is greeted with suspicion, seen as regressive or nostalgic.

Moreover, and most critically for our investigation, what claim does postmodernism have on this larger intellectual inquiry into appropriation? Both deserve to be freed from their assumed association. To decouple appropriation and postmodernism is not to deny their relationship. It allows for a broader lens through which to understand both, one that will expand our understanding of appropriation by giving it an independent intellectual identity, rather than a vehicle for the presumed historicist pastiche that dominates architectural thought and popular imagination around the postmodern. By challenging the codification of appropriation as postmodern, we can begin to problematize and expand both terms and conceptualize appropriation across both historical and geographical space. Appropriation is both the endogenously architectural object of investigation of this panel and a means of framing historical narratives at the very moment when disciplinary concerns meet exogenous cultural, political, and technological developments such as copyright laws, international politics, and technologies of reproduction. ◆

ENDNOTES

1. Joseph P. Kahn, "Renzo Piano gets museum airborne," *Boston Globe*, Special section: The Gardner Grows, January 15, 2012.

2. See for example Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge,1994), and Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence, A plagiarism," *Harper's*, February 2007. Last accessed January 22, 2013, <http://harpers.org/archive/2007/02/the-ecstasy-of-influence/>.

3. The language here comes from the AWCPA directly. The actual text of the legislation and commentary are available through the Library of Congress. Last accessed January 22, 2012: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c101:H.R.3990:>

4. Quoted in Daniel Su, "Substantial Similarity And Architectural Works: Filtering Out 'Total Concept And Feel'" *Northeastern Law Review*, 2007, vol 101, n. 10, p. 1865.

5. Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence, A Theory of Poetry* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975).

6. See both the recent Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorythm* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011) and Mario Carpo, *Architecture in the Age of Printing: Orality, Writing, Typography and Images in the History of Architectural Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001).

7   See Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), Jorge Otero Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

8   In FAT's case the most recent and perhaps the most radical example would be their project for the 2012 Venice Biennale, while for Dogma it might be interesting to consider their "Stop City" in polemical relation to Archizoom's "No-Stop City."