# The Idea of Time: Historical Consciousness and Aesthetic Unfolding

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St Augustine asked, "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not,"[1] In a modest, tenuous manner, St. Augustine opens the thinker to the question of one's own individual perception of time. Throughout the long discourse of philosophy, time is discussed in terms of duration and succession, temporality and eternity, and linearity and nonlinearity, to mention a few qualifiers. As the stream of opposing pairs continues and compounds, I return the reader, as St Augustine did, to the ability to know and the presence of the unknowable. Within the mind's eye lies an referential, intuitive understanding of time on a multiplicity of levels. This knowledge can be, for example, rationalized collectively, such as the universality of clock time, intuitively assumed, such as one's inclinatory perception of historical consciousness, and personably tangible, such as memory. Time is the psychological tension between one moment of actuality and all other referential moments of actuality in history.

Time perception is a shifting lens, and material culture echoes changes in ideas about time and history. The development of historiography in the 19th century endowed this period with a historical consciousness. This self-awareness of history opened the past to wholesale eclecticism and ruptured the traditional linear course of aesthetic development. Likewise, in response to their historically zealous predecessors, the twentieth century modernists systematically renounce history. By their very act of rejection, however, the modernists acknowledge their consciousness of history. The use of historic referentiality in design need not be a symptom of unhealthy architecture. Rather, it is my objective to demonstrate the utility of the past and the future as conceptual implements, opportunities for design conscious of time perception.

After serving famously as a revolutionary pub for 81 years, City Tavern of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was demolished in 1854, and recently reconstructed in 1976 (Fig.1). The detailed accuracy of City Tavern's resurrection deceives the innocent tourist into believing the pub to be an authentic historic monument. City Tavern is perceptively suspended in the 18th century; it is a reliquary artifact associated as closely as possible with a specific target date in the past. Two blocks from City Tavern stands Franklin Court, the site of Benjamin Franklin's home, now a garden designed by Robert Venturi between 1972 and 1976 (Fig 1).[2] Venturi's frame traces the dimensions of Franklin's demolished home. The original foundation of the 18th century building is visible through glass portals below. The pristine, steel outline could be considered a "living ghost," like City Tavern, prolonging a static image of the 18th century. However, the viewable stone foundation is authentic monument, not staged like City Tavern. The garden's past is transparent and tangible. Venturi's addition is definitively not of the 18th century, but of the volatile 20th; its materiality and austerity makes no illusions about its age. Franklin Court is as much an 18th century structure as it is a contemporary garden; past and present cannot exist without one another. Within this layering, the referential tension of

time is acutely perceptible. Franklin Court is a reinterpretation of the viewer's perception of time through a temporal integration of multiple times.

The tactile difference between City Tavern and Venturi's addition, two contemporary buildings, is essentially structural and material, however, the perceptive difference implicates two very different histories. City Tavern's history is a constructed reality. It is, essentially, a stage created for a specific image-purpose and is unable to support "other," any image excluded from the especial purpose. In this paper, I explore two types of stages: the historic relic, and new cities. The historic relic, City Tavern, slavishly reasserts a specific time-image through all times. New cities, on the other hand, create unique time-images with little or no time-referentiality. Franklin Court, however, is living architecture, past and present. It is original 18th century structure, which is monument, and it is also original 20th century structure, which is sequentially tied to the primary form. The reality of Franklin Court is not constructed, but endued in a tangible, dynamic layered history. Within layered histories, multiple time-images coalesce with multiple time-purposes, and resolution is reached through the formation of complex time-relationships. Layered histories can be considered historic sequences, time-specific assemblages, or time-interpretive assemblages. Historic sequences are reevaluations, either in continuity or contrast, of preexisting design problems. Time-specific assemblages engage multiple times in a structure, and one specific time is determinate of all other times. Time-interpretive assemblages, Franklin Court, form full integrations of multiple times ungoverned by one specific time. Within this framework, I propose a reading of architecture on the grounds of tensile time-relationships.

Fig.1. Left: *City Tavern,* Right: *Franklin Court,* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, (Author).

**A Brief History of Historiography**

During his inaugural dissertation at the University of Königsberg in 1770, Kant postulated, "that the idea of time is not something abstracted from sense experience but something presupposing it."[3] In other words, time is not objectively inherent; it does not exist for itself, but is instead "a pure form of sensuous intuition."[4] This theory posits time as a conceptual impetus, the ground on which referential thought unfolds. As the perception of time changes, so does the nature of thought in time. From this vantage point it is fruitful to chart the course of historiography, beginning with the development of theories of historic continuity and social evolution by Gianbattista Vico in the early 18th century.[5]

Vico's theoretical contribution was the non-durative, alterable nature of man. According to Vico, the historic world is distinct from the natural world; because the historic world was created by man, man is therefore a unique product of his own creation.[6] Vico postulated that there is a pervasive and unique character to each human society, and that this uniqueness follows a necessary order of succession, or development.[7] Art, myth, law, religion, and song are therefore forms of communication natural to each unique society and cannot be understood without the utilization of that society's language, linguistic symbolism, or a common mental dictionary.[8] According to Vico, "minds are formed by the character of language, not language by the minds of those who speak it."[9] History and one's own perception of time are therefore inescapable. Therein lays the philosophical foundation of the raucous historiography of the 19th century.

Two ideologies dominate the German historiography of the 19th century: that of Leopold van Ranke and that of Jacob Burckhardt. Ranke propagated his new history as *Wissenschaft*, or exact science, based on the careful study of factual sources and laws which provided a historical record of occurrences *wie es gewesen*, or as they happened.[10] Burckhardt, on the other hand, believed that history could be understood as *Bildung*, or cultural images, myth, as used to interpret the *Weltanschauung*, or collective intuition, of former times.[11] Burckhardt's history was not a scientific study, but a poetic interpretation. Meinecke wrote on this

distinction: "The two men put different queries to history."[12] Ranke asked, "What does man mean for history?" while Burckhardt questioned, "What does history mean for man?"[13] In other words, Ranke sought the objective judgment of history, the "permanent ideas that emanated from great men and nations and evolved in all of their historical motions," while Burckhardt searched for the subjective reflections, myths, through which history was bestowed with meaning.[14] Between the debate of Ranke and Burckhardt, one understands the volatile nature of a historic consciousness, and the utility of time as a conceptual tool.

Burckhardt's influence was pervasive, and his teachings found an ardent student in Sigfried Giedion, the celebrated historian of the European modernists. Giedion claimed, with characteristic modernist optimism, "history is not simply a repository of unchanging facts, but a process, a pattern of living and changing attitudes and interpretations."[15] What Giedion accomplished in his Burckhardtian historical analyses was the interpretation of the past as a continual confirmation of present methodology, persistently pointing towards the future.[16] For example, while Giedion condemned the eclecticism of the 19th century, the thoughtless reuse of dead styles, he praised the development of new spatial perceptions in the Renaissance. Giedion encouraged modern designers to develop new conceptions of space, as a means of unifying the historic expression of the period.[17]

The Burckhardtian approach to history carries an uncertain tension between the relationship of the individual to the whole, and Giedion utilized this schism to his advantage with a degree of interpretive flexibility. Giedion considered, for example, Renaissance perspective to be the "expression of the whole era," and yet he esteemed an artist like Brunelleschi who embodied through his own genius the "unity of thinking and feeling in the Renaissance."[18] Burckhardt searched for the recurrent and constant among the particular, and discovered his "*grosses geistiges Kontinuum*"[19] in the unique, not the general.[20] Giedion sought out genius as a means of defining a unified artistic epoch. Through his Burckhardtian interpretation, Giedion actuates historical consciousness as a way of edifying the validity of the ideological totality of the modern movement.

**Relics and New Cities: Two Stages of Time**

> *"My dream is to see the Place de la Concorde empty once more, silent and lonely, and the Champs Élyées a quiet place to walk in. The 'Voisin' scheme would isolate the whole of the ancient city and bring back peace and calm from the Saint Gervais to the Étoile.*
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> *…The 'Voisin' scheme covers 5% only of the ground with buildings, it safeguards the relics of the past and enshrines them harmoniously in a framework of trees and woods…In this way the past becomes no longer dangerous to life, but finds instead its true place within it."*[21]*-Le Corbusier, Urbanisme*

The difficulty with Le Corbusier's historicism is the "expression of unity" celebrated by early 20th century modernists. The Voisin scheme reduces historic Paris to a unified whole, a consolidated organism that can no longer be understood as a multiplicity of values, but is instead a silent museum enjoyed by the casual individual.[22] Duration, by means of repetition, eases the mind with continual reassertion. "I know…" indicates an implicit, individualistic understanding, but "if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not," reveals an uncertainty, even an impossibility of bringing the knowledge of the individual coeval with that of the whole, the external world. The durative, repetitive, lasting past and future can be known, or at least assumed. Le Corbusier's historic Paris, like City Tavern, is a relic, static and unchanging in time. Repetition, the preservation and reconstruction of a specific time-image manifested through all times, reconciles the individual and the whole into "we."

Succession, change, is unpredictable, and hence naturally unknowable. The eternal concealment of change creates between the individual and the whole an irreconcilable anxiety, evident in Le Corbusier's Voisin scheme. The individual can exist as a happy observer in Le Corbusier's Paris, from above looking down, or from outside looking in, but

being within means capitulation to a unique idea. Whereas the nature of repetition reconciles the individual and the whole into "we," succession separates "we" into "I" and "they." Because change is unknowable, it is self-evident that there can never exist any universal agreement on what change will become. While universal agreement, the "we-ness," of relics like City Tavern, cultivates a static, ghosted environment, the separation of "we" into "I" and "they" creates an environment of disjunction. The anxiety of continual change, the lack of referential tension to anything but the object itself, engenders separation between "object" and "other."

On the urban fringes of today's metropolises, new cities are designed and built with the same zealous totality of Le Corbusier's "Voisin" scheme. Crocker Park, for example, a New Urbanist shopping and residential center just outside of Cleveland, Ohio, opened in 2003, boasts the charm of a small Midwestern town with all of the security of a privately operated mall (Fig.2). The real city is a diluted idea abstracted into the architectural detailing and cobblestone streets. Crocker Park nurtures an idealic past, an "other Cleveland," which has never existed. The four avenues of the upscale shopping center, like any mall, end in parking garages and vacant lots adjacent to the highway. On an opposite end of the architectural spectrum is Parc de la Villette, designed in 1982 by Bernard Tschumi on the outskirts of Paris, extending beyond the massive shadow of La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie (Fig.2). Essentially a series of programless follies along a green lawn, Parc de la Villette abstracts the city into a self-referential island, a unified futuristic world independent of Paris. The only symbolic reference to "other Paris" is the Metro sign. These two very different spaces have in common a totality of time-sense perception due to the anti-referential nature of the unified idea. Anything left over or left out becomes "other." The Paris metro sign, a foreign historic artifact in the metallic splendor of the Parc is not unlike the bulldozer chewing new earth at the edges of Crocker Park, reminders that both histories are irreconcilably incomplete due to their naïve totality. What remains is a constructed image, the architectural stage, supporting only static likenesses devoid of contradiction and heterogeneity.

Fig. 2. Left: *Crocker Park,* Cleveland, Ohio, Center and Right: *Parc de la Villette,* Paris, France, (Author).

**Layered Histories: Between Times**

Relics and new cities are theoretically pure duration and pure succession, respectively. Between "we" and "I and they," absolutist ideologies are eclipsed by the particularities of time perception. Duration, "I know," and succession, "I know not," must dance together. Layered histories, historic sequences time-specific assemblages, and time-interpretive assemblages engage referentiality actively and intuitively. "Every new architectural work is born in relation no matter whether of continuity or anti-thesis to a symbolic context created by preceding works."[23] The transparent contextualization of layered histories produces in architecture multiplicity and temporal contradiction.

The Phillip Johnson addition to the Boston Public Library, opened in 1972, reflects the scale and proportion of the adjacent neoclassical Boston Public Library, designed by McKim, Mead, and White in 1895 (Fig.3). The fenestrated arcade of the 19th century monument is remembered in the monolithic piers and austere half-moon windows of the Johnson building. Though the exterior facades relate to one another, the two buildings function separately: the older remains essentially as a museum, lecture hall, and reading room; and the younger operates as a modern library. Keeping with preservation laws, the two have separate entrances, with separate grand staircases, and are only accessible to one another through a back hallway. The Johnson building is a contemporary structure consciously aware of its origin; the two libraries form a historic sequence.

Fig. 3. *Boston Public Library,* Boston, Massachusetts, (Author).

The historic sequence is a continuation, not an integration. "Every man-made replica," according to George Kubler, "varies from its model by minute, unplanned, divergences, of which the accumulated effects are like a slow drift from the archetype."[24] In other words, the perpetual imperfection of human work drives the designer to continually reinterpret an existing problem until the problem has been sufficiently exhausted. Consecutive solutions form traceable sequences; each new solution is the consequential derivative of the last. These solutions range from subtle divergences to radical anti-thesis. Johnson attacked numerous problems, including "urban library," "grand staircase," and "exterior bay systems;" all problems which were gleaned from the earlier solutions of McKim, Mead, and White. This type of historicism does not blur the present with the past, as does Franklin Court, nor does it evoke an idealic past, as does Crocker Park. History is, in this case, a tool; the past is relevant as it relates to the present.

Two blocks west of the Boston Public Library stretches Commonwealth Avenue, a leafy boulevard flanked by wealthy 19th century townhouses (Fig.4). Considered unit by unit, the Commonwealth Avenue townhouses can be studied as a historic sequence. The form of the buildings follows an established pattern for 19th century Bostonian townhouses: a raised entrance at the side of the property and an adjacent bay window reveal formal rooms to the street. Tracing early townhouses to late townhouses, certain patterns develop and specific problems reappear which are solved again and again. However, as a whole, the stylistic eclecticism of the townhouses connotes a time-specific assemblage.

Fig. 4. *Townhouses on Commonwealth Avenue,* Boston, Massachusetts, (Author).

Stylistically, the houses vary widely: classical facades neighbor Art Nouveau ornamentation, as do Byzantine and Gothic facades with Richardsonian and Wrightian revetments. The Byzantine façade of one townhouse and the Wrightian façade of its neighbor reveal nothing about the sequence of townhouse development, nor do they denote specific townhouse innovations. What we learn is largely ornamental, yet this decoration is not trivial. The eclectic nature of the Bostonian townhouses reflects a consciousness of time and an appetite for history which allows the integration of multiple histories in one time. Time is no longer a tool, but a referential game in which the traditional rules of sequential development are questioned, manipulated, and reinterpreted. However, the typological framework of Commonwealth Avenue embeds itself in the 19th century; the townhouses are an exhibition of all times which cannot escape its own time.

Time-interpretive assemblages, like Franklin Court, reinterpret time perception; referentiality is blurred to foster the full integral communication of multiple times. The Musée d'Orsay in Paris was converted from the out-of-use Gare d'Orsay, built in 1900, into a museum of 19th century art between 1978 and 1986 (Fig.5). The re-adaptation of the old train station prevented the Gare d'Orsay from becoming a relic, a touristed memory frozen in the early 20th century. The opulence of the old gare is complemented by the new addition; abstracted neo-Egyptian pylons unfold tight passages into wide halls, layer after layer, and the bold austerity reveals the detailed elegance of the old gare. Time, in this place, is not a sequential tool or an aesthetic game, but is instead the full integration of multiple histories. Perceptively, the contemporary additions are not only modern or ancient, as the old gare is no longer only neoclassical. Unlike Commonwealth Avenue, the Musée d'Orsay does not maintain a solid typological framework as a singular point of reference. Instead, as was the case of Franklin Court, one

time cannot exist without the other. The Musée d'Orsay is as contemporary as it is centurial. Within this system, the past becomes a viable living language in the transparency of the present.

Fig. 5. *Musée d'Orsay,* Paris, France, Author.

**Supple Temporality: An End of Times**

Questioned in this study are inherent assumptions based on time perception which affect architectural design. Walking through Philadelphia's historic district, the staged 18th century is inescapable. Costumed actors roam the city of monument and relic. Often what could not be preserved was razed, and, as if to maintain sanctity where stone failed, gardens were planted to memorialize memory. At the urban scale, the architectural stage is an idealic tourist destination. Living Philadelphia encroaches on the edges of the hyper-real image of reconstructed 18th century Philadelphia. On the other hand, tourists following Boston's historic Freedom Trail find themselves plunged into the gritty, vibrant city. A painted red line on the sidewalk winds tourists through a string of historic monuments. The unsuspecting visitors also meander through the living streets of Boston: the theater district, an open-air market, a major highway construction site, the bargain shopping district, and Chinatown. 18th century Boston is layered beneath 19th and 20th century Boston. The past is at moments revealed, tangibly, then concealed again, transparently, within the urban fabric.

Layered histories are valuable because they necessitate active consciousness of time relationships. Tensile time is a shifting lens, and the multiplicity which is conceived in such dynamism can not be supported by static, unified theories of time. Multiplicity involves "other," contradictory "object." Otherness can only be reconciled through a complex layering of systems which allow for both succession and duration. Hence, layered histories, time sequences, time-specific assemblages and time-interpretive assemblages, can be utilized as conceptual models for design work. History can be a design occasion to be employed, manipulated, and reinterpreted. The use of the past in design need not be considered the resurrection of aesthetic zombies or an ignorance of future possibilities. Instead it opens opportunities for design based on a supple approach to time, design self-aware of the inescapable endowment of historical consciousness.

**Endnotes**

[1] J.T. Fraser, Of Time Passion, and Knowledge: Reflections on the Strategy of Existence, (New York:George Braziller, Inc, 1975), p. 25.

[2] Charles Jencks, The New Paradigm in Architecture: The Language of Post-Modernism, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 61.

[3] Fraser, op.cit., 35.

[4] Theodore Meyer Greene, Kant Selections, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 50.

[5] Ibid, p. 30.

[6] Gabriel Ricci, Time Consciousness: The Philosophical Uses of History, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 11.

[7] Isaiah Berlin, Henry Hardy ed., Three Critics of the Enlightenment, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 8-9.

[8] Ibid, pp. 10-11.

[9] Ibid, p. 62.

[10] Joseph Mali, Mythhistory: the Making of Modern Historiography, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 14.

[11] Ibid, pp. 14-15.

[12] Ibid, p. 131.

[13] Ibid, p. 131.

[14] Ibid, p. 131.

[15] Sigfried Giedion , Space, Time, and Architecture, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 5.

[16] Manfredo Tafuri, Theories and History of Architecture, (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1980), p. 153.

[17] Giedion, op. cit., 31-32.

[18] Ibid, 31-32.

[19] Great historic continuum, translation by author.

[20] Mali, op. cit., 100.

[21] Manfredo Tafuri, Theories and History of Architecture, (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1980) 48.

[22] Ibid, p. 49.

[23] Ibid, p. 109.

[24] George Kubler, The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962), p 71. According to Kubler, the word “archetype” denotes the prime object, or the first invention of a formal series followed by a series of replicas, varying solutions to the same problem posed by the premier.