"One Man's Meat Is Another Man's Cold Broccoli:" Normative vs. Historicist Visions of Technology in Architecture

RUMIKO HANDA
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

INTRODUCTION

Technology has often been this century's model for architecture, as exemplified in Le Corbusier's house as "a machine for living in".[1] Seeing the exponential development of technology, early Modernists in architecture took progress, or the superiority of what is new to its predecessor, to be an unquestioned assumption and an expectation for themselves. Appropriating science and technology's observed success into another realm's program is not a symptom singular to architecture, but rather is common among other humanities' disciplines, as R. G. Collingwood suggested in the following:

> ... those who have believed most strongly in progress have been much in the habit of appealing to the progress of science as the plainest proof that there is such a thing, and often, too, have based their hope of progress in other fields on the hope of making science the absolute mistress of human life.[2]

Chronological changes in the humanities, however, are by nature different from the progress in science and technology, as Collingwood further argued. To be specific, the latter is a particular kind of change from one state to another, in which the proceeding state fulfills, in addition to what the preceding fulfilled, what the preceding ought to but could not. For Joseph Rykwert, then, what we have in architecture is not so much progress in the above sense. For "they advance by accumulation and not by development."[3]

The sense of progress is erroneous not only when one observes the history of architecture and other humanities. More importantly, when taken as an epistemological assumption, it creates an illegitimate program for the future. This is apparent with Postmodernism or Deconstruction. With their keen interest in progress, Postmodernists and Deconstructionists alike justified their positions by, more than anything else, denying the predecessor. Although they relate to the time line of history differently— Postmodernism using the past to overcome Modernism, and Deconstruction proclaiming the end—both share a sense of superiority to their immediate predecessors. Their theory and methodology are devised as opposites to their predecessor's. A critical assessment of their position in and of itself took only a secondary significance. The problematic implications seem clear enough: the position self-destructs. Justification based on novelty is self-contradictory. In the time required to state, "I'm right because I'm new," "I" becomes no longer "new" and therefore no longer "right."

It is important to recognize, in comparison, that what resided in the minds of many Modern architects, along with the sense of progress, was a devotion to simplicity found in the primitive. Matei Calinescu sees a state of crisis in such modernity.[4] It is indeed a crisis, for two antithetical notions coexist in a single body of thought, one assuming the superiority of the new, the other seeking the ideal in the old. For Rykwert, however, reflecting on origins in search of the ideal has often been and should be a necessary exercise at the time of thinking for the future:

> The return to origins always implies a rethinking of what you do customarily, an attempt to renew the validity of your everyday actions, or simply a recall of the natural (or even divine) sanction for your repeating them for a season. In the present rethinking of why we build and what we build for, the primitive hut will, I suggest, retain its validity as a reminder of the original and therefore essential meaning of all building for people: that is, of architecture.[5]

It may then be beneficial at the end of the millennium to rethink the notions one is accustomed to, and to question the assumptions that may lie behind these notions. Reflecting upon the cases of the mid-eighteenth century and of the early twentieth century, in which primitivism played an important role in writing a program for the future, this paper will contemplate on two often-opposing epistemological assumptions concerning time. These two epistemological positions are historicism on the one hand and what supports "art without history"[6] on the other, which Alan Colquhoun once named the normative position.[7] This paper will reveal an important difference within seemingly similar versions of advancement: the cases of primitivism present a fundamentally normative epistemology, as compared to the strong historicist nature of Postmodernists and Deconstructionists. If the historicist view of progress is destined to self-denial via the futile combat of an avant-garde that must always be at war with yesterday's certitudes, then it may be productive to consider the possibility of "*arrière-garde*,"[8] or a return to sources, as Paul Ricoeur once suggested.[9] The key to the latter, the paper will argue, is in the recovery of the normative way of thinking. To do so, then, is to quit either modeling architecture after technology or hiding building technology away behind the drapes of ersatz antiquarianism. Instead, it will be argued here, we must to allow technology to take a prima donna role in the poetic construction of architecture.

Definitions: Normative vs. Historicist Epistemology

Before we embark on analyzing the primitivism of the mid-eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries, it is necessary to define the key concepts of this paper: normative vs. historicist epistemology.

Whoever is interested in historicism finds the notion to be rather confusing, because of its varied definitions, which sometimes present a contradiction to each other.[10] This problem comes from the fact that historicism is a notion regarding, more than anything else,

epistemology. Any attempt at understanding at a more facile level than that of epistemology, for example, a particular style or time period, is doomed to failure. Historicism is, epistemologically speaking,

> The view that the history of anything is a sufficient explana-
> tion of it, that the values of anything can be accounted for
> through the discovery of its origins, that the nature of anything
> is entirely comprehended in its development.[11]

It is because of this way of knowing that historicism is sometimes associate with positivistic view of history—the belief that one has a way of knowing the past as it was. We may also say that, based on the above definition, the ideologies we have seen in architecture since early Modernism are fundamentally historicist in nature. For all, including Modernism, Post-modernism, and Deconstruction, identify themselves in the linear flow of history. Carl E. Schorske maintained that while Modernism and Postmodernism may be seen as opposites in that one is the denial and the other is the use of the past, they are basically the two sides of the same coin, that is, historicism.[12] We then may place the architectural ideologies of this century, as varied as they may seem, within a single perspective of modernity, recognizing, as Friedrich Meinecke asserted, that "the rise of historicism is one of the great intellectual revolutions of the modern age." [13] Moreover all these schools of thoughts have in common the sense of superiority to their predecessors.

The ideologies of primitivism we find in the mid-eighteenth and early twentieth centuries bear some certain nature which belongs to the notion that is often opposite to historicism, namely the normative position. A naive observer may be inclined to consider primitivism as belonging to historicism, for the very reason that primitivism looks to the past. Another objection may be raised that normative epistemology, which was behind Classicist architecture, has nothing to do with primitivism, whose forms do not necessarily bear stylistic similarity to that of Classicism.

However, normative epistemology should be understood, above and beyond stylistic questions, for its belief that a thing carries its own discernable truth, independent of its history and location. This position can be called "art without history."[14] When primitivism looks into the past or the distant, that is, chronologically or geographically, it looks into them with the belief that there is some inherent truth that can be applied in the here and now.

Of course, the distinction between normative and historicist epistemology is not always as decisive as I have portrayed it to be so far. Both views appear in, for example, the works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, was originally published in 1755. In his proclamation that "the only way for young German artists and writers to become great, even 'inimitable,' was by imitating the Greeks," we observe the coexistence of historicist and normatist attitudes:

> ... we must ignore 20th century hindsight and look at things
> from the perspective of the 18th century. In so doing, we note
> how the idea of progress and cultural development was
> constantly being challenged by certain human needs for norm
> and structure, at a time when a very old system of rules and
> values had come out of joint without having been replaced by
> a new and better one.[15]

While writing the history of art with "the idea of history progressing in a linear fashion,"[16] Winckelmann also trusted some attributes of artists to be "universal and therefore timeless, *a priori* category."[17]

Two following cases, namely Marc-Antoine Laugier of mid-eighteenth century and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, later Le Corbusier, of early twentieth century will help examine further the difference between the two epistemological positions and demonstrate primitivism's strong foothold in normative epistemology.

THE PRIMITIVE: THE SIMPLE AND THE ESSENTIAL

Primitivism's prime assumption is that the simpler and more primitive, the more profound, more important, and more valuable a thing is. However, it bears recalling that this is never an absolute rule but only primitivism's assumption.[18] To examine this assumption may clarify other beliefs behind primitivism. What was it that allowed Laugier in his 1753 publication to state that "The little hut which I have just described is the type on which all the magnificences of architecture are elaborated"? How could he defend his simple hut "against the possible charge that by discarding everything but columns, entablatures, pediments, doors and windows, he would reduce 'architecture to almost nothing'?"[19]

The primitive was for Laugier "the golden age when man lived still in close contact with nature and was guided by his natural instinct only."[20] This view was shared by Giambattista Vico, who Frances S. Connelly argues is the first to articulate the notion of primitivism.[21] In his *New Science* of 1725 Vico stated:

> Before, in the time of Homer, the peoples, who were almost
> all body and almost no reflection, must have been all vivid
> sensation in perceiving particulars, strong imagination in
> apprehending and enlarging them ... and robust memory in
> retaining them.[22]

Contrary to the simple and the primitive, for Laugier, was often the superfluous and the defective, with which the true perfection is never attained. Reflecting Jean Jacques Roussau, both Vico and Laugier thought cultural sophistication was sometimes synonymous to guile and falsehood, which stand in the way of attaining the "truthful, open, faithful, generous, and magnanimous." [23]

THE PAST: AUTHORITY OR SOURCE

In search of the essence, primitivism turns to the past. A strong interest in the past alone cannot, however, be singled out as the characteristic that makes a notion belong to historicism. The distinguishing question is rather within the use of the past. In particular, the question, "what is the role of past?" will be answered differently by those on either side of the fence. With historicism, the past works as the authoritative agent of evaluation or justification, while with normative position, the past operates as a vehicle through which the ideal is sought in all terrain, while justification retains a timeless immediacy.

For example, nineteenth-century Eclecticism, an exemplar of historicism, justified its veneration of a multitude of objects primarily by the knowledge that the form came from the past. In this mode of thinking, the question regarding the appropriateness and legitimacy of present and future architecture relied primarily on the authority endowed by the past, which in itself is nothing but an agent external to the matter in question.

Normative epistemology, by contrast, looks for principles to be shared between the past and the present. In this sense, it is beneficial to compare, as Robert Goldwater did, between primitivism and archaism:

> Archaism (as it is found in the Nazarene and pre-Raphaelite
> movements) is also similar to primitivism in that it goes back
> to an earlier art for its inspiration, but, since it considers the
> epoch it has picked, which technically it realizes and appre-
> ciates as a beginning one, as the highest point which art in its
> expression has reached, it sticks formally closer to this art
> than does primitivism. Moreover the works which it admires
> and copies are considered to be in its own cultural tradition,
> a style whose freshness lies in its suggestion of a later, too-
> full-blown flowering, and whose charm lies in its restraint
> when compared to this now well-known later period. In the

same way the content which is conveyed by this form has only an intellectualized, or an arbitrary meaning; intellectualized because it belongs to a taught tradition, arbitrary because it no longer has an immediate emotional meaning and is significant only in fitting into a preconceived, artificially limited ideal.[24]

THE RETURN TO THE ORIGIN: CREATIVE PROCESS

Because primitivism is not as strongly concerned with the authority of the past, but rather the past is a mere inspirational source for contemplating the essential, it allows creativity to be engaged in deriving this essential. Another distinguishing factor therefore lies in the way how one may arrive at the primitive. With both Laugier and Jeanneret, the fundamental faculty at work is imagination and speculation, rather than empirical observation.[25] For Laugier, it was simply not possible to gain empirical knowledge of the primitive:

It is important to realize that Laugier, writing in 1752, could hardly have known that Greek buildings displayed so clearly the functional character of the Orders. When he envisaged his new architectural ideal, Greek temples were still a literary conception rather than a reality.[26]

However, more importantly, Laugier was not interested in empirical fact of the past, but was looking for the utopia, as it is clear in his statement, "rules should be based on what ought to be not on what is." [27]

In this, one may say that the return to the origin is primarily a creative process based on imagination. And here, this notion separates itself from historicism. The historicist, whose interest lies in the knowing something by way of knowing its history, would naturally operate with the assumption that actual knowledge of the past is attainable and that knowledge is the pre-condition of one's work. Just as the age of Enlightenment is associated with the birth of historicism, the empirical method is at the foundation of historicism.

The less importance placed on empirical observation and the stronger employment of creativity as the human faculty are still the case even when, one and a half centuries later, the primitive architecture was available to Jeanneret for observation. The archaeological study of 1833 on the Irish crannog dwelling was known in his school age. His travel to the east of 1911 included a prolonged stay in Athens and a visit to Rome. And yet, the drawings of the primitive hut display the architect's strong creativity at work.

LEGITIMATE CREATION: BUILDING A NORM

One should however note that primitivism does not completely set the artist's imagination free. For primitivism assumes a set of inherent and therefore universal rules, not only effective in the primitive, but also applicable to the present and to the future. In this, the return to the origins meant the search for the norm, which is the position supported by the normative epistemology, but contradicting to historicism. This creation should be distinguished from the artist's capricious making.

Is it clear that Jeanneret's "The Lesson of Rome" was the result of his effort "to devise a method of teaching architectural composition, a course he must soon teach, and teaching is itself an educational experience."[28] Here, it is probably necessary to go beyond Adolf Max Vogt's critical observation that "The simplistic image of LC as mere apostle of the future has until now made historians blind to the fact that, as a young man, he was of immense significance in matters of historical beginnings"[29]: Jeanneret's primitivist interests were directly caused by his self-expectation as the apostle of the future.

Wolfgang Herrmann saw that Laugier was after the normative function in his primitive hut:

Its momentous significance lay for him in the fact that it provided the badly needed norm by which present-day architecture should and could be guided. The aspect of the hut which in Laugier's mind really mattered was its normative function. ... His hut is not a curious illustration of a distant past or a factor of an evolutionary theory of architecture but the great principle from which it now becomes possible to deduce immutable laws.[30]

The norm was to work as a set of firm and unalterable rules. What Laugier opposed was the whim of personal opinion and caprice to which the talent and genius would degenerate without such rules.[31]

Here then was a guarantee against outworn, capricious custom as well as the vagaries of individual taste. More, it was the framework of a theory of architecture firmly based on nature, and entirely satisfactory to reason, a guide to all future architects, ...[32]

That the norm is found in the primitive is, once again, a reflection of Rousseau's thoughts:

This idea conformed with Rousseau's view that one should go back to the very beginning of human history and find there the norm by which the present can be guided and, if necessary, corrected, and was also akin to Condillac's notion that human understanding had been misled and would have taken another course if it had always followed the guidance of nature.[33]

And this normative nature of primitivism is what, as Rykwert suggested, makes the return to the origin the legitimate method of writing a program for the present and the future beyond.

PRIMITIVISM, WAY TO DISCERN INHERENT NATURE IN ARCHITECTURE

Primitivism then allows one to consider the inherent properties of architecture. Although Modernism in general is primarily historicist, because it retained the interest and method of primitivism, it avoided losing the sight of the questions concerning the essence of architecture. Considering the past not as the authority to follow but merely as a vehicle by which to arrive at the essential principles of architecture, and using one's imagination as a free and yet critical faculty, those who engaged in primitivism engaged themselves, along with the strong sense of their own time in history, not in the replication of the past but in the questions concerning the inherent properties of architecture.

The difference should be understood between the two following notions: on the one hand, something is beautiful just because everybody agrees with it and on the other, because something has a certain inherent nature that makes it beautiful, everybody can agree with it. For Laugier, agreement alone was never a sufficient justification for beauty. Although he argued that "those works were the best which had found the approval of most people for the greatest length of time," "he strongly opposed the notion that certain practices are good just because they had been done in this way for a long time." It was then "universal approval sanctioned by reason which he accepts and universal approval relying on custom which he abhors."[34] Once again, contemplation and study of the primitive hut provides a legitimate means to arrive at such reasoned rules. This allows the architect to look into the inherent properties of architecture, and to avoid relegating the judgment to any external authority.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN ARCHITECTURE AS A HUMANISTIC DISCIPLINE

If we are to benefit from returning to the origins, or from examining the way two cases of primitivism treated the issues of time, then a possible role of technology needs to be considered from

the point of view of normative epistemology. Now, the question is no longer of architecture modeled after technology. Neither is it of technology being made use of in a building only to be hidden from the visual scrutiny.

Since the middle of the seventeenth century when the newly-established school of technology included instructions concerning building construction, technology has tended to assume two extreme roles in architecture. The one, an absolute model for architecture, has cast, more often that not, false expectations to architecture. In the other role, technology is relegated to the mere perimeter of architectural values, especially those of convenience and economy. If so, then technology is allotted to the back-stage, hidden from the viewer's scrutiny, and never assumes a role on the stage. When one considers the possibilities of normative epistemology, and in particular the need to give more serious attention to the inherent properties of architecture, technology presents us with yet another role. Of all the possible properties of architecture, what can be more inherent than the physical attributes with which technology is concerned: the process and method of construction; the materials and how they are joined; or the structural forces that work through the physical elements to keep up the building? For it honestly portrays the physical laws of nature. Making technology visible in the final building, then, means to demonstrate such properties. We might say that technology is in fact an appropriate means to recover the normative epistemology of architecture within the predominant historicist current of the contemporary conditions.

Here, however, we have to answer the question raised by David Leatherbarrow in relation to Kenneth Frampton's notion of tectonic culture.[35] The question is:

> ... while every building practice leaves traces of its methods on the outwardly apparent elements of the construction, not each of these traces is symbolic. ... When, or under what conditions is a pragmatic solution also poetic? [36]

This question begins to engage us in a broader issue of the problem of architectural signification we face today. In this regard, one is reminded of a keen observation Victor Hugo made in 1832, in his phrase, "This will kill that."[37] "The great poem, the great edifice, the great creation of mankind will no longer be built, it will be printed." According to Neil Levine,

> The 'death of architecture' was in effect a redefinition of architecture, both as a medium and as a mode of expression. It was not so much that architecture as a medium had lost its dominion over the other arts but rather that the architectural mode of expression had lost its hold over the medium itself and now failed to define it. The four-hundred-year history of the disintegration of architectural content was to be matched by a collateral erosion of architectural form.[38]

We have had, for at least half a century now, the linguistically-driven understanding of architectural signification. Applying Ferdinand de Saussure's deliberation on linguistic signification, architectural meaning has tended to be understood arbitrary to the piece's inherent properties, and instead assigned by a specific culture or the architect as the author. Given the contemporary difficulty of architectural signification, that is, in the sense of both meaning and meaningfulness, one needs to see the possibility of natural signification based on the normative understanding of architecture.[39]

In concrete, to elevate the mere trace of construction to poetry, technology needs to assume the role of ornament as discussed in the phenomenological hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's notion of ornament reflects the two-millenium-old notion of the whole-part relationship. Just as Laugier examined each element of a building up against "Aristotle's rule that in poetry 'the structural union of the parts should be such that it any one of them

is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed',"[40] a particular demonstration of technology within a building should refer to the whole, that is, architecture:

> We have only to remember that the ornamental and the decorative originally meant the beautiful as such. It is necessary to recover this ancient insight. Ornament or decoration is determined by its relation to what it decorates, to what carries it. It has no aesthetic import of its own that is thereafter limited by its relation to what it is decorating. ... Ornament is not primarily something by itself that is then applied to something else but belongs to the self-presentation of its wearer.[41]

Casting technology with a significant role of ornament may provide a way to recover architecture as a humanistic discipline, that is, architecture that concerns itself, in Rykwert's phrase, with "the essential meaning of all building for people," in which technology plays a visible role. After all, among architecture's tasks is to make visible what has been invisible.

NOTES

[1] Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture*, trans. with an intro. by Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), unabridged and unaltered republication original publication (London: John Rodker, 1931), 107.

[2] R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, revised edition, ed. with an intro. by Jan van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 332.

[3] Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, second ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 37.

[4] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism Avant-Garde Decadence Kitsch Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

[5] Rykwert, 192.

[6] Irving Lavin, *Past-Present: Essays on Hisoticism in Art from Donatello to Picasso* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 203.

[7] Alan Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981).

[8] Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. and with an intro. by Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 20.

[9] Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and Ntional Cultures," in *History and Truth*, trans. with and intro. by Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 277.

[10] Alan Colquhoun, *Modernity and the Classical Tradition: Architectural Essays 1980-1987* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).

[11] Dwight E. Lee and Robert N. Beck, "The Meaning of 'Historicism'" in *American Historical Review* (April 1954), 568.

[12] Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[13] Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 220.

[14] Lavin.

[15] Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton, "Introduction," in Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*(La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987), x.

[16] Heyer and Norton, xiii.

[17] Heyer and Norton, xvii.

[18] Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, enlarged edition

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), original edition 1938, 251.

[19] Wolfgang Herrmann, *Laugier and Eighteenth Century French Theory* (London: A. Zwemmer Ltd., 1962), 28.

[20] Herrmann, 43.

[21] Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 5.

[22] Connelly, 14.

[23] Connelly, 20-21.

[24] Goldwater, 221.

[25] Rykwert, 48.

[26] Herrmann, 22.

[27] Herrmann, 51.

[28] H. Allen Brooks, *Le Corbusier's Formative Years: Charles-Edouard Jeanneret at La Chaux-de-Fonds* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 295.

[29] Adolf Max Vogt, *Le Corbusier, the Noble Savage: Toward an Archaeology of Modernism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 219.

[30] Herrmann, 48.

[31] Herrmann, 20.

[32] Rykwert, 48.

[33] Herrmann, 49.

[34] Herrmann, 39-41.

[35] Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture.*, ed. by John Cava (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995).

[36] David Leatherbarrow, "Kenneth Frampton, Studies in Techtonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture" book review in *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians (March 1997)*, 99-100.

[37] Victor Hugo, *Nôtre-Dame de Paris.*

[38] Neil Levine, "The Book and the Building: Hugo's Theory of Architecture and Labrouste's Bibliotheque Ste-Genevieve," in *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture.* Ed. by Robin Middleton (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982), 154.

[39] Rumiko Handa, "Against Arbitrariness: Architectural Signification in the Age of Globalization," forthcoming in *Design Studies* (August 1999).

[40] Herrmann, 20.

[41] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second, revised ed., trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 159.

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