Considering the Baroque

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Since the nineteenth century, historians and theoreticians of architecture have tended to examine the baroque in those moments when the relationship between the production of architecture and its historical analysis, between doing architecture and doing history, has been open to contention.¹ Generation after generation, scholars have been prompted to pay attention to the baroque to consider the limits of architectural history as a field and to advance new propositions concerning the relation of contemporary architectural practice and thought to its past.

Architects and historians who addressed the baroque as a subject of history helped to shape debates around modern expressionism and functionalism. The baroque shored up both phenomenological and critical sides of the theory wall. It explained nationalist values as it undermined them. It bolstered the modern inheritance of the classical and the romantic alike. It gave purpose to architecture in the age of post-World War II humanism. It negotiated the tensions among form, language, and ornament in the era of postmodernism. The resurgence in studies on the historiography and theorization of the baroque since the 1990s suggests that we are in another such moment of reflection.² The baroque was, in this sense, architecture's constant twentieth-century companion—often against the grain of historical fidelity or philosophical rigor, but regularly to remarkable effect. All of which prompts questions about our contemporary relationship with historical knowledge and where the baroque might once again figure as a subject that invites contemplation of our field.

One of the earliest problems posed systematically by the first modern historians of art we can claim as architectural historians concerned the changes classical architecture sustained from its supposed fifteenth-century apogee to its seventeenth-century nadir and the question of how and why the rebirth of antiquity yielded to the deformations of Francesco and the Borrominists. The modernist historiography initiated by Alois Riegl, August Schmarsow, and Heinrich Wölfflin, for example, lent historically derived values to the lexicon and theory of modern architecture.³ The appreciation of cinquecento and seicento works through modern eyes eventually became important for the prehistory these works offered modern architecture and, thus, for their role in upholding modern architecture as something more than an anomaly. In its debts to history modern architecture became historically explicable, even in its apparent ahistoricism. At the same time, historians of architecture offered a modern account of their various early modern subjects. Their writing thereby formed part of architecture's modern intellectual history.

By the postwar era, when a semblance of disciplinary autonomy for architectural history emerged, the values derived from the baroque had been normalized as proper to modern architecture and propagated independent of their nineteenth-century recovery through historical and psychological study: space and spatiality, empathy and affect, human scale and bodily experience, movement and motion. Offering a historically legitimate critical language disarticulated from the examples it was first used to explain, this vast work of historical production helped describe and advance the values of modernism. Historians are prone to regard anachronism with distaste. Yet the errors sustained by a modernist historiography of the baroque added something important to architectural modernism—a body of concepts and

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modernized precedents—and to works of architecture that we can, in the end, regard with favor.

In 1888 Wölfflin wrote, “It has been customary to use the term *Baroque* to describe the style into which the Renaissance resolved itself or, as it is more commonly expressed, into which the Renaissance degenerated.”⁴ His *Renaissance und Barock* was one of a number of books that responded to the fresh rigors of *Kunstwissenschaft* in their treatment of the painting, sculpture, and architecture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These works approached the history of architecture as a field of study leading to something more than a catalog or reservoir. Understanding that architecture formed part of culture, not simply its outward expression, Wölfflin and his contemporaries laid foundations for architectural history as a discipline concerned with the intersection of architecture’s internal problematics and its highly complex cultural settings. Baroque posed a conceptual problem demanding new tools of framing and analysis—the basic, evolving apparatus of a discipline. What kinds of buildings belong to the history of art? How do they participate in that history alongside painting and sculpture? Under what manner of force does architecture, in particular, sustain change over time? And what remains proper to architecture as a distinct set of knowledge and practices when all that is observed as being changeable—its appearance, organization, role, materiality, technology, and so on—ultimately transforms?

For Wölfflin baroque was a symptom of cultural decline rather than a blunt instrument of the religious institutions that employed its effects with the greatest profundity. He advanced a chronology and a historical problem distinct from the broader social and institutional circumstances in which architects and their buildings performed. The degeneration Wölfflin saw from Bramante’s Renaissance into Bernini’s baroque was only partially related to the coincidence of the most aggressive constructive phase of the Counter-Reformation and the formal and aesthetic developments of what would later be called the “high baroque”—the *stilo moderno*. Hence Michelangelo’s importance for Wölfflin’s baroque as an architect whose chronology alone disqualified him as an agent of the Trentine Council. The baroque does not exactly come from the church.

Those histories of baroque architecture that commence with Il Gesù bind the baroque to the Counter-Reformation, to which it lends expression, and to the contextual circumstances in which a more persuasive, powerful, and unitary architecture emerged within the classical tradition from the end of the sixteenth century. For example, in *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600–1750*, Rudolf Wittkower illustrated the first flowering of the baroque age with Giacomo della Porta’s façade of the Gesù, thereby positioning architecture as neither subservient nor immune to the forces of religion and rulership that lay beyond the internal debates regarding

architectural composition, ornament, and symbolism.⁵ Wölfflin’s ambitions were not entirely at odds with those advanced by Wittkower seven decades after *Renaissance und Barock*, as his own discussions therein of the Jesuit church demonstrate. His edifice of choice, however, is Carlo Maderno’s Santa Susanna, which poses the problem of a seventeenth-century aesthetic development that could be explained in the most modern terms. In Wölfflin’s interpretation, the baroque worked as a device to separate historical contingency from interior artistic forces. For later readers this would offer a natural complication for architecture as a worldly practice functioning between its own agendas and those imposed upon it.

In his later and widely read manual *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*—which is one century old this year—Wölfflin argued that the baroque not only described a kind of stylistic unit of architecture’s chronology but also constituted a natural stage in the cyclical patterns through which styles rise and fall.⁶ Writing in *Renaissance und Barock* more than a generation earlier, Wölfflin asserted that for its diagnostic value the baroque demonstrated how “ancient art ‘dies’ from symptoms analogous to those with which the Renaissance ended.”⁷ In the specific circumstances of the “post-Renaissance period,” as he put it, the alignment of baroque with a form of cultural decay does not explain how art shifts toward the baroque, which emerges as a destination and not simply as an accidental cul-de-sac of architectural history.⁸

As many scholars have observed over the past two decades, Wölfflin’s theorization of the architectural baroque in the *Grundbegriffe* relied on a conceptual framework of perception, empathy, and bodily experience that had recently become available to historians of art and architects.⁹ His themes of massiveness and movement, cultural affinity and spatiality, clearly drew from extradisciplinary developments in aesthetics and psychology. Le Corbusier’s assertion in *Vers une architecture* that architecture is “the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light” is evidence that such concepts as mass and movement and space had entered the mainstream of the language of architectural modernism.¹⁰ It was inconceivable to the modern mind that architects of the past could not appreciate space as such, a notion that rises from a century of historiography as a triumph of rhetoricity.

Wölfflin’s student Sigfried Giedion took this idea further, constructing monumental histories of architecture as the histories of form, space, and motion. His most famous book opens on a note that parallels the introductory remarks in Wölfflin’s *Renaissance und Barock*: “*Space, Time and Architecture*,” wrote Giedion in June 1940, “is intended for those who are alarmed by the present state of our culture and anxious to find a way out of the apparent chaos of its contradictory tendencies.”¹¹ Giedion extends Wölfflin’s conclusions to

posit a modern zeitgeist that was not only manifest in architecture, photography, painting, literature, engineering, and other cultural expressions of the new technological age but was also their unifying force.

In a section of his book titled “Our Architectural Inheritance,” Giedion offers a series of reflections on the functional organization of medieval and Renaissance cities, Renaissance planning at an urban and regional scale, the interaction of architecture and society, the organization of what he calls outer (urban) space, and a brief consideration of the lessons of Francesco Borromini, Guarino Guarini, and the baroque architecture of southern Germany, on which he had written his dissertation at the start of the previous decade. These lessons concern, above all, “the undulating wall” and the “flexible ground plan.” Giedion turns squarely to Borromini’s two arguably most idiosyncratic buildings, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane and Sant’Ivo alla Sapienza. He notes the return of the San Carlino façade “in the English ‘crescents’ of the late eighteenth century, and . . . in a somewhat altered way, in contemporary architecture.”¹² His classically modernist analysis of Borromini’s “invention”—the flexibility that transforms “the stone wall into an elastic material”—cuts past geometry, symbolism, the classical tradition, and the social and institutional histories of the church and the order it houses.¹³ His treatment of Sant’Ivo likewise invigorates the theme of spatialization. Once more bypassing the signification of other aspects of this emblem-rich church, he recalls only the Davidic star in his analysis, noting its role in generating the space of the interior.

Giedion is notorious for his instrumentalization of historical examples, and the first generation of “critical” historians who followed him were merciless in exposing his embrace of the modern teleology as a historiographic principle. He was hardly alone in exercising this attitude toward history, but he was most effective among his peers and predecessors in getting across the relationship between the baroque and the modern—an accomplishment that earned him the role of critical history’s punching bag in perpetuity. It is enough to note that he took recourse to values he regarded as isolated and articulated by Wölfflin, through the (high) baroque of Maderno, applied by Giedion to the later, Roman (high) baroque of Borromini, and then on to Guarini and Santini. Giedion’s reading bears different fruit for those architects who were eager to absorb his lessons. In this sense, *Space, Time and Architecture* documents the distillation of Wölfflin’s generation’s thinking on the baroque along with the buildings and unrealized projects that informed a later generation’s postwar work.

There will be nothing in this broad-strokes recollection of Wölfflin and Giedion that is unfamiliar to historians of either seventeenth- or twentieth-century architecture.¹⁴ Indeed, the proclivity for anachronism that Wölfflin and

Giedion display has tended to neutralize their voices in contemporary historiography of the baroque among its specialists—even if their work remains alive in writing by architects who continue to search out its lessons. Recent studies on the history of architectural historiography and the disciplinary consciousness fostered by Manfredo Tafuri and other advocates of a critical architectural history have better appreciated the mechanisms by which transhistorical values were isolated by earlier writers and propagated in the twentieth century. It is a commonplace to observe that the historiographic outlook on the present we find in Wölfflin and Giedion has been practiced by generations of historians whose writing and teaching have informed the contemporary professional and artistic landscape of the architect. Against this background, the twentieth-century history of architecture demonstrates that anachronism has been productive for those who conceive of, think about, and realize works of architecture. Moments of distorted comprehension when ideas and exemplary works of architecture enter contemporary professional consciousness have a past of their own. Their documentation and analysis now sit more firmly than ever before on the architectural historian’s home turf.

Tafuri described a long modern era characterized by a capacity for historicism that gathered historical episodes along the red thread he cast from the fifteenth to the twentieth century.¹⁵ Where past works of architecture lent ideational and technical models to practicing architects, ensuring a virtual exchange of ideas across time, the steady incursion of a discursive historiography into architectural culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries undermined the legitimacy of that centuries-old practice. Tafuri famously argued that the problem belonged not to architecture but to a history that had become confused with architecture’s objectives.¹⁶ The maturation of architectural history as a discipline was implicated in this confusion: the architectural historian defined a field shaped by a tension between objective knowledge and engagement.¹⁷ As Tafuri had it in *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* and in his lectures on Borromini, the historical baroque—a Roman baroque, with a European and trans-Atlantic diffusion—coincided with the first flowering of the new, modern sense of historicity and criticality.¹⁸ The baroque’s dissolution of the highly articulated and delineated compositions of the Renaissance appeared to predicate an era that could realize forms only intimidated by humanist classicism.

The baroque as a subject of history and historiography is a loaded case for considering the traffic between an adolescent historicist awareness, an increasingly rigorous approach to historiographic method and themes, and the cultivation of history’s lessons for architectural design and production. The baroque has been put to work to many ends, most recently as a rich subject in the history of architectural historiography.

This work suggests that the intellectual history of architectural culture—architecture in its broadest sense, including the history of architectural historians and their work—has a great deal to offer our understanding of history’s position in architecture. It serves not as a retreat into an indefensible disciplinary autonomy but as the prospect of turning architectural history on itself through scholarship that introduces new forms of politics within the field and that shapes new points of contact with the world beyond.

Notes

1. This essay revisits a paper first delivered 18 March 2010, to the seminar series “Anachronism in Intellectual History,” convened by Ryan Walter at the University of Queensland’s Centre for the History of European Discourses. More broadly, it draws on work undertaken alongside Maarten Delbeke and John Macarthur on an Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP0985834), the principal outcome of which is a collection of new essays: *The Baroque in Architectural Culture, 1880–1980* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2015).
2. Positioning academic studies of baroque architecture as a separate phenomenon, see Robert Harbison, *Reflections on Baroque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Walter Moser and Nicolas Goyer, eds., *Résurgences baroques: Les trajectoires d’un processus transculturel* (Brussels: La lettre volée, 2001); Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2004); Angela Ndalianis, *Neo-baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); Helen Hills, ed., *Rethinking the Baroque* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2011).
3. The cornerstones of this first generation of baroque architects include Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock: Eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien* (Munich: Theodor Ackerman, 1888), English ed., *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon (London: Fontana, 1964); August Schmarsow, *Barock und Rokoko: Das Malerische in der Architektur; Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1897); Alois Riegl, *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom* (Vienna: Anton Schroll, 1908), English ed., *The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome*, ed. and trans. Andrew Hopkins and Arnold Witte (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010); and the multi-volume, trans-European study by Cornelius Gurlitt, *Geschichte des Barockstils/es*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Ebner and Seubert, 1886–1889).
4. Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, 15.
5. Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600–1750* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958).
6. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1915), English ed., *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, trans. Jonathan Blower, ed. Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015).
7. Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 73–88.
9. Two influential sources for this recognition, which have supported a generation’s work on the theme, are Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, eds., *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1994); and Mark Jarzombek, *The Psychologizing of Modernity: Art, Architecture and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
10. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (Paris: Éditions Crès, 1923), English ed., *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (1927; repr., London: Architectural Press, 1952), 37.
11. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), vi.
12. *Ibid.*, 111.
13. *Ibid.*, 113.
14. The most recent authoritative contributions to the study of Wölfflin and Giedion are, respectively, Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845–1945): Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Gurlitt, Brinckmann, Sedlmayr* (Muttens, Switzerland: Schwabe, 2015); and Reto Geiser, “Giedion in Between: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Transatlantic Exchange, 1938–1968” (PhD diss., ETH Zurich, 2010).
15. Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell’architettura*, 4th ed. (orig. 1968; Bari: Laterza, 1976), English ed., *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia (London: Granada, 1980), esp. chap. 1, “Modern Architecture and the Eclipse of History.”
16. *Ibid.*, chap. 4, “Operative Criticism.”
17. This is Tafuri’s argument. See *ibid.*, chap. 6, “The Tasks of Criticism.”
18. *Ibid.*, 19–24. Tafuri pursued this observation in his course at Venice in the 1978–79 academic year titled “Francesco Borromini e la crisi dell’universo umanistico.” I have treated this theme at greater length in “*Francesco Borromini and the Crisis of the Humanist Universe*, or Manfredo Tafuri on the Baroque Origins of Modern Architecture,” *Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 3 (2010), 301–35.