Cultural History: Europeans, Americans, and the Meanings of Space

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The “spatial turn” of the 1970s–80s inspired innovative studies about built environments, which then shifted the meaning of culture far away from earlier notions of connoisseurship.1 Architectural historians still have much to learn from the initiatives of that era. Theorists asked how space affected social mores and political power.2 Intellectual historians explored various contexts that helped disseminate ideas.3 Social historians used maps and photographs to investigate nuances of life and historiography “from the bottom up.”4 Visual sources became significant documents.5 Cultural history in particular became a shared domain for experimentation as “historian-historians” probed all kinds of cultural production, high and low, individual and social.6 Carlo Ginzburg, for example, emphasized the cultural “filters” whereby people read texts and events in light of their own preoccupations, which often seem heretical to those in power.7 Interpretations were inevitably fragmentary, given the partial nature of archives and the paucity of material about ordinary people, so scholars concentrated on micro-histories, not grand, totalizing narratives. Following the lead of Walter Benjamin, they often focused on objects that might seem insignificant.8 History had become a puzzle, for which no one ever has all the pieces, much less a master image on the box. No Zeitgeist gives cohesion to an age. All this helped realign the nature of historical inquiry by embracing fragments, shards, incongruities, even insoluble mysteries.9

European scholars in diverse fields left their mark. Georges Duby, a medieval architectural historian who observed that history is often told in silences, helped open discussion about space and architecture.10 The social theorist Michel de Certeau underscored the creativity individuals bring to mundane “everyday” routines in the street and in their homes.11 Public space became a favorite leitmotif, drawing in part on brilliant analyses of popular festivals and carnivalesque inversions of power by the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin.12 Fiction, too, found its place, notably Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities (1972), with its celebration of fantasy and imaginaries in urban experience.13

Michel Foucault was probably evoked most often, especially after the phenomenal success of Discipline and Punish in 1977.14 His “spatial obsessions” led to vivid metaphors such as “field,” “territory,” “position,” “spatialization,” “enframe,” and “placement.”15 For almost a decade, beginning in 1972, he directed two research projects in which young architectural historians delved into the histories of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century équipements collectifs. (Foucault expanded the implications of the term, usually translated as “public facilities,” to include regulations and normative concepts for streets, hospitals, and housing.)16 François Béguin, one participant, described the challenge to conventional notions about architecture and historical research. “First one must shake off the spell of the house,” he recalled, then “de-mineralize it, deconstruct it.”17

Perhaps inevitably, Foucault’s multifaceted ideas were often misconstrued and distorted. He repeatedly denied the possibility of an inherently repressive (or liberatory) site—including the Panopticon. Space was operative and dynamic; places always exist in the plural and, despite the incessant operations of power, changes cannot be fully predicted. (In a personal conversation, he once played with English idioms: “Men usually know what they do; they even know why they do what they do. What they don’t know is what ‘what they do’ does.”)18) Foucault criticized architects’ grandiose belief in the power of representation, though he admired their ability to imagine transformations. Asserting both optimism and the specificity of cultural history, he acknowledged that buildings could have positive effects if “the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real power of people in the exercise of their freedom.”19 As in other fields, some scholars swept aside this nuanced conception for an abstract metaphysics of power, supposedly revealed, in this case, in an obscure 1967 lecture, “Of Other Spaces.” Foucault first told the audience of young French


architects that “contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely desanctified.” 29 He then spoke of “counter-sites”—some brothels and bathhouses, borderlands and colonies—where people might experiment with unorthodox kinds of behavior. Appropriating the medical term “heterotopia,” he described the phenomenon as a fleeting, unpredictable experience, often a fantasy, certainly not a radical alternative. A decade later, in 1977, a group of Italian architectural historians reformulated the talk. Power became universal and continuous, heterotopia a central element in Foucault’s thinking. 21 One group of architects used this concept to disparage any spatial intervention as politically meaningless; another claimed to design would-be heterotopias of otherness and opposition.

But is there a “true” interpretation of Foucault’s spatial discourse? After all, he rejected any idealization of the author. He encouraged others to adapt his models pragmatically, to see where and how they worked, not to replicate or enshrine them. The Italian misconstrual soon dominated the emerging realm of architecture theory, and as such it became a reality, albeit a distortion of the original source and persona. This dilemma will always be present in cultural history.

By comparison, Marxist scholarship was smoothly woven into the fabric of cultural history. Raymond Williams’s The Country and the City provided a brilliant class analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English villa landscapes. 22 Manfredo Tafuri used Marxism to dissect architectural innovators of that era and since. 23 David Harvey balanced critiques of spatial inequalities with a utopian vision of resistance and collective meaning in urban life. 24 It took more time for translations of Henri Lefebvre and his colleague Manuel Castells, who analyzed the role of space in repression, exclusion, and grassroots opposition. 25 American historians responded enthusiastically, emphasizing “the various ways humans find and explicate meaning . . . between written and other forms of cultural expression.” 26 David Rothman’s The Discovery of the Asylum (1971) presciently analyzed the floor plans, façades, and site locations of prisons, mental hospitals, and other American asylums of the early nineteenth century, much admired on both sides of the Atlantic. 27 Trained to use archives and attentive to cultural milieus, a few historians reframed architectural biographies. 28 Others celebrated popular public spaces. John Kasson’s Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century (1978) showed how amusement parks brought together men and women from various social classes as active participants in mass spectacles. 29 Women’s historians scrutinized the gender implications of architectural typologies. 30 In sum, historians imbricated architects with those who funded, produced, and used their designs.

As before, innovative historical work often looked abroad. Three exemplary books of 1980 affirm the crucial role of architecture in the interconnected realms of culture, politics, and economics by honing in on specific cities and nations. The authors were the economic historian Richard Goldthwaite on Renaissance Florence; the intellectual historian Carl Schorske on fin-de-siècle Vienna; and the architectural historian Joseph Rykwert on eighteenth-century Europe. 31

Of course, the allure of interdisciplinarity never expunged fundamental differences. 32 Art and architectural historians deal principally with the artist’s intentions, whereas historians typically proceed from influences to social consequences and changes. Many cultural historians embrace spatial analyses with great insight, but there is a tendency to downplay individual architects and typologies in favor of abstract “forces” that affect social and cultural life. 33 The question still remains: How do built environments affect individuals and societies? They don’t determine behavior, but they do have effects, sometimes quite potent. Buildings and spaces can enhance cultural values, encourage certain kinds of social behavior, preclude alternative possibilities—or, more accurately, make them quite difficult. Beliefs about race, class, and gender resound in residential settings. Nationalism, consumerism, and social inequalities are enacted in public places. Yet the processes and meanings are never fixed; shifting patterns exist, but not formulas. With these reflections in mind, can all historians seek greater proficiency in alternative ways of thinking, including those of related disciplines? Anyone working on built environments should learn the fundamental visual and verbal languages of architecture. Likewise, architectural historians can deepen their grasp of evidence and interpretation. For example, we cannot presume that architects read texts as closely as scholars must do, nor can we play so freely with our sources. Historians are trained to recognize such mimetic dilemmas, to strike a balance between rigor and imagination.

We all share a need for what Clifford Geertz calls a “continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure.” 34 Intellectuals keep “tacking” between material realities and abstract theories, from what they know to what they do not fully comprehend, and then back again in an endless, wondrous voyage. Along the way, each form of knowledge bestows blinders as well as skills and insights, ignoring purportedly extraneous factors to concentrate on specific concerns or to celebrate special qualities. Architecture is dynamic, creative, sometimes even obstinate, not simply a response to or reflection of abstract, anonymous forces. Yet the conceit of its autonomy brackets out vigorous con-
tension about meanings, uses, and new forms—where culture comes alive.

In conclusion, following the linguistic turn, architectural historians and others, too, might well reconsider discursive patterns. Jargon and “scare-quotes” imply a shared understanding of ambiguous referents, but evade the need for analysis. Verbs carry implications about agency and effect. Do environments prove, document, shape, or reflect? If these words seem dated and deterministic (which they should), what about linguistic expressions like reinforce, mediate, or articulate? Or socially provocative terms like segregate, market, evoke, display, and ignore? The critical methods of cultural history illuminate the intricate workings of architecture and urban space, allowing scholars to take in views from multiple perspectives.

Notes
1. Both the humanities and the social sciences became preoccupied by the “linguistic turn” and the “cultural turn” in the 1970s. This article focuses on cultural historians’ interest in space and architecture, with allusions to art history, cultural geography, cultural anthropology, culture studies, urban studies, and other disciplines. By the 1990s, Edward Soja, among others, could speak of a “significant trans-disciplinary spatial turn” (“Lessons in Spatial Justice,” Hunch 1 [1991], 98; my emphasis). Some of the material here draws from a 2005 conference paper, “The One and the Many: Cultural Histories and the American Built Environment,” available on the Web site of the Warren Center for the Study of American History, Harvard University.


