

Narrativity in Contemporary Architectural Historiography

Some possibilities for reading
Leo Gens' texts

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This article studies new possibilities for reading canonical texts of 20th century architecture, focusing on the question, how textual strategies are used to construct historical knowledge. Taking critical historiography as a frame, Leo Gens' texts are read in comparison with Western classics. Gens' undefined causality and fragmented narrative show how the local conception of modern architecture in Estonia was not historically as 'thick' during the Soviet era as in Western teleological histories of architecture.

Summary

The lack of belief in the post-Rankian objectifying history, which is based on a clear separation of form and content in writing, has been evident in the academic discipline of history for almost half a century. Since the early eighties, architectural theories have called into question the canonical modernist history of architecture, turning their attention to interdisciplinary locations and writing based on different methodologies. Although proclaiming inclusiveness, critical theories have paid less attention to textual strategies that are used in creating historical knowledge and constructing the canon; and that might lead to narrative paths that go beyond the obvious ideological content. In recent years, critical historiography has taken up the task of re-reading canonical texts of modern architecture in order to move forward from fossilised ideological critiques, and thereby rehabilitate the figure of the historian scarred by the blows of the critical theorist.

Both critical theory and critically informed historiography have focused on the body of canonical texts by Emil Kaufmann, Nikolaus Pevsner, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Siegfried Giedion, Bruno Zevi, Leonardo Benevolo, Reyner Banham and Manfredo Tafuri. Generally, texts are seen to operate on two main levels: a) narrative built on the succession of iconic architects and recognised movements (Chicago School, *Deutscher Werkbund*, Le Corbusier etc.) representing the relationship between modernity and history, and b) the essence of modernity in general and what architecture has to do with it. The role of history in the 'histories' of modern architecture has an ambiguous character: the anti-historicism

(or the manifested break with the past) of early 20th century avant-garde is transformed into historical justification of the Modern Movement in history books. The first generation of historians (Pevsner and Giedion) built up causal relationships, the starting point being in the present, not in the past: by projecting contemporary interests and aims into the past, the unstoppable progression of Western civilisation and culture, as well as the inevitability of modernism, was legitimised. The first apologists for the Modern Movement saw modernity as something monolithic, characterised by the uniqueness and exceptional quality of the era. While the early avant-garde was rather heterogeneous in its composition, as well as ideas, historians played a decisive role in defining early twentieth-century programmes and forms as a homogeneous phenomenon and implying that they contained continuities with the present.¹ After WWII, the understandings of modern architecture changed, along with the transformation of the idea of modernity. Colin Rowe's 'architecture of good intentions' refers to the unwillingness to use the term Modern Movement or Modernism; instead, he claims that the essence of the term was not clearly definable any more. Despite acknowledging the heterogeneous dimensions of modern architecture, the 'new' term still retains a connotation of a certain universal quality.²

Critical theory and the critique of narrative history

Since the 1980s, architectural research has searched for an expanded vision of modern architecture that can unite new themes, characters, (geographical) areas and, most importantly, a kind of writing of (architectural) history whose nature is determined by methodology rather than 'a temporal distance from its object of study'.³ By combining new (inter) disciplinary tools and theoretical accounts (Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism etc.), architectural history was supposed to be released from the constraints of totalising history and object-centred research. As a result, recent decades have witnessed the increased intellectualisation of architecture: what was at first a largely autodidactic interest in Bachelard and Heidegger became the topic of textbooks, anthologies and seminar papers, with the committed students having to be familiar with the likes of Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, Jameson, Gramsci, Derrida, Lacan et al. As a reaction, as Mark M. Jarzombek and Sylvia Lavin have pointed out, the exclusion of the problem of architectural form altogether limits the potential for architecture to operate in any capacity beyond that of a metaphor staged by philosophy. This, in turn, raises the question of whether critical theory is the only legitimate inquiry into the plural and disruptive character of cultural formations, including architecture. Eliminating architecture as an event, reducing it to theory or philosophy,

1 A. Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2008, p. 1.

2 C. Rowe, *The Architecture of Good Intentions: Towards a Possible Retrospect*. London: Academy Editions, 1994, p. 6.

3 I. Borden, J. Rendell, *From Chamber to Transformer: Epistemological Challenges and Tendencies in the Intersection of Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*. – *InterSections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*. Eds. I. Borden, J. Rendell. London, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 9.

turns the word 'architecture' into an irritating attachment to its own history.⁴

Critical historiography and narrative history

The connections between the new historiography and traditional architectural history are evident in the wish to preserve the 'autonomy' of a work of architecture, even if it concentrates on power relationships and ideologies. Sibel Bozdogan, a Turkish architectural historian, has written that if, for example, post-colonialist critique ignores the work as such, it takes the risk of reproducing precisely those power relationships to which it opposes itself. She claims that even architectural works that support existing power relationships can be aware and critical of their position, since the attitude in non-Western cultures, for instance, towards Western universal modernism is often polemical and not always a one-way giver-receiver relationship.⁵

Critical historiography (or theorised historiography) acknowledges the potentials of narrative discourse in the understanding of architectural theory as endlessly mutating. One of the settings for this understanding is the practice of writing, or being aware of it while reading a text. Referring to Frank Ankersmit, Mitchell Schwarz has written about historical meaning created by textual strategies; i.e. the meaning exists only

within the scope of the text. The historian cannot splice together causal relationships between individual statements into beginning, middle and end, since he or she has no knowledge of the actual sequence of events in the past. What is to account for historical understanding, if causality – which was the main explanatory tool of objective history writing – is termed absent? Ankersmit states that causation is replaced by intertextuality, which means that narrative substances do not refer to reality, but only to other narrative substances (found in other narratives). Hence 'First machine age' or 'Postmodernism in architecture' do not refer to any truths regarding the nature of reality; they only reflect the regularities in how we have actually decided to conceptualise reality.⁶ Thus, critical historiography does not aim at uncovering the Truth – instead it calls into question the imperative of closure;⁷ or, as Michel de Certeau has said: the historiographer only builds 'local' representations of the past or solves partial problems.

Leo Gens and his architectural history

Intertextuality enables us to experiment with reading Soviet texts on modern architecture in a way that differs from its generally accepted reading as being purely ideological: following the official Soviet canons of history while unofficially sustaining the national identity of Estonians. The underlying idea

4 M. Jarzombek, The Disciplinary Dislocations of (Architectural) History. – *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 1999, Vol. 58 (3), p. 491; S. Lavin, Theory into History, or, The Will to Anthology. – *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 1999, Vol. 58 (3), pp. 495–496.

5 S. Bozdogan, Architectural History in Professional Education: Reflections on Postcolonial Challenges to the Modern Survey. – *Journal of Architectural Education* 1999, Vol. 52 (4), pp. 207–216.

6 F. R. Ankersmit, Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language. (Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Library 7.) The Hague: Nijhoff, 1983, pp. 86, 160. Referred to in M. Schwarz, Gathered this Unruly Folk: The Textual Colligation of Historical Knowledge on Architecture. – *Journal of Architectural Education* 1991, Vol. 44 (3), p. 146.

7 M. Jarzombek, A Prolegomena to Critical Historiography. – *Journal of Architectural Education* 1999, Vol. 52 (4), p. 203.

here is neither to reconstruct a specific part or an image of the past nor give a historical account of Estonian post-war historiographical culture that strives for some generally understandable or accepted view. Instead, it is to experiment with the possibility of textual strategies that highlight the understanding of modernity in Estonian architectural history, namely in the texts written by Leo Gens.

Leo Gens (1922–2001) was an Estonian art historian and critic who stood out from the post-war cultural scene in terms of being unquestionably the most active writer on modern art and architecture for about forty years. His writings are not limited only to the issues of art and architecture themselves, but cover a wide sub-disciplinary range of visual, material and built culture. Besides modern and contemporary architecture, he was just as keen and passionate about the issues of sculpture, applied arts (textile, metalwork and ceramics) and heritage preservation, as he was about industrial and interior design, city planning and the encroaching commodity culture. Starting in the mid-1940s, Gens' bibliography includes hundreds of articles in weekly cultural and daily newspapers, professional magazines – on art as well as on architecture and construction – but also youth and Communist Party magazines and introductory articles to albums, catalogues, written both in Estonian and Russian. Lesser in quantity, but still representative, are his books: monographs on the Estonian sculptor Jaan Koort; on the architect Karl Burman; on national romanticism, which was the object of Gens' fascination for decades. He was also the author of the chapters on 20th century architecture

in *History of Estonian Architecture* (1965) and *History of Estonian Art* (1977).

Looking for the biases in Gens' texts, one cannot naturally ignore the main ideological discourse, which is the operational context for Estonian culture in Soviet reality, even though on a hidden or secondary level, where adjusting to the regime could be considered a survival strategy and, thus, a means of maintaining a connection with European cultural tradition. This was, of course, done partly under the banner of national rhetoric, which was acceptable to Soviet ideology. Gens' affection for *art nouveau* as a context for rising national architecture was, for instance, ideologically acceptable due to the fact that Estonia had been part of the Russian empire during the time when the national architectural culture (i.e. architecture commissioned and designed by Estonians) started to develop in the early years of the 20th century.

Representative of the nationalist content is Gens' history of architecture that was built during the independent Estonian Republic, before WWII, where the narrative is based on individual architects and is never critical. Critical notes and stance, as ideologically required, are revealed only through general accounts of social development, whereas the history of post-war architecture was built on a typology of buildings that made it possible to advance the progression of Soviet society.

One must admit that the obligatory Soviet rhetoric, and Gens' way of establishing analysis in close connection with the object being researched, discourages experimental readings of his texts. Krista Kodres has written about the 'freedom of theory' (meaning freedom from theory) in Estonian art historical tradition,

in which theorising was considered to be more of a task of 'intellectual historians'.⁸ Gens can be seen as belonging to this tradition, as his conclusions were drawn directly from the material he studied and general accounts of the period were based mainly on the buildings and the individuality of the architect.

Still, there are two obvious similarities between Gens' writings and 'Western' canonical texts: Gens saw architectural history as something universal, although for him, the central force behind architectural practice was not *Zeitgeist* but national identity. The other connecting link is the background of an art historian, which explains certain similarities in focusing on style, as in the case of Pevsner and Giedion, who, coming from the German cultural context, were clearly influenced by Wölfflin's school of art history.

Gens structured the narrative rigorously on an axis that began with social-economic conditions and urban development, followed by stylistic introduction and ending with the description of single buildings and architects. This kind of segmented narrative in which social conditions are separated from form and conclusions are based on stylistic features plays an important role in textual strategy, conveying either positive or negative criticism, or emphasising what is ideologically demanded when necessary. At the same time, the segmented narrative is the main reason why Gens' writing never exposes the clearly articulated causality found in Western texts. Although Gens

was interested in registering certain regularities in Estonian 20th century architecture – mostly the connection between national tradition and progressive architecture – the texts do not express the understanding of modernity as being a revolutionary or transformative condition or era. This might be a result of the understanding that Estonian inter-war architecture was not directly influenced by avant-garde practices, but was characterised by a slow and rather formal acceptance of the Modern Movement.

Gens' textual strategy, which is characterised by varying and undefined causality, highlights, in addition to the dominant ideological/national discourse, the problem of the insecurity in writing about modern architecture in the post-war years, and the historically 'thin' conception of the modern built environment at that time.

*Summary by author
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8 K. Kodres, *Filling The Gap: An Attempt to Analyse Sten Karling's Theoretical Views on Art.* – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture* 2008, Vol. 17 (3), p. 64.