ARCHITECTURE IN EFFECT:  
A Glance at Critical Historiography

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Abstract
Historiography marks a relatively unexplored research domain in architecture. Despite the obscure nature of this subject matter, architectural historiography equally illuminates a hidden pathway to the historical interaction of architecture with art or literature. Critical historiography adds another dimension to this emerging research topic that further encapsulates multiple levels of criticism. In recognition of a growing interest for historiography, it can be argued that the critical aspects of historiography may serve as crucial instruments for an enhanced understanding of architectural historiography. In this article, the realm of architectural historiography is investigated through a multidisciplinary perspective that revisits architectural criticism, critical historiography, modern architecture, phenomenology, and a number of aspects of architectural historiography in the Swedish Million Homes Program.

Keywords: architectural historiography; modern architecture; phenomenology.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ARCHITECTURE
Historiography can be interpreted as an interesting research topic closely interlinked with criticism. Vann (2012) summarizes historiography as:

“...the writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination.”

Words and images have commonly communicated history across centuries. A glance at modern architecture through a concept of movement spectacles further reveals that these means of communication indeed reflect various art forms. Hence, the contemporaneity of architecture as an advocate of movement and a picturesque development from historical still images to animation and cinema resonates with a vision that bridges historiography with architecture. MacArthur claims that in view of a modernistic perspective, some of the contemporary inventions are traceable to the origins of modernity (McArthur, 2006):

"While the revolution of the 'movies' over the photographic picture was a culture-wide event, architecture had something particular at stake: photography was invented about the same time as the archaeological concept of style and some of its first uses were in the documentation of and restoration of national monuments. The chemical and optical bases of cinema existed in earlier photography, just as much of Modernist architecture was implicit in the planning techniques and structural and servicing technology of the nineteenth century."
Despite the global impact of modernism and the modernistic approach to architecture that motivated a generation of architects, modernism also failed (Brolin, 1976; Newman, 1980). This failure has partially been blamed as a motive for the unpopularity of modern architecture in most countries (Lara, 2006). In the context of 1950s adoption of modernistic values by the middle class in Brazil, a generalized optimism, steady economic growth and relative stability were identified as contributing factors (Lara, 2006). There are however also disparities of various nature that may have contributed to the success of modernism.

Perhaps, a fruitful approach in this regard is to make a few stops along the historical axis and identify a number of milestones that have proven their importance in architectural history. Walter Benjamin and Heinrich Wölfflin both claimed that the perception of architecture begins in the body (MacArthur, 2007). Aloïs Riegl and Benjamin further asserted that the fundamental aspects of perception are historical.

Otero-Pailos provided an interesting historical overview about phenomenology from the 1960s until present time (2010). Postmodernism which marked a thirty-year period coincided with phenomenology’s rise and fall in architectural debates. Moreover, a notion that architectural phenomenology radically transformed architectural historiography was adopted by Otero-Pailos on the basis of changing approaches to historiography and the influences of phenomenology. In light of Otero-Pailos’ indication of changes in architectural historiography with regards to phenomenology, it can be claimed that Otero-Pailos in fact missed the most important period in phenomenology’s and architectural history’s influence on recent architecture by concluding his findings around 1980 (Livesey, 2011). Livesey (2011) further deduced that even though phenomenologists started their activities in the 1960s and onwards, the widespread adoption of phenomenology in North American schools of architecture mostly became apparent in 1980s and early 1990s.

Hitherto, it has already been established that architecture and historiography are interrelated through a wide range of art forms. The relation between architecture and the architect has also been analyzed through many different research articles. In an exemplary case Gohardani (2011) highlighted the relation between the architect and his/her surroundings in an article that conveyed a number of critical reflections with regards to the architectural design process. Another vantage point that convenes a more profound meaning about architecture, deals with the perception that theorists, architects, and critics commonly have turned to nature and natural metaphors in search of justification and inspiration. Consequently, an exploration about the impact of the organic metaphor in architectural practice is initiated. In consideration of the organic metaphor, Di Palma stated that (2006):

“The organic metaphor invokes not just nature, but more specifically in terms of its capacity to create and sustain life. In this, it intersects with those human dreams of refashioning the world into a better place, of recapturing a prelapsarian state of harmony and grace. Thus the organic metaphor also carries with it an ethical imperative, suggesting that architectural choices thus legitimized have a ‘natural’ – and therefore unquestionable – ‘rightness’ to them.”

Furthermore, Bergström (2008) made an observation that research studies related to architectural historiography are almost non-existent. However, one rather distinct fact that should be taken into account regarding this matter is that architectural history captures the interest of scholars from various disciplines. Arnold et al., (2006) declare that:

“Today architectural history is written mostly by the people who define themselves as architectural historians, but contributions to the field are not the exclusive right of the architectural historian. Many art historians, archaeologists and other academicians and scholars are in one way or another adding to the expanding architectural history scholarship. The
backgrounds of architectural historians may vary as well; they have PhD
degrees less in architectural history than art history, archaeology and
architecture or in programmes that focus on history and theory.”

It is a plausible possibility to envision that the generated research from the disparate research
disciplines ultimately has contributed to a broad brush of architectural historians that in turn have
painted the historical walls of architecture with various historical stances. The absence of a
smaller focused brush as a representative instrument for the critical aspects of historiography
could possibly explain the small number of research studies related to architectural historiography. A relatively ambiguous course of architectural historians and the late blooming
ideas for these establishments are also conveyed by Arnold et al., (2006):

“In North America, for instance although architectural has been taught as
part of liberal arts and humanities programmes and humanities
programmes and on and off at schools of architecture since the end of
the nineteenth century, the first advanced programmes on the subject
were instituted only in the 1960s. Also, the Society of Architectural
Historians, arguably the first society of architectural historians in the
world, was founded only in 1940 and continued to hold its meetings for
some time together with the College Art Association – the organization
of art historians.”

ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM

Arguably, one of the most renowned views about critical architecture has been communicated by
K. Michael Hays. Hays considered architecture as an instrument of culture and as an
autonomous form (Hays, 1984). Nonetheless, the vision of architecture as completed is
challenged by the fact that a critic or historian aims to restore an architectural object to its original
meaning. Thus, roots of misunderstandings may emerge due to the modifications observed in the
language, architecture and the global outlook between the interpreter and the time period the
architectural object was created. In view of architecture as an autonomous form, the creation of
form is accepted to be at a specific time and location, in spite of any constrains with regards to
the origin of the object. Hays argues that a conscious avoidance of historical or material fact also
provides the critics with an opportunity to engage in serious discussions about the architectural
object as distinctly different from other kinds of objects. In an excursion through a selection of
Mies van der Rohe’s projects, Hays observed a persistent rewriting in the architectural program
and interpreted this as the consistency of van der Rohe’s authorship. Hays further concluded that
(1984):

“Repetition thus demonstrates how architecture can resist, rather than
reflect, an external cultural reality. In this way authorship achieves a
resistant authority – ability to initiate or develop cultural knowledge
whose absolute authority is radically nil but whose contingent authority is
quite persuasive, if transitory, alternative to the dominant culture.
Authorship can resist the authority of culture, stand against the
generality of habit and the particularity of nostalgic memory, and still
have a very precise intention.”

Architectural critics undoubtedly contribute to architectural historiography as the definitions of
historiography also recognize the influences of critical aspects. Given these circumstances, an
understanding of the views shared by critics about architectural criticism is of paramount
importance. Hays states that both criticism and design are forms of knowledge and further
proposes that criticism marks a field of values. According to Hays (1984), it is further possible
to generate cultural knowledge by architecture.
THE SWEDISH MILLION HOMES PROGRAM AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

One suggested method to investigate architectural historiography for a particular setting is to consider the Swedish Million Homes Program. As partially stated earlier, two closely related research directions can be chosen for further insight into historiography. The first research direction can be summarized as an excursion in the realm of historiography which in itself provokes additional questions about the historical standing of architecture in art or literature. The second research direction insinuates a notion to weave in critical aspects in favor of generating cultural knowledge. Before either one of the mentioned research direction are pursued any further, a short historical background about the Million Homes Program is presented.

The Swedish Million Homes Program was initiated in 1965 with the main objective to build one million (hence the name) dwellings over a ten-year period (Hedman, 2008). When this program eventually ended in 1974, about one million dwellings had been built and this ambitious housing program had thus resulted in an increase in Sweden’s building stock of 650,000 new apartments and houses (Hedman, 2008; Borgegård and Kemeny, 2004). In summary, the Million Homes Program was able to achieve its goal quite efficiently. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of this program, many critical voices were raised regarding the aesthetic implementation of this housing program. Other strands of criticism that have encircled the Million Homes Program refer to monotone architectural designs, large-scale structures, and grey concrete suburbs that contributed to social segregation and high crime rates. In many ways it was not surprising that the Million Homes Program was initiated (Miljonprogrammet, 2006). The Swedish welfare model and the emerging need to address the housing shortage in urban areas were among the principal motivational factors for the completion of the Million Homes Program. Borgegård and Kemeny (2004) explain the high-rise housing for a low-density country such as Sweden by the following:

“The influence of the ‘functionalists’ steadily increased symbolised by the promotion of their ideas at the Stockholm Exhibition 1930. The Swedish welfare model is also part of the explanation for high-rise building. Since the 1930s, the dominant ideology has been that the welfare state should ‘take care’ of its citizens. This ideology supported large scale solutions, for the provision of schools, day care, communal facilities - and for housing. Such ideas gave rise to a planning philosophy based on certain population numbers, for example, the ‘neighbourhood unit’. The planning link to transportation should also be noted as the commitment to rapid public transport enabled the city centre to be connected to suburbs including high-rise buildings. A further explanation is the heavy demand for new housing, stimulated by relatively late urbanisation after the Second World War, which put pressure on housing demand in urban areas all over Sweden. Later on, in the 1960s and early 1970s, the demand was high in central and southern Sweden, especially in the industrial towns and cities with growing service sectors. During the Million Homes Program, a rational choice was made to construct prefabricated concrete multifamily blocks, with relatively uniform apartments.”

From a critical perspective, it can be argued that despite Sweden’s role as a leading European country in high-rise housing (Rådberg, 1991), the ambition of the Million Homes Program to predict neighborhood units by mixing and integrating different groups of households through the spatial mixing of tenures failed. One possible reason for this failure is that an environment to create the basis for such a setting was never realized in the first place. Following Di Palmas’s earlier discussions about architecture and the organic metaphor, one can communicate a standpoint that merely since certain architectural choices bear ‘rightness’, they do not necessarily contribute to a successful architectural practice. Quite contrary, unless the consequence of the
architectural choice on the organic metaphor is not taken into account, the organic portion is gravely neglected. In this case, the legitimacy to integrate different groups of households is unquestionable as one potential method to create a better environment. Yet if no stimulus actions are taken to ensure that the living conditions for the tenants are enhanced, then it is also unlikely that a better living standard is achieved.

Throughout the 1960s, it was rather common to display the building materials in their original colors. Thus, most buildings were rarely painted during the Swedish Million Homes Program era. Building facades only started to be painted in distinct colors such as orange, green and brown in the 1970s (Söderqvist, 1999). This created a rather dull impression of concrete building blocks that represented many of the dwellings in the Million Homes Program. In light of MacArthur’s arguments about the photographic picture and movies, an analogy can be drawn from this rather stagnant approach of the Million Homes Program era, which partially reflects an opposite trend to modernism.

From a phenomenological perspective, the dull concrete facades represented a space with only a limited amount of interaction with the surrounding environment. These limitations further impose constraints in terms of shape/texture/color occurrences within the designated space itself and created a cultural environment of their own. Unlike a more communicative space that could potentially be made of glass curtain walls, the majority of the housing units of the Million Homes Program era were never able to provide this advantage. Hays (1984) underlines an alternative architectural choice that would impact the considered facade spaces from a phenomenological vantage point:

“The glass curtain wall – alternately transparent, reflective, or refractive depending on light conditions and viewing positions – absorbs, mirrors, or distorts the images of city life.”

Perhaps one of the major flaws of the Swedish Million Homes Program was the centralistic view that large scale solutions were preferable and once implemented, individualistic measures did not have to be taken into account on behalf of the prosperity of the Million Homes Program dwellings. Historically, it was proven that the these types of measures in fact created segregated communities and that the envisioned ideals about the Million Homes Program could not be achieved with the type of collective measures that in some sense neglected the individuals in these communities. The essential part of the discussion concerning the Million Homes Program does not entirely write off this ambitious housing program as a major failure. On the contrary, it rather seeks to provide possible answers to its failure. In terms of architectural historiography, the major underlying motives for the Million Homes Program have already been established. The generated cultural knowledge in the Million Homes Program communities promoted areas that seemed decoupled from nature. Even though the ambition of the Million Homes Program communities was to find a harmony between the large scale structures and nature, this task was not easily achieved. The grey large scale structures were often aesthetical and featured repetitive design patterns that according to Hays’ earlier views indeed represented the resistance of architecture.

Upon further reflections about the Swedish Million Homes Program, it is legitimate to pose a question that seeks to summarize a number of highlighted parts. The particular question that comes into mind reads: can architectural choices be blamed for the failure of the Swedish Million Homes Program?

The answer to this question is yes. Undoubtedly, the Swedish Million Homes Program was not only an ambitious housing program, but rather a socio-economic wave that swept across Swedish shores and impacted the lives of generations of people. Hence, the Million Homes Program can not merely be regarded through an architectural lens, since such an approach would neglect to capture the multifaceted aspects of the housing program. Yet, the architectural choices clearly do influence the perception of the Million Homes Program dwellings. Without any
special efforts to particularly address the underlying decisions behind the architectural design concepts that eventually marked the Million Homes Program dwellings, a consistent finding with respect to the identified sources about the housing program is that most of these sources in some respect seek to provide a logical explanation about its failure. Even though the adopted communication methods of these sources provide the reader with an insight about this housing program, one can equally argue that a shift of positive attitude by the early writers about the Swedish Million Homes Program gradually turned to a negative impression about this housing program that still have lasted until present day. Despite a number of critical voices that echoed through the 1960s housing issues in Sweden, most political decisions about the Swedish Million Homes Program were made unanimously in favor of the housing program. The principal point to carry away from this discussion is a criticism of the written word about the Million Homes Program, as the majority of authors make their own interpretations about the tenants' impression of the program. In this respect, the true feelings and impressions of the people who have lived or continue to live in the Million Homes Program communities are ignored. It is rather surprising that most of the literature work about this housing program do not include any quotations by the tenants living in these communities. Such a measure would entitle a reader to form his/her own opinion about the Million Homes Program. Consequently, the considered sources about the Swedish Million Homes Program also include a tunnel vision by the authors. The tunnel walls of these visions have been made of the authors' perception of the living conditions in the Million Homes Program communities and the consequences this program has had for the tenants.

**SUMMARY**

In summary, it can be concluded that architectural historiography provides historians with efficient instruments to generate knowledge. With aims to serve the architectural historiography community, the dilemma in seeking to categorize different types of historians with respect to their various research disciplines should be abandoned in favor of the definition of historiography which in itself also includes critical aspects that bear fruit to knowledge. Moreover, it is recommended that architectural historiography is included in architectural research programs in a greater extent than before to ensure that a wider scholastic community engages in this convoluted research area. Architectural historiography is part of the human history on this planet and with a futuristic outlook of colonizing other planets in the future; this research area can be perceived as a reliable source of documentation of historical human activities.

**REFERENCES**


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