

Interview

Trading Zones and the Stickiness of Ideas

Interview with Sarah Williams Goldhagen

Footprint: In the year 2000, you described a sense of anxiety shared by many architects in relation to postmodern heterogeneity. After almost twenty years, do you believe that anxiety still persists? Has it evolved, changed, or perhaps been replaced by something else?

Sara Williams Goldhagen: It has probably diminished because the economy is better now than it was then, and because the hopes for a Marxist revolution have been more or less permanently extinguished. Twenty years ago, we were still dealing with a generation of intellectuals who harboured immense ambivalence about the capitalism. To subsequent generations (the ones now practicing most wholeheartedly), thought leaders like Koolhaas and Eisenman basically said ‘so, architects build for the people who make a lot of money. To make architecture, that’s what you have to do. Get over it.’

Twenty years ago style was really a salient question for architects, charged with all sorts of ideological messages and saturated with meanings. As a designer, one had to be very careful about what kinds of things one was communicating, and there was a sense of a culturally determined but also transparent relationship between the viewers and users of a building and the people who shaped it, mediated by the design of the object itself. But that broke down with the arrival of globalisation, which multiplied meaning-contexts many times over, and with the expanded influence of post-structuralism, in

which the apprehension of meaning was complexified to the point of irrelevance. I don’t see designers nowadays anxious about style, or even much about what messages they are communicating to their colleagues and peers through their design choices. The focus of discussion has completely shifted. Anxiety remains, for sure, but its focus is now far more concrete, and real, centring on globalisation, global warming and climate change, and on the consequent mandate to preserve and reinterpret local cultures.

FP: How would you see the role of the architectural historian in relation to this new reality? If the architectural historian, as you described it then, could clearly put their finger on these relations between styles, messages, power structures, how would you see historians performing in our much more ambiguous environment? What could be interesting foci for them?

SWG: There is a huge amount of work to be done in architectural history to uncover lineages of the body of thought I analyse in my most recent book, *Welcome to Your World: How the Built Environment Shapes Our Lives*. One superb example is Zeynep Çelik Alexander’s *Kinaesthetic Knowing*. So many other questions remain! For example, how much impact did the American philosopher and psychologist William James have on nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century American architects? Or John Dewey? These would be fascinating questions to answer, and really important ones.

As we are in the process of revising our understanding of what role architecture plays in human experience and human social life, and we have become clearer about how people actually experience buildings and spaces in the phenomenological sense, there is an opportunity to revisit modernism, especially its heterogeneity. Take some of the beautiful buildings by Jan Duiker or Brinkman and Van der Vlugt. Why do they still have the aesthetic power that they do? Given what we now know, how do those landmarks look and what can we learn from them?

And conversely, what is it that twentieth-century progressive architects were doing wrong? One obvious way that some architects went wrong was by privileging mass production so highly that their work steamrolled over any consideration of human phenomenological experience. How, then, is contemporary technology being used in ways that support or fail to support human experience? I can think of a few examples, particularly in the early mania for parametric design... but that's a different subject.

FP: You are still talking about the heroes of the modernist canon, Jan Duiker or Brinkman and Van der Vlugt, Walter Gropius.... What about rewriting the history of architecture in another way; one that does not focus on star architects from the Euro-American continents? What do you make of the more recent 'global histories' of architecture, or the more cross-cultural attempts?

SWG: These huge correctives are absolutely necessary. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the barrier separating the West from the rest of the world seemed so impervious that so-called non-western cultures and traditions just didn't seem very relevant. That's completely changed. Equally important are the critical studies on vernacular architecture, and the relationship of vernacular or indigenous architecture to high architecture. Look

at the most recent Aga Khan award for Bengali architect Saif Ul Haq's school just outside Dhaka in Bangladesh. Made from bamboo and floating for half of the year, the school constructs a kind of vernacular that works perfectly with climate change yet formally and experientially, is really innovative. Such a smart project comes only from an architect who learns from every step he takes as he walks around the city. And so, the kind of inter-penetration of various traditions and levels of culture is a critical question that resonates with the experiential concerns on which I am currently working.

FP: On these grounds, do you see the possibility of making a huge corrective to the architecture history canon as the endeavour of a single author or team of authors?

SWG: Survey books of 'world history' or 'global history' are written because they are useful for teaching an undergraduate class in which professors need to assign reading. I'll answer this question in a roundabout way. Recently I spent a lot of time in Africa. Colonial monuments throughout. For example, in Namibia, which is one of the least dense countries in the world, population-wise – and really, who goes to Namibia? – there is this little town, Swakopmund. Because Namibia was a German colony in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Swakopmund, sitting on the edge of the ocean in one of the world's biggest deserts, looks like a late nineteenth-century German village in the Black Forest. It's surreal. What makes *Blut und Boden* buildings in the suburbs of Heidelberg any more important than the buildings I saw in Swakopmund? Nothing.

Then if we recognise that Africa is not one place but fifty-four different countries with countless different kinds of geographies and topographies and tribal histories ... one couldn't even write a comprehensive history of African architecture, much less of global architecture. Even the notion

of a Latin-American architecture history is questionable, despite all the journals declaring otherwise that are written and published all over Latin America. One of the reasons I wrote the Coda to *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture* as I did was to acknowledge modern architectural history's limitations. Two generations of scholars had concentrated their studies on a very restricted group of people and an extremely circumscribed set of issues. I am not even sure I see the value of trying to write a global history of architecture today. Whatever you came up with wouldn't give anybody a very good sense of how architecture develops, much less of the salient issues.

More interesting would be to take a thematic approach. A thematic meta-history means getting away from the conventional art historical narrative of, 'at the end of the 1920s there was a stock market crash in the United States, which reverberated around the world. And so, this is what happened architecturally in the 1930s. And in Eastern Europe, this is what was going on at the same period.' I say: 'Forget this! Think thematically instead.'

Technology would be an obvious theme because it's easily definable but also extends far beyond its material base to encompass architect's visions and ideals of social life. Histories of technology exist, of course, but I know of no work on recent technological revolutions that approach it at a global scale and theorise the potential interactions of various technological innovations with political life, social space and civic space. Another obvious topic is climate change. Although it seems well-tilled ground by now, I'm not sure that it is completely the case when we think about the ways in which different areas have dealt with their climates and their resources and their indigenous materials to solve problems of social life and inhabitation and living. That would be a cool book I myself would want to write.

FP: If we don't want to assign a single global historical survey to students, what could be a good thematic approach to set up a series of courses, a good way to restructure the traditional survey course?

SWG: My super quick response is that I don't think we want to teach surveys anymore. I am not sure how a survey benefits students. The conventional model of education was based on frontal learning, the professor imparting knowledge to the student. Effectively it derived from a classical model whereby students were expected to inculcate a well-defined, restricted body of knowledge, and doing so gained them entry into the cultural elite.

That is not what educators are trying to do anymore, certainly not at the undergraduate level. What we are trying to do now is to give students the background and conceptual tools to think critically and analytically about the salient human, social, political issues of the day. One way to introduce students to architectural history could be a year-long thematic course based on, for example, 'phenomenological experience', dedicating a week at a time to the study of 'the visual system', the auditory system, and so on, as well as formal tropes such as 'texture', 'pattern', 'complexity', 'fractals', 'biophilia,' and so on. Now you are getting me excited!

FP: It is very exciting, indeed! It seems great to have different points of view converging around each of these topics. We started off this issue of *Footprint* with something similar in mind, based on Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone. Pratt defines contact zones as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical ways.' For her, contact zones produce friction as well as 'moments of wonder and revelation and mutual understanding and new wisdom.' We are curious about moments when different architecture cultures have come together to discuss a common theme or shared

design problem, and we are also curious about what happens to that theme or design problem after it is interpreted by all these different cultures.

SWG: The concept of contact zones brings to mind American historian of science Peter Galison's concept of 'trading zones', places and spaces in cultures where ideas, like goods, are exchanged despite differences in language and culture. I was there when Western architects started to go to China and it was a really fascinating trading zone, or contact zone; there was a sense of wonder and astonishment similar to that which Pratt describes. It is interesting to think how discussions about intercultural questions have changed. The world twenty years ago was a really disaggregated place. Not as disaggregated as it was in the seventeenth century, but I can tell you that the watershed shift between twenty years ago and now is remarkable. And there's a lot of issues to be thought through regarding how people view different cultures, now that different cultures are so much more proximate than they were before.

FP: Beyond larger geopolitical or global economic transformations, this trading seems to be boosted at the purely disciplinary level by events where architects meet, such as exhibitions, biennials, congresses, competitions. What role would you assign to such events in the development of architecture?

SWG: Just as the CIAM meetings used to be in the twentieth century, these meetings and exhibitions and so on are the glue that holds the profession together. But there are so many of them now, taking place all over the world, that in sum I think that they are actually much less important than they used to be – no single group or groups has near-hegemonic control over the discourse, as used to be the case.

FP: You have been mostly writing history, but as you say, now you have evolved from being a

historian to a critic and theoretician. We wonder if from your new perspective you could still appraise historiography as a form of theory?

SWG: In a way, almost any good historical and historiographical work ends up being a form of theory, because you almost can't help but posit a vision of society (or culture, or whatever) and how it operates. I will give you an example. I worked with Robin Middleton, a historian of eighteenth and nineteenth-century French and English architecture. His *Neoclassical and 19th Century Architecture* is, in part, a historiography of modernism, but underlying that was a much larger and more complex theoretical view regarding the so-called great chain of ideas. It is a historiography based on a theory of how culture evolved over time and the stickiness of ideas through generations.

FP: Staying with historiography, what do you think about the history of architecture competitions; the way it has been written so far, and the way it should be written now?

SWG: I am on the board of the Van Alen Institute in New York, which sponsors a lot of ideas competitions, which are effective in shaping discussion about a certain social problem, like resiliency, or a given development, like Detroit's waterfront. Competitions can be really critical in laying the groundwork for thinking about a project, as well as in creating public demand for the right ideas.

FP: Certainly, institutions do play a key role in shaping architecture discussions. However, there seems to be a paradigm shift in relation to how we understand architecture and assign priority to buildings, especially when discussions are no longer centred and defined by a few institutions, but are built among a multiplicity of actors from all around the world who are contributing elements to feed discourse. Some modalities of the architecture competition, like the virtual competitions sparked

by the burning of Notre Dame, insinuate new instances where this paradigm shift is visible. In the face of such shifts, can you still see some common denominator or common ground in contemporary architecture?

SWG: Yes, absolutely there is a common ground, but it isn't stylistically based. If you take the paradigm of 'human experience' as how architecture and the built environment should be organised, around what we know about the way humans perceive, learn, develop cognitively, and so on, then you begin to discuss formal questions like scale, surface articulation, spatial organisation, and use natural light in more helpful terms. Take natural light – that's one that people are all over, right? We know natural light is good for people: it improves mood, improves health, supports circadian rhythms. But how is an architect going to use natural light in Angola, where the light is so bright and hot that all people are doing is basically trying to get away from it and into the shade?

I definitely think that there is going to be, and to a certain extent there already is, the kind of shift in orientation that you just mentioned. Yet it is not going to be as easily identifiable as when modernism was (temporarily) superseded by postmodernism, because it is going to be based on the interrelations that can be established between human experience and the body, which change dramatically depending upon who you are, and where you are in the world.

Biography

Sarah Williams Goldhagen is a critic, theorist and historian of modern and contemporary architecture. She holds a PhD in the History of Art and Architecture from Columbia University; in addition to her *Louis Kahn's Situated Modernism* (Yale, 2001) and *Anxious Modernisms* (MIT, 2001), she authored several seminal articles retheorizing modernism and excavating the roots of Alvar Aalto's work in experimental psychology. In 2017 she published the highly regarded *Welcome to Your World: How the Built Environment Shapes Our Lives* (HarperCollins). For many years, Goldhagen was the *New Republic's* architecture critic, and taught for a decade at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. A sought-after speaker nationally and internationally, she writes, lectures, and consults on how architecture and landscapes, cities and streetscapes, infrastructure and public art – the built environment – shape human experience.

