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**BEYOND THE SPATIAL TURN: ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY AT THE
INTERSECTION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND BUILT FORM**

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ABSTRACT

In the past three decades, a growing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have turned their attention to the spaces of the built environment as a means to understand historical and social processes, thereby dramatically affecting our understanding of the latter. Edward Soja has defined the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences as “a response to a longstanding ontological and epistemological bias that privileged time over space in all the human sciences, including spatial disciplines like geography and architecture.”¹ Soja thus positions spatiality against temporality, or space against history. In turn, the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has led to a “social turn” in disciplines that study the built environment, particularly architectural history.

In this paper, I discuss the ways in which Michel Foucault’s and Henri Lefebvre’s “spatial turn” have enabled both scholars to overcome what they understand as a disciplinary crisis in regards to the subject matters of their studies. While Foucault attempts to resolve a crisis in the study of historical object of *events*, Lefebvre is concerned with the limits of *society* as a research object for the study of capitalism.

Positioned at the intersection of the study of built space and history, architectural history has long assumed a privileged position with access to study the objects of the built environment. Yet, if the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences was resulted from an attempt to resolve a disciplinary crisis concerning subject matters, does it imply that architectural history’s “social turn” also signifies a similar crisis in the study of architectural subject matter? How has the social science nature of contemporary research in the built environment affected the methodologies and the discipline of architectural history?

In the past three decades, a growing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have turned their attention to spaces of the built environment as a means to understand historical and social processes, thereby dramatically affecting our understanding of the latter.

Edward Soja has defined the “spatial turn” in the human sciences as “a response to a longstanding

ontological and epistemological bias that privileges time over space in all the human sciences, including spatial disciplines like geography and architecture.”² Soja thus positions spatiality and temporality (or space and history) as competing ontologies.

How then, can we understand the scholarly position of the discipline of architectural history? Positioned at the intersection of the study of built space and history, architectural history seems to have assumed a privileged position to develop what Soja defines as “a more creative and critically effective balancing of the spatial/geographical and the temporal/historical imaginations.”³ If so, how can we explain the distinct “*social turn*” in architectural history since the 1960s with increased focus on questions about class, power, postcolonialism as well as architectural history’s own canon rather than architectural forms and stylistic evolution?

My paper frames these questions by examining the study of building types, a site that conflates understandings of space and history.

I will address these questions by first approaching the intriguing question about “disciplinary turn”: Why step outside of one’s research field and expertise, and why not? Why “turn,” if you will? I propose examining this question using the work of the harbingers of the “spatial turn”: Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. Their perspectives on the “spatial turn” have often been discussed from the specter of space, focusing on their immense contribution to the ways in which architectural historians, geographers and planners conceive the subject matter of built space. This paper, however, focuses on the “spatial turn” from the perspectives of history and the social sciences, which have enabled Foucault and Lefebvre to overcome what each of them understands to be a crisis in their disciplines. By doing so, I ask whether the “social turn” in architectural history reflects a crisis in architecture as a discipline as well as an ongoing attempt to reform it.

THE OBJECT

Soja locates history's intellectual authority in its interpretive power. Architectural historian Arindam Dutta defines disciplinary authority as the authority to explain totality with a fragment, the object of research.⁴ The authority of any discipline, Dutta states, is therefore *dependant* on the discipline's object. Dutta uses the non-realization of the Geddes plan for Tel Aviv as a case study to stress such disciplinary dependency: With large parts of the Geddes plan unrealized by the Zionists and the proposal's papers burnt by Arab insurgents, *no object* remains from the original Geddes plan. How then, can this architectural non-realization be studied? Without an architectural object, can architectural historians even claim to be able to *study* this event? Returning to the question "why step outside one's field of research," I would like to suggest that the "spatial turn" in the social sciences was promulgated by the same problem identified by Dutta: the problem with the *object of research* leads to an inquiry without an object.

INQUIRIES WITHOUT AN OBJECT

Foucault has rejected history's paradigm of "chronology as causality" based on the *object of the event*. He has famously stated that the 19th century was an era "obsessed with history."⁵ This obsession meant that history's paradigm encompasses all fields of study. The most notable is biology, which has been transformed by Darwinian evolution theory. Foucault dismisses history's presumed aim "to discover a pattern or a rational sequence of events" and declares that "the traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled."⁶

Theories of history involve inquiring into the reasons for stability and change in society. These include, for example, material subsistence in Marx's theory and political association in

Aristotle's formulation on moral and spiritual conditions in most religions. Nezar AlSayyad has discussed the "tradition of endings" to history, as *theories* of history are often complemented by philosophies of history, interpreting all historical events as contributors to the full development of humanity, the "end of history."⁷ One example of these is Marxism's classless society.

Foucault has looked for a reform in historical thinking and another way to conceive of, and do, history. History is listed in the subtitles of many of his books. He did this by rejecting history's *object of the event* for the study of another object: space. But *why space?*

I suggest examining this question via building types. While 19th century architecture shows an overly obsession with history, it seems that this obsession refers to history *not as ontology* but as *form*. Historiographical studies of architecture understand historical periods as forms rather than evolutionary stages and assign meaning to proto-historical forms by ascribing them *to building types*. In this way, government buildings were designed in neo-Gothic style, private mansions in neo-Palladian style.

Yet, the urban setting of architecture always already challenges any attempt at conceiving a *chronological, evolutionary* perception of built space, as the former is a collage of buildings of different historical periods. 19th century built environment was thus produced as a result of a *conflation* of historical periods rather than a reflection of *evolutionary progression* in architecture. While within the museum the world is understood chronologically and evolutionarily, the museum itself, as a building type, participates in the making of historical collage of the city. By associating building types with proto-historical forms, architecture produced in the 19th century has attempted in a sense to reproduce the nature of urban development as oeuvre. Perhaps it is the only discipline that resists history's dominant ontology of progression in the 19th century.

In fact, it is in *modern architecture* that architecture is thought evolutionarily, as the former has defined itself as the end point of architectural history. This “end of history” formulation is made possible in tabula rasas like Brasilia or in clean slates like the Soviet Union. However, it remains painfully unresolved in historic cities such as Paris and Vienna, where the “modern” became just another time period that conflates with all others.

Interestingly, building types have been used by modern architectural historians such as Nicolas Pevsner to demonstrate their breaks from history.⁸ As new institutional building structures such as the railway station have no ancient parallels to invoke existing architectural styles, they would thus require the use of completely new, modern architectural forms and materials.

Foucault’s interest in building types is very different. In fact, he was not interested in the buildings per se. Rather, his interest lies in the vast disciplinary measures employed by the modern state. The institutional building type, as an object, has enabled him to zoom in specific sets of practices that were applied on certain “parts” of the subject – e.g. the body, the mind, one’s sexuality, one’s death.⁹ In this way, Foucault is able to confront and study the vast disciplinary-reality of society. The implications of Foucault’s work have stimulated rethinking of what is at stake about space: as modern institutions set out to work on the *conduct* of subjects -- on their hearts and minds -- those also brought their bodies with them, creating new architectural problems and transforming individuals, and “to provide a hold on their conduct...to make it possible to know them, to alter them.”¹⁰ Yet, this reform in architectural thinking is not Foucault’s main concern. Space is instrumental, rather than central, to his work.

THE OBJECT OF SOCIETY

Problems concerning the object of study are not exclusive to the discipline (and ontology) of history. Lefebvre's "spatial turn" stems from a similar frustration with the limit of society as a research object for the study of capitalism. "For Marx himself," he wrote, "industrialization contained its finality." Lefebvre did not see that industrial production implied the *urbanization of society*, and that the mastery of industrial potentials required specific knowledge concerning urbanization.¹¹ Marxist scholars such as Manuel Castells have insisted that class is a "strictly-social issue."¹² Lefebvre responded by arguing that this view excludes the ways in which the production of space shape "the reproduction of social relations of production, hence capitalism itself." Space is thus a *social product*,¹³ "a sort of reality of its own...distinct from, yet much like, commodities and money."¹⁴ The city is an *oeuvre* – a work of art in production in which all citizens participate, one that conflates social classes, and thus is a site of social negotiation and struggle. The city works on social class (as on other kinds of difference) in ways similar to the conflation of historical periods.

Lefebvre's study of social space has affected not only his analysis of capitalism but also Marxism's "political cause." Lefebvre's neo-Marxist turn lies on his uncompromising argument that *everybody* has the right to the city, including the bourgeoisie. He thus challenges Marxism's "end of history" idea of proletarian revolution and the eventual arrival of a classless society.

THE OBJECT OF SPACE

Soja's statement, which locates history's power in its interpretive ontology, implies that space does not have such overarching interpretive ability. Foucault and Lefebvre's rejection of the overarching "end of history" philosophy signifies that space is a "better" arena to study the world precisely because space has no such interpretive power. Yet, if space is such a great arena for

research, why do scholars dealing with space (for example, architectural historians and geographers) turn to social subject matter such as class, race and gender? Moreover, does not this turn to the social work to erode architecture's disciplinary integrity and authority?

DISTRESS

As modern architecture embraces the evolutionary search for the new (an idea still prevails today in both design and research), and while the urban setting of architecture conflates and disrupts this perception, architecture is clearly a discipline in distress. As observed by Dutta, “does not architectural discourse, in its attempts to gain control over the various meanings of architecture, as it holds “architecture” in the mirror to represent itself, always speak of *something else?*”¹⁵

Foucault defines distress as the state of not knowing oneself.¹⁶ One thus requires what Foucault calls an “indispensable other” towards one's formation as subject.¹⁷ I have tried to show that Foucault and Lefebvre have used architecture and urbanism as a means to reconstitute history and the social sciences as well as their disciplinary integrity. Space is *indispensable*, as history and the social sciences are in distress due to their lacking of an object of study. Can social sciences be seen as the “indispensable other” of architectural history?

We should remember that modern architecture (which rejects history) has already made a connection between architecture and society, viewing architecture as a means to shape society in the service of grand “end of history” ideologies, particularly socialism and nationalism. What then is new about the “social turn” in architectural research beginning in the 1960s (for which the Berkeley school is a pioneering example)? Lefebvre's rejection of Marxist “end of history”

ideology is helpful here. The use of architecture in the service of social engineering, to quote Pevsner, involves “creating new forms and materials for new societies” and reflects forms and materials as architecture’s subject matter and object of research. Yet, architectural history is aware of the warning sign: attempting to explain all phenomena vis-à-vis space (as 19th century scholars did vis-à-vis the event) will annul space as a subject matter and make hollow the disciplines that study it.

In conclusion, the “social turn” in the study of architecture has enabled architectural historians to *reject the exclusivity of the architectural object of form* and thus reform what is at stake about architecture as a subject matter and as a discipline. Like Foucault’s endeavor to reform the history of society, architectural history is still invested in the study of the formation of built space. Yet, by questioning forms as the locus of answers to these questions, the social turn led to a reform of the ways we understand what is at stake about architecture and what architecture ultimately *is*.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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