Marc J. Neveu: One premise of a discussion of the role of history for the contemporary practice of architecture is that the relationship between history and design should be activated. Implied in this premise is either a complete abandonment of history, or general dissatisfaction with approaches to history that focus on a canon that is considered as little more than a pattern book organized by typologies or styles. How would you characterize the relationship between history and praxis?

Alberto Pérez-Gómez: There is some real reason for the dissatisfaction that exists. It stems from a general misunderstanding of what history can provide for the future or practicing architect. The origin of this problem can itself be pinpointed historically. This is useful because it means that the situation we face has not always been the same and may indeed change.

Marc J. Neveu: What is at stake is much more about the appropriateness of our actions, which is probably much more important than the specific formal problems we usually identify as architects.

Saundra Weddle: Why do you think the 18th and 19th century mode of engaging the past has persisted? Does it have something to do with the way architects in particular use history? APG: From the beginning of the 19th century the relationship between the thoughts we have as architects and our actions has been construed instrumentally. This is something that was not always there. While
in technology, and there are usually more expeditious ways of dealing with these questions than historical narratives.

MJN: What do you think is the best mode of delivery so that these questions you’ve talked about can be asked, for example in architectural education?

APC: Well, the first thing is for the teacher to identify those questions for himself or herself. It is always very personal. Identifying those questions is crucial – much more than covering material or simply conveying information. One way to get at the questions is to filter our heritage through the professors’ fascinations, through the questions that really matter to us, so that the questions of our predecessors that resonate with our own questions and that make history relevant. Otherwise it is always history becomes truly and always a thing of the past. Methodologically, it is not a bad idea, for example, to structure lectures where you deal with historical material and connect it, ever force it into connections with present questions and open up the debate and try to understand how this historical background gives guidelines and sets precedents on how things are not as new as they seem to be. This is always the big problem. We think we have to reinvent the wheel and we don’t.

There are thematic connections but there are also questions that show how things are resonant and how one can learn from those historical examples. Demonstrating the “resonance” between Hans Schaarouw’s amazingly inventive Berlin Philharmonic Hall and a Greek amphitheatre in the mountains, for example, might be invaluable to a young student who believes in the unqualified merits of novelty.

I do believe, however, that there is something to be said for chronology, for knowing that Gothic comes after the Romanesque. As a student I remember getting lost if I didn’t have this basic information. It is a negotiation. The professors should find those resonances, even if we are not completely sure about the connections. Even merely opening the questions can be an excellent pedagogical tool.

SW: In your view, are there fundamental, non-negotiable principles of architectural history that anchor the discipline and distinguish it from others?

APC: Yes, I think there are, but this is a long lecture as well would merit a longer conversation. Architecture does offer something specific. It has something to do with us finding a place that is ordered, that speaks back to us, that allows us to dream, that orients us, as I often say, like a metaphorics that is made into material, that allows the inhabitant/participant to find his or her own place in the world in relation to an institutional framework, wherever we may be in time and space. It is important to remember, as Merleau-Ponty suggested and as has now been corroborated by subversive neuroscientists like Alva Noë, that “we are not our brains”, and our consciousness is literally enacted through our bodily actions in a given world. The natural and built environment matters immensely. There is something very basic that architecture does offer and has offered throughout history because the questions that architecture addresses are resonant with the Big Questions of Mankind. There are resonances with religion, with science, and particularly with philosophy. Architecture does address those questions, and it provides answers that are particular to specific times and places and that allow humanity to live well, let’s say, and pass on to others the savoir vivre, a kind of wisdom that we may profit from. It is always very personal. Identifying those questions that really matter to us, so that the questions of our predecessors that resonate with our own questions and that make history relevant. Otherwise it is always history becomes truly and always a thing of the past. Methodologically, it is not a bad idea, for example, to structure lectures where you deal with historical material and connect it, ever force it into connections with present questions and open up the debate and try to understand how this historical background gives guidelines and sets precedents on how things are not as new as they seem to be. This is always the big problem. We think we have to reinvent the wheel and we don’t.

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SW: You mentioned that architectural history has an obligation to provide a kind of framework or orientation that we can use to compare to our experience to understand it more fully. I wonder about the practice of the architectural historian. Do you think there are guiding principles that are non-negotiable for the historian?

APC: Of course, I believe some history is better than others. Histories are stories after all. Histories that try to be objective and factual can be useful, but I always miss the dimension of interpretation. I don’t know if I would call this “non-negotiable,” but my preference is to frame architectural history in terms of hermeneutics. A way of looking at history that comes from the philosophical tradition of the 20th century, particularly Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, who help the professional historian write a more helpful history. Why? Because in this kind of framework the issue is to foreground interpretations. Interpretation is basically how we get at truths. And interpretations mean that we value the questions.

We first find the questions that are important to each one of us and then we understand their importance in terms of their cultural significance. Other kinds of stories, particularly found in literary works, are very useful for this purpose, and have been particularly so since the early 19th century (Gadamer goes as far as saying that literature inherits the task of traditional

“THE QUESTIONS THAT ARCHITECTURE ADDRESSES ARE RESONANT WITH THE BIG QUESTIONS OF MANKIND.”
philosophy in the modern period. Then we look at the material and interpret it through these questions so that it can speak to us.

APG: For me, this is simply real architectural discourse. There may be images that matter in the present could stem. Things that matter in the present could stem.

What, in your opinion, has been gained by architectural historians appropriating from resources and methods of other disciplines. Believing in the evidence of your own experiences.

That is futile waste of time (even though I use many of these books because people do some very serious work and spend all of their lives working in archives and this is very, very useful.)Factual compilations and archival work may be useful, but in the end, for me, as an educator of architects, what matters must in architectural education and in our praxis is this interpretative framing of the historical material that connects in a dialogue with present questions.

APC: The way I see this problem, the issue is to preserve a rationality or objectivity of the historical narrative, and this always led to a suspicion about hermeneutics or foregrounding questions that forces the connections to the present.

For me, the way to deal with this problem is rather to disallow that there is a rationality at work in historical processes, or a dialectic at work in historical process, and to understand that in this mass of material, evidence and touching moments that we get from the past, there are connections that are self-evident for each of us, which we have to learn to cultivate and from which real questions that matter in the present could stem.

There is this a close connection between hermeneutics and phenomenology. We must learn to recognize the importance of what matters to each one of us, questioning "common sense" skepticism that always defers to the opinions or the objective facts of others. Believing in the evidence of your own experience. This, for me, is very crucial. It is also at odds with the homogenizing that happened in the aftermath of deconstruction, when historical narratives and valorization were taken down to the lowest common denominator. The fact is that certain artifacts move you and bring forward questions and connect in an a-historical way. We all have access to this. It is a question of exposure. This is part of what good architectural teachers should do for their students. It is important to understand that these moments of epiphanic matter, to cultivate them, and to valorize them. Then we can construct stories that are incredibly valuable. I don’t think that the past is valuable just because it is past. This connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics is very important.

APC: History is basically stories; otherwise maybe we are into some other forms of expression. Maybe some historians want to make documentaries, to use other media, it is an instrument of forgetting, and that is a dilemma before moving to Italy to read 19th century architectural fables. He has recently moved to the West Coast of the USA to teach architectural history.

APG: History is basically stories; otherwise maybe we are into some other forms of expression. Maybe some historians want to make documentaries, to use other media, it is an instrument of forgetting, and that is a dilemma before moving to Italy to read 19th century architectural fables. He has recently moved to the West Coast of the USA to teach architectural history. What is the role of history "happens". What is the role of history "happens". Whether we tell stories or write or read history, the dialectical unveiling that originates in speech has priority since it, where you makes present what is important here and now. The other forms of writing are very interesting, sophisticated, and crucial in a way. I am not claiming that we should get rid of books. What has priority is the oral, the word as spoken. Or alternativelyConversely, for the student of history must be prepared to receive the written word dialogically, not passively.

Saundra Weddle and Marc J. Neveu

Marc J. Neveu is an American who studied architecture in France. Ca nada before moving to Italy to read 19th century architectural fables. He has recently moved to the West Coast of the USA to teach architectural history and theory.

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