

Revisionist Histories and Their Limits. Seeking Alternative Representations of Architectural History

Original

Revisionist Histories and Their Limits. Seeking Alternative Representations of Architectural History / Rosso, Michela. - In: ABE JOURNAL. - ISSN 2275-6639. - ELETTRONICO. - 1:(2012).

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2525156 since: 2016-02-24T14:24:34Z

Publisher:

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Published

DOI:

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Référence électronique

Michela Rosso, « Revisionist Histories and Their Limits », *ABE Journal* [En ligne], 1 | 2012, mis en ligne le 02 février 2012, consulté le 02 février 2016. URL : <http://abe.revues.org/131> ; DOI : 10.4000/abe.131

Éditeur : Laboratoire InVisu CNRS/INHA (USR 3103)

<http://abe.revues.org>

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Document accessible en ligne sur :

<http://abe.revues.org/131>

Document généré automatiquement le 02 février 2016.

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- 1 A cursory overview of the recent literature in architectural history reveals a startling disparity between the increasing number of reprints of well-established reference books, only seldom updated, and the almost complete absence of courageous new attempts to rewrite the history of this discipline according to its latest and most innovative achievements. As a matter of fact, the flood of doctoral dissertations, architectural biographies, and hyperdetailed archeological analyses of building processes and critical projects, based on first-hand archival investigation, is never easily channeled into a comparable production of new publications addressing the layman and neophyte. The latter's rather conventional and conservative approach, the persistence of traditional periodizations, the recurrence of well-established names and theoretical frames of reference, confronted with the extreme sophistication and self-referentiality of more specialist works, could be interpreted as the result of a communication gap between two different types of knowledge, and two different cultural markets—*high* and *low*, elitist and mainstream—of architectural history.
- 2 At least three paths of research have gained unprecedented legitimacy as the subject matter of revisionist histories. They can be singled out from among the modern trajectories previously marginalized or left out by the canonical discourse. Although the revisionist wave has involved the historical writing of other periods as well, the scope of the following overview is limited to books and studies mainly concerned with the history of early modern and contemporary architecture (15th to 21st centuries).
- 3 A challenge to the Eurocentric and North American bias that has dominated the history of architecture since its inception has elicited works that extend their geographical reach well beyond the western world, including previously unexplored countries and regions.¹ Emergent countries, such as China, India, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa, have suddenly garnered unparalleled scholarly attention. Among these works, a special place is occupied by essays that challenge current interpretations of the development of modernist architecture in the Third World. They show how architectural and urban modernism, no longer considered as simply another instance of Western expansionist aspirations, acted as a potent vehicle of modernization, economic development, and technological transfer, actively contributing to the construction of these countries' national and cultural identities.²
- 4 A new demand for history coming from communities whose role has traditionally been excluded from the canonical discourse—women, ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged groups—all claiming a specific place in the history of architecture and urbanism, has recently prompted a number of works. This research has significantly improved the critical perspective on the history of the built environment. These works, however, cannot be fully understood when placed outside the context of specific multicultural societies, such as the North American one. Profound social inequalities and vigorous opposition movements have accentuated the public's awareness of ethnic differences and social discriminations, fertilizing this field of investigation in Europe and elsewhere.
- 5 New interest has been kindled in the so-called "other modernisms," aimed at challenging the pervasive and persistent myth of the avant-garde by stimulating the critical reassessment of figures conventionally excluded by the canonical textbooks because of their open opposition to the more orthodox and intransigent factions of modern architecture. A significant part of the architectural literature has therefore been rewritten and revised, especially in countries that were governed by totalitarian regimes. The controversial personalities of architects, technicians, and intellectuals whose works had been identified and sometimes confused with the political instances of these non-democratic governments became the focus of accurate and patient research, especially by younger generations of scholars.

- 6 But what is the real impact of these scholarly works on the general awareness of the history of architecture? How do the most recent reference and text books reflect the findings of these highly sophisticated studies? In most cases, popular writing on architecture seems impermeable to the world of academic research. Why is it so? Will these studies affect the consolidated narratives and official accounts of the architectural history of the 20th century? What relegates them to the world of academic elites, scientific journals, and consequent evaluation processes?
- 7 However, certain new critical approaches have introduced innovative perspectives, capable of stimulating the curiosity of a broader and less specialized audience. This is the case of some recent books.
- 8 The first one, written by the architectural historian Giorgio Pigafetta in 2007, advertises itself as an alternative version of the history of architecture between the 15th and 20th centuries.³ For the author, the history of architecture can be narrated as the history of the principle of imitation, a pervasive, immortal, timeless idea that, like a karstic river, finds its way out from time to time despite recurrent attempts to bury it. His *Storia dell'architettura moderna* is the history of how a code (the classical language of architecture) has continued to be adopted and interpreted by architects and builders over five centuries. This potentially fruitful historical material is then used by the author as a narrative pretext for his original account of the architectural history of the last five centuries. The result is a tableau dotted by permanent factors and continuities rather than innovations, ruptures, and avant-gardes, a history in which the conflicting categories of tradition and originality, modernism and anti-modernism, invention and imitation, constitute a substantial part of its rhetoric.
- 9 In Marco Biraghi's *Storia dell'architettura contemporanea*,⁴ the label "modernism" is peeled off, revealing a plurality of concepts that require a heterogeneous outlook, and implicitly acknowledging the acceptance of diverse and distant experiences within this broad historiographical category. It is significant that this account of the history of architecture from the origins of the contemporary age (around 1750) to 2008 concludes with the chapter *Nuovi riti, nuovi miti* ["New rites, new myths"] where the author offers these twelve keywords, mottoes or slogans: *Globalization, Architecture as a work of art, New Museums, Junk space, Signature buildings, Eco&Bio, Continuity, Near East, Lightness, Ove Arup, Star-chitect System, After Image*. In the trans-historical perspective yielded by this highly pluralistic vision, each one epitomizes a theme relevant to the contemporary age.
- 10 The episodic, fragmented nature of this narrative is taken to the extreme in volume one of *Architettura del Novecento*⁵ by Biraghi and Alberto Ferlenga. It is a collection of essays by 120 authors which together compose a multi-form portrait of the architecture of the 20th century, giving rise to a mosaic of 179 alphabetically arranged entries chosen by the editors, including such general terms, concepts, or keywords as *digital architecture, architectural books, materials, museum, landscape, monumentality, etc.*, along with a selection of architectural magazines, seminal books, academic and research institutions, architectural schools, public exhibitions, and prizes that have substantially influenced or even oriented the course of the architectural history of the last one hundred years. Trying to avoid both the excessive specialization and the encyclopedic aspirations that characterize two parallel, opposite, and supposedly obsolete trends of the literature in architectural history, the authors dare a radical reformulation of the narrative codes of this discipline, clearly demonstrating the tremendous difficulties implicit in such a monumental and ambitious enterprise.

Notes

1 See for example the two new volumes on Brazil and Turkey recently published in the series *Modern architectures in history* issued by Reaktion Books.

2 Duanfang Lu, *Third World Modernism: Architecture, Development and Identity*, London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

3 Giorgio Pigafetta, *Storia dell'architettura moderna. Imitazione e invenzione fra xv e xx secolo*, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007 (Nuova cultura ; 163).

4 Marco Biraghi, *Storia dell'architettura contemporanea. 1. 1750–1945*, Turin: Einaudi, 1998 (Piccola biblioteca Einaudi. Nuova Serie; 400) and Marco Biraghi, *Storia dell'architettura contemporanea. 2. 1945–2008*, Turin: Einaudi, 2008 (Piccola biblioteca Einaudi. Nuova serie; 401).

5 Marco Biraghi and Alberto Ferlenga (eds.), *Architettura del Novecento. Teorie, scuole, eventi*, Turin: Einaudi, 2012.

Pour citer cet article

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Entrées d'index

Index de mots-clés : historiographie, révisionisme, architecture contemporaine

Index by keyword : historiography, revisionism, contemporary architecture

Indice de palabras clave : historiografía, revisionismo, arquitectura contemporánea

Schlagwortindex : Historiografie, Revisionismus, Zeitgenössische Architektur

Parole chiave : storiografia, revisionismo, architettura contemporanea