

"I Am an Architectural Historian"

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Mark Jarzombek

“I Am an Architectural Historian”

59

A discussion about positions should be less about who we think we are than about how and what we have been made, for the simple reason that the outside world continually overdetermines our respective positions. Tenure, publishing, access to archives, and advanced research opportunities—not to mention any number of other things including writing for a journal called *Positions*—align us with certain realities long before we decide what position we want to take on this or that subject. To try to outline the complex interchange between subject and object is, however, not my purpose here. I would like to discuss the question of position from a more conceptual point of view by starting with the seemingly factual sentence “I am an architectural historian.” I could mean that I hold a teaching position in a field defined as “architectural history,” or that I received a certain type of training distinct from that called “art history” or “cultural history.” But this line of reasoning only manages to return the discussion to the standard crisis of *subject* position. I locate the crisis elsewhere.

Instead, I mean with that sentence to foreground the word *architectural*. What if, for example, we take a temple in India, a warehouse in Russia, a grocery store in the United States, a palace in Rome, the rebuilt Barcelona Pavilion, and the tourist sites of Karnak; these are all, obviously, things architectural, but we might want to differentiate between architecture and building, between architecture and vernacular, between architecture and monument, between architecture and preservation, between architecture and professional practice, and in the case of the work of Frank Gehry, between architecture and, as Hal Foster has explained, sculpture. But this is the wrong direction to take, for

Positions #0

in defining architecture in this way we are always defining it in relation to something else. What if it were true—as a point of logic—that all of these things are just as much architecture as not-architecture. This might seem like a pure contradiction, but I find it a productive one. Architecture is unique among the various art endeavors in that almost any building, structure, ritual center, bridge, etc., can be architecture and, simultaneously, a form of not-architecture. And if we include “the mound” of Adolf Loos, the woven carpet of Gottfried Semper, the tent of Le Corbusier, the primitive hut of Marc-Antoine Laugier, the seashell of Richard Neutra, we move ever farther into the *positive* realm of what architecture is not.

The problem that I am bringing forward is not resolved by going back to Greek etymologies. Indeed, that is another symptom of architecture’s ambiguous status as this dual entity architecture/not-architecture, a status that in its cumulativeness is nothing less than the result of architecture’s compounded modernities. In modern times—and I mean here the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—architecture, as I am describing it, came to be something far different from its earlier incarnations. Its status as an art was called into question within the study of aesthetics; its position as an arbiter of history was uncertain; its frequent inability to accommodate itself to advances in capitalism, technology, and materials added layers and layers of *not* to the word *architecture*—so that today it is time to admit that of all the arts, architecture is the most indeterminate.

The word *architectural*, instead of describing the word *history* in my original sentence—instead of bracketing and tightening its definition (as *art* does in the category of art history)—does just the opposite. It explodes history into a realm of ambiguity and uncertainty, into a place where it might be impossible, conceptually speaking, to hold a position without doing a disservice to the set of productive negativities subsumed by architecture. Thus the sentence “I am an architectural historian” puts me at a disadvantage, so it would initially seem, given that the nomination is not in fact definitive, or at least must remain open-ended. This is not the same as declaring that “Anything can be architecture.” What I am saying, instead, is that because architecture is *always* also not-architecture, when we operate as historians (and I am avoiding for the moment “as theorists”) we are being positioned within a modern condition that no amount of disciplinary correctness and scholarly depth, as much as these are to be valued, can ever erase. The problem is not to be repressed but needs to be, where possible, enhanced, and I can almost say, enjoyed.

Petit Larousse,
Paris, 1962



Siège des Nations unies à New York

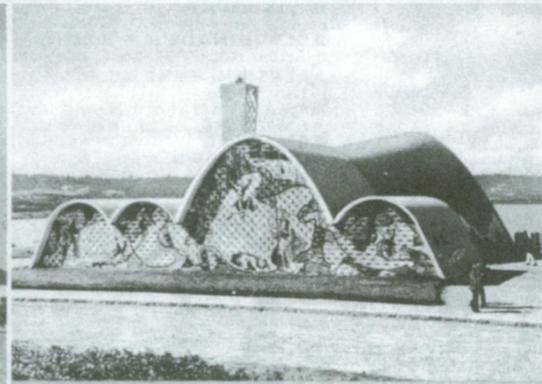
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