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Phenomenology and the Rise of the Architect-Historian

La phénoménologie et l'émergence de l'architecte comme historien

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Phenomenology and the Rise of the Architect-Historian

La phénoménologie et l'émergence de l'architecte comme historien

Jorge Otero-Pailos

- 1 The architectural reception of “phenomenology,” from the 1960s to the present, has been the source of countless academic debates over its vices and virtues, even as the motives, manner and outcome of this appropriation have escaped historical exegesis. The difficulties we face in interpreting the significance of “architectural phenomenology,” as it is customarily called to distinguish it from the philosophy, are not just a function of the fact that we are dealing with the recent past. The subject matter evades traditional categories of architectural historiography, which have been traditionally focused on either people (architects) or objects (buildings, environments, and so on). Architectural phenomenology is this and more. It is also an intellectual and social formation defined by its pursuit of unity and purity through architecture. Its ramifications are daunting: It exists inside and out of North Atlantic academies, in publications, academic genealogies, built projects, discursive practices, and loose networks. Beyond personal friendships, the agents that defend architectural phenomenology don’t even recognize themselves as a collective, frequently have opposed political sympathies, and often clash among themselves. Adding to the difficulty of capturing this formation historically is the fact that it occurred at a period of great change in the field of architecture. The thirty-year period we call Postmodernism coincides with phenomenology’s rise and fall in architectural discourse. Our understanding of the transformation of architecture’s cultural order, from Modernism to Postmodernism, cannot be complete without grasping the role that architectural phenomenology played in the process.
- 2 Before we can begin, we must sift through many misinterpretations and misunderstandings. The most important of these is the erroneous identification of architectural phenomenology with Modernism, which has been put forth by poststructuralist critics such as K. Michael Hays. Indeed, architectural phenomenology presented itself as a “return to the essence” of Modern architecture. But in fact this

was only an “apparent” return, since it was separated from the historical Modern movement by a negative reference to what the Modern movement had become in the 1960s. However reactionary it may seem today, the “essentialist” stance of architectural phenomenology was the way for a young generation of architects, who obtained their degrees in the late 1950s, to establish their difference with their immediate predecessors. To neophytes like Charles Moore, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Kenneth Frampton, Robert Venturi, Joseph Rykwert, Dalibor Vesley, Juhani Pallasmaa, and countless others, their elders had lead Modernism astray by making it subservient to the market economy, a phenomenon that they thought was particularly acute in America. They unleashed their hostility towards Paul Rudolph’s fetishistic articulation of structure, towards Gordon Bunshaft’s corporate functionalism, towards Eero Saarinen’s complicity with big business, and the like. This antagonism reveals the neo-avant-gardist pretensions of architectural phenomenology. To separate themselves from the consecrated avant-garde they struggled to gain a monopoly over the aura of self-determination required of any avant-garde positioning. The fact that the consecrated architects who dominated the field of production also dominated the market only played into the hand of architectural phenomenology.

- 3 To understand just how these newcomers established their avant-gardism we need to reconstruct the space of possible positions available to them in the late 1950s. Obviously, they studied architecture with the intention to become architects. Without smoothing over specific national differences, the teaching of architecture in North Atlantic societies during the 1950s was meant to instill on students the categories of action, conception, imagination, and perception of the architect they were meant to become. In other words, students were meant to acquire the disposition necessary to take up the position of architect. But what defined the position of architect back then? It was defined as the command of the field of architecture, a position that carried the standing of highest autonomy (self-directing freedom) and authority (power to command) to determine what is architecture (as opposed to mere building).
- 4 The difference between the position of architect and that of modern-architect is that the latter claimed to be the avant-garde of the former. The modern-architect field claimed the monopoly over the future, or what will be considered architecture tomorrow, for the avant-garde has no audience except the future. The position of modern-architect drew on the charismatic ideology of the Romantic genius-creator for its authority. This long tradition equates the work of the “best” architects with poetic vaticination, that is with the art of making prophetic designs and writings that intuitively grasp the coming nature of architecture. For those top geniuses the restricted field of Modern architecture reserved a position of central privilege, which guaranteed their authority over all other positions, and guaranteed that their utterances would be accepted as the oracle’s Truth. Architecture’s Modern movement was defined by the shared belief in the hegemony and desirability of the modern-architect position. It was, in other words, the *épistème* of Modern architecture.
- 5 The field of modern architecture established its avant-gardism with regards to the larger field of architecture by restricting its vocabulary, so as to call attention to its difference (or “purity” if you will), and by limiting the possibilities of access to aspiring architects. Thus, organizations like CIAM were formed to regulate membership to “by invitation only,” consecrate exemplary architects, and homogenize practices. A commonality among the agents that would make up architectural phenomenology was

their interest in the Modern movement, precisely for the avant-garde elitism associated with it. They were, in a very real sense, oriented towards the position of modern-architect through their education, if not outright molded for it. This for instance was the case of Norberg-Schulz, who Giedion mentored at the ETH, personally invited into CIAM as a junior member, and encouraged to found the CIAM-inspired PAGON group in Norway.

- 6 Thus, to understand the rise of architectural phenomenology, it is not enough to look at the history of ideas in isolation. The cultural order of modern architecture was the expression of its social space. The belief that the modern-architect, was indeed an autonomous agent, a genius-creator, conveyed the rules of the cultural order governing that social space, in which the power to speak for architecture was restricted to a few consecrated genius-creators, whose position was coveted, and therefore legitimated, by the rest.
- 7 This social space underwent important changes in the late 1950s, as did its homologous manifestation in the restricted field of modern architecture. As higher education was democratized and enlarged in America, and the European countries benefiting from the Marshall Plan chances for access to the restricted field of modern architecture increased dramatically in those societies. In the United States alone, NAAB-accredited Bachelors of Architecture programs nearly tripled between 1947 and 1973 (an increase from 26 to 65). This was the result of a comprehensive program of heavy government subsidies, initiated by President Eisenhower in 1955, at the dawn of the Cold War, to make university education more “efficient,” that is, to increase the intellectual production of university professors and to educate more students. A Federal Commission on the Experimental Study of the Utilization of the Staff in the Secondary School was established to fuel “productivity” in universities. It collaborated with state governments¹ and private institutions, such as the Ford Foundation, to produce integrated solutions for education, matching disciplinary curricula to specific building types for maximum teaching effectiveness.² Five years later, Architectural Forum reported that there was an “immediate need” to build an astronomical 132,400 classrooms. The young architects graduating in the 1960s found a job market flush with open positions. Eisenhower’s administration actively boosted construction activity to buttress national prosperity. The construction industry in 1959 amounted to 11.3 percent of the gross domestic product, a rise of 400 percent since 1929.³ In sum, the expansion in the number of active university professors, students, and practicing architects was concordant with an external change in the American economy and society, which supplied the new producers with socially homologous consumers.
- 8 As Jean-Louis Cohen has pointed out, the massification of architectural education in **Italy and** France was also absorbed by rising social demand for a different type of modern-architect, more “professional” than “unique.” This swing in demand, towards a more “technical” and less “artistic” modern-architect, resulted in modern architecture’s “banalization” (as Cohen calls it) or “routinization” (to us Max Weber’s terminology).⁴
- 9 The concordance between internal and external changes precipitated a major re-ordering of modern architecture’s cultural order. It took this change to give an advantage to competing definitions of the modern-architect, which had been in circulation, although relegated to a secondary plane, since the early twentieth century. For instance, the idea, espoused by the American Gropius, that the modern-architect

was a “team leader” of technocrats. The flood of newcomers to architecture, intent on reaping the economic benefits of their professional degrees, legitimated this new definition of the modern-architect by eagerly pursuing new ways to make practice yield more financial profits through new work organizations such as the corporation. Reinhold Martin has recently examined the set of ideas about networks and systems towards which these architects, whose main interest was the heteronomy of the market, gravitated.⁵

- 10 The success of technocratically disposed agents in reordering the definition the modern-architect happened faster in professional practice than in state universities, with the slowest adjustment, or most ardent resistance, happening at elite schools with pedagogies aimed at producing “leaders.” This struggle between universities with elite and mass student clienteles was most pronounced in countries where institutions had to compete for students, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. It produced famous rivalries such as that between Syracuse and Cornell. When Gropius oriented Harvard, the emblem of American class privilege, towards “teamwork,” he created a sense of crisis in the academy. Norberg-Schulz, who had gone to Harvard to study with Gropius, dropped out of his courses, protesting that the professor never attended his own classes, and that it was not the same to study under Gropius than under the “teamwork” of his assistants. Students at elite institutions, who were prepared for the position of genius-creator, and who denied themselves the immediate economic benefits of pursuing the position of commercial-architect in exchange for the long term rewards and prestige of becoming a modern-architect, were also disillusioned to find out that their investment had been devalued by the increase in sheer numbers of modern-architects.
- 11 By the late 1950s, some elite schools and journals were striking back to preserve their definition of the modern-architect as a leader, visionary, or poet vates. Jean Labatut led the charge at Princeton University, and, quite independently, Ernesto N. Rogers made his rallying cry heard through *Casabella Continuità*. These were the first calls for a “return to the sources” of the Modern movement. They are, in this sense, the precursors of architectural phenomenology. Labatut and Rogers both made their mark as modern-architects in the 1930s, and were heavily invested in the charismatic ideology of the genius-creator. Labatut lashed against Gropius’ “teamwork” idea as something to be “flushed down the toilet.” Rogers thrashed Reyner Banham for reducing Modernism to formalism, and failing to grasp its “true creative essence.” Labatut and Rogers were considered “teachers of teachers,” and indeed they successfully mentored a generation of educators that were to take important positions of power within the American and Italian academies, such as Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, Aldo Rossi, Vittorio Gregotti, and Giancarlo de Carlo. What began as a “return to the essence” of Modernism became the enabling element of a postmodern sensibility in their students, as the young generation gained consciousness of their difference with the “roots” their teachers were invoking, and therefore of the historicity of the Modern movement.
- 12 It is not insignificant that this first “return to sources” was launched from platforms that, as Cohen has pointed out, are the mechanisms of affirmation and constitution used traditionally by the avant-garde, namely the social sect, the school, and the press.⁶ Labatut and Rogers used these vehicles to establish their autonomy from the heteronomy of the business world, and thus from the competing definition of the

modern-architect as technocrat. Although they always insisted that they be regarded as modern-architects, they defined their avant-gardism and gained their cultural consecration through their positions as teachers and writers. Labatut and Rogers help us fill in the universe of possible positions available to those young architects vying for recognition as modern-architects, and eager to be set apart as the new avant-garde.

- 13 Indeed, at a moment when the modern-architect's professional practice was governed by the principle of "business as business," the position of "practitioner" appeared as the most in the field, and therefore the most deprived of the cultural capital reserved for autonomous geniuses. Labatut's and Rogers' students gravitated towards teaching and writing, but with a sort of schizophrenic intention to be recognized as great modern-architects by becoming professors and critics. This moment is of great significance to the history of modern architecture. When students trained to take up the position of architect uncannily and intuitively found that the only place where they could practice what they were educated for was in the university, it was a turning point in the cultural order of the architecture field. It was the hair-crack between the university and the profession that would become, twenty years later in the late 1970s, a monumental rift between theory and practice, between historians and architects locked in a the struggle for autonomy and authority over the field, which defined the postmodern period in architecture. It is not by coincidence that Labatut founded the first PhD in architecture at Princeton in 1949, and that by the early 1970s there was a boom in PhD programs for architects in History, Theory, and Criticism.
- 14 Norberg-Schulz, Moore, Venturi, Frampton et al. brought their dispositions as architects to the positions they took up as architecture professors, critics, and historians. Perhaps the most powerful among these dispositions was the idea that the architect had to act upon culture, change things. Yet, their university careers relegated them to the passive positions of "readers" of architecture culture. To compensate for their ambition to be "actors" in the field, they focused on the notion of "creative reading" as something equivalent to "creative design." Thus, their work began to focus on the theory and methods for analyzing architecture.
- 15 In 1950s architecture schools, the closest thing to a theory of visual analysis was taught in the history of architecture classes. Norberg-Schulz, inherited Wölfflin's lineage through Giedion, and quickly became interested in Gestalt psychology. His books took Wölfflin's technique of comparative visual analysis to new heights. Princeton was different, as Labatut was deeply opposed to "official history" as he called it. Labatut, through his intellectual exchanges with Jacques Maritain, the Catholic Thomist philosopher, developed the notion that history was learned in images resulting from poetic vaticination. This was the model that Moore learned, and why in 1956 he became interested in Bachelard's "poetic images."
- 16 The trouble was, of course, that historians did not welcome the incursion of architects in their field. The specialized architecture history journals from the 1950s and 1960s are records of a field dominated by antiquarians, who regarded the idea that writing history was a creative intervention in contemporary culture as heresy. Norberg-Schulz was isolated and driven out by the architecture historians of the Norwegian Academy in Rome. Frampton was attacked for being "light" on primary sources. Architecture historians called these architects "theorists" to emphasize the speculative and unscientific nature of their historiography.

- 17 Architectural phenomenology emerged out of this double bind of being demoted and pushed to the margin by the dominant definition of the modern-architect and the antiquarian architecture historian. These two factions held the monopoly of authority over the definition of architecture. The modern-architect legislated what could be considered architecture in the future, and the antiquarian established what it was in the past. Architectural phenomenology emerged as the collective struggle of a generation of neophytes to impose and legitimize the position of architect-historian within the field of architecture.
- 18 Having won independence from the modern-architect with the notion of “creative reading,” the architect-historian also had to win its autonomy from architecture history. It did so by marking positively what was stigmatized: a fuzzy historiography. The architect-historian broke free from historians and their discourse in the manner that architects and artists break free from their critics: by creating intrinsically polysemic works beyond all discourse, and developing an anti-intellectual discourse about architecture that declares the inadequacy of all discourse. In short, they sought to invest themselves with the charismatic ideology of the prophetic genius-creator.
- 19 Phenomenology was crucial in this quest towards a disciplinary autonomy figured as a radical individualism, for it presented architect-historians with confirmation of interpretation as a creative act comparable to design. Phenomenology was embraced but read with strategic superficiality, only to confirm the ultimate nullity of discourse and the primacy of creativity. It helped give philosophical credibility to the architectural *illusion* of authorship. What is more, it allowed architect-historians to draw a homology between their “return to the roots” of modern architecture, and the “return to things” of phenomenology. Architectural phenomenology provided the theoretical foundation for the belief that the autonomy achieved by becoming an architect-historian was avant-gardist.
- 20 The rise in power and authority of the architect-historian only underscored the extraordinary consecratory power of universities, and their capacity to reproduce themselves, warts and all. Most of the agents who became architect-historians were of petit-bourgeois origin, without the means to be disdainful of a university paycheck, but educated to aspire to be free from economic constraints. On a social plane, theirs is a history of triumph in the sense that, without the economic means of a Philip Johnson who could pursue a financially risky practice, they nonetheless gained equal or superior recognition and authority by taking intellectual risks. It is the social struggle to take those positions which embody the greatest authority in the game of architecture that defined architectural phenomenology. By bringing the dispositions of the architect into the position of historian, and vice-versa, gained the ability to, as Jean-François Lyotard put it, “either make a new move or change the rules of the game.”⁷
- 21 Architectural phenomenology did not change the rules. It developed a new possible move within the existing game, the position of architect-historian. The emphasis on experience helped establish “creative reading” as a condition for “creative producing.” This created an audience of consumers for the types of “formal analysis” books that became a typical genre of architectural phenomenology. This genre, in a self-consciously naive way, begun the process of the dismantling the object of architecture into codes. Norberg-Schulz’s *Intentions in Architecture* is the masterpiece which pushed

this genre beyond its naivety and into positivism, semiotics, and social science, thus inaugurating what we now call structuralism.

- 22 The best-seller status of books by architect-historians among architects attests to their legitimacy within the larger architecture field. Architect-historians succeeded in attaining a position of autonomy and authority over architecture with works that played images against texts to replace historiography with a mystifying effect—a technique that was perfected by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau in *S,M,L,XL*.
- 23 The success of the architect-historian's subversive strategy was based on their ability to overturn the hierarchy of the field without disturbing the principles on which the field is based. This stratagem allowed Norberg-Schulz, Frampton, Moore, and others to break the censorships and conventions established by the previous generation of Modernists regarding what an architect or a historian was "supposed to be," and to do so precisely in the name of the same underlying principles. This is the ruse of architectural phenomenology's "return to the sources," a strategy that as Pierre Bourdieu noted, is the basis for all heretical subversion and all aesthetic revolutions, because it enables the insurgents to turn against the establishment the arms which they use to justify their domination, in particular asceticism, daring, ardour, rigour and disinterestedness.
8
- 24 Architect-historians beat the dominant groups of modern-architects and antiquarian architecture historians at their own game by demanding that they respect the fundamental law of the field; a denial of any external constraint that might limit or undermine the originality of the genius-creator, such as the "capitalist economy," schooling, and the petit-bourgeois aversion to risk. Thus, architect-historians like Norberg-Schulz and Moore derided commercial-architects, undermined the conventions of academic scholarship, and held modern-architects to unattainable standards of uncompromising egomania. The stronger their demands for a return to the sources of modern architecture, the more desperately modern-architects, haunted by their exposed inadequacy, vied to be consecrated by architect-historians. Thus the modern-architect slowly yielded his authority to the architect-historian.
- 25 The "returns" to past styles, to the perceived roots of modernism in French revolutionary architecture or in vernacular styles, was never more frequent or desperate than during the period when the pursuit of unity, purity, authenticity, and originality was demanded of modern-architects by architect-historians. These buildings are the silent trace of the struggle between modern-architects and architect-historians. They are irreducible to the architect's or the builder's labor, for they were meant to engage and fulfill the expectations of the architect-historian's creative reading, who would in turn consecrate the building with their writings. Norberg-Schulz's paeon to the "originality" of Michael Graves, or Kenneth Frampton's advocacy of Mario Botta, prove that discourse is just a stage in the production of the work, and not mere accompaniment.
- 26 Architectural phenomenology gives us a magnified view into the structural changes that first unhinged the modern-architect *épistème* and gave the architect-historian a new advantage in the struggle for authority. A critical history of architectural phenomenology should help us recognize, and perhaps change, the social struggle reproduced in the reified opposition of practice versus theory, producers versus consumers, the masses versus the genius, convention versus exception, and autonomy versus heteronomy.

- 27 One thing keeping us from this critical historiography is that we know precious little about positions in architecture other than the modern-architect, and even less about the architect-historian. Part of the reason is that for the architect-historian's revolutionary move to work, agents had to manifest complete sincerity in the denial of their own interest in authority. This partially explains why the architect-historian had to feign naive disinterestedness in the history of his or her own struggle for legitimacy, and why writing the history of historians is considered heresy. It is not by accident that many architecture historians since the 1970s declared themselves "non-operative" in architecture, an apotropaic gesture meant to protect their privileged position of authority from scrutiny. The current lacuna is also a function of the historiographical methods used by architect-historians, which fail to grasp the position of the modern-architect "in play" against competing positions (such as those of past architect-historians) struggling to impose alternative definitions of the architect. The result is that current histories of the postmodern period create the illusion that the modern-architect *épistème* simply transformed itself, as though animated by some internal magic.
- 28 If a critical historiography can be provisionally sketched out, along Pierre Bourdieu's definition, as an attempt to "explore the limits of the theoretical box in which one is imprisoned . . . to provide the means for knowing what one is doing and for freeing oneself from the naïveté associated with the lack of consciousness of one's bounds,"⁹ then to analyze the history architectural phenomenology is also to recognize that we are not entirely free from its grasp. I write from the position of architect-historian that architectural phenomenology made available, even if I now endeavor to free the "job description" from the limits imposed on it, and from architectural phenomenology itself.

NOTES

1. One of the better known examples which served as the model for other state sponsored studies was William C. BARK et al., *Report of the San Francisco Curriculum Survey Committee*, San Francisco, 1960.
2. The reference for the integration of teaching and learning with particular school buildings was Dr. Lloyd Trump's 1959 report. The findings were presented at a symposium at the University of Michigan, sponsored by the Educational Facilities Laboratories (a branch of the Ford Foundation). A select group of the country's best "school architects" were paid \$1,000 each to develop typical designs based on Trump's model: Donald Barthelme, Charles W. Brubaker of Perkins and Will; William W. Caudill of Caudill, Rowlett & Scott; Charles R. Colbert of Colbert, Lowrey, Hess, Boudreaux; Phillip J. Daniel of Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall; John C. Harkness of the Architect's Collaborative; Samuel E. Homsey of Victorine & Samuel Homsey; John Mcleod of Mcleod & Ferrara; John Lyon Reid of Reid, Rockwell, Banwell & Tarics; and

- Eberle M. Smith. See “Three Ace Schools for the Trump Plan,” in *Architectural Forum*, n. 3, v. 112 (March 1960), pp. 118–128.
3. “Building’s Soaring Statistics,” in *Architectural Forum*, n. 2, v. 112 (February 1960), pp. 107–112.
4. Jean-Louis COHEN, *La Coupure entre architectes et intellectuels, ou les enseignements de l'italophilie*, Paris, L'Ecole d'architecture Paris-Villemin, 1984.
5. Reinhold MARTIN, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, MIT Press, 2003.
6. Jean-Louis COHEN, *La coupure entre architectes et intellectuels*.
7. Jean-François LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 52.
8. Pierre BOURDIEU, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 84.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
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