Resuscitating the Author: implications of Danto's philosophy for historians of trend-defying architecture

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ABSTRACT

The paper revisits the often-contested terrain of historiography that is reliant on meta-narratives with specific reference to the writings of philosopher Arthur C. Danto. Architectural historians often position their subjects according overarching views of history (commonly known as meta-narratives), an approach that seems incongruous to the study of architects who would defy historical trends in the pursuit of shocking or iconic works. The paper argues that historians of trend-defying architecture can simply index the facts (telling small, unconnected and potentially banal stories), or else follow the lead of an historian like Danto (who is also a philosopher of historiography), who has abandoned the poststructuralist catch-cry ‘the author is dead’ to pursue a sophisticated kind of indexing that seeks to penetrate the thoughts and words of artists and architects. His approach is a fitting response to an art world that, he argues, exhausted its meta-narratives. The paper discusses Danto’s texts in this light, while referring to a recent interview between Danto and the present author. The implications, for architectural historians, of his seminal work on the analytical philosophy of history.

RESUSCITATING THE AUTHOR

It is possible to imagine two distinct, if hypothetical, kinds of architectural historians: one who is especially sceptical of what architects have to say about their buildings, and another who is more wary of what their fellow historians might say if their histories ignore architects’ versions of events. For the sake of an argument, this paper will treat the two as distinct, if not mutually exclusive, types. The aim is consider the pros and cons of two ideologically antithetical ways of doing history, without losing sight of the fact that no real historian would ever be so fanatical as the hypothetical types in question.

Our first type of historian — the one who doesn’t trust architects — can, with reasonable accuracy, be called a poststructuralist. If an architect has something to say about a building they’ve designed, our hypothetical poststructuralist would consider the broader context, the discursive context, in which their words were uttered, possibly exposing the architect’s words as rhetoric. Our poststructuralist historian might argue that architects have a vested interest in casting their buildings in a certain light, making them notorious mythologisers, and one could look for no better proof of Roland Barthes’s claim regarding the death of the author, than to look at architects’ claims about their buildings. Having concluded that architects’ words are unreliable, our poststructuralist historian might scan the horizon for words that do matter, taking a greater interest in the words of their fellow historians. It follows that this poststructuralist historian would be inclined to give less regard to architects’ claims and instead read around the subject (be it a building or some other topic of architectural inquiry), becoming immersed in their peers’ overarching theories, or those of writers from related disciplines.

Such an approach might raise the ire of our other hypothetical historian, the one who is less sceptical of architects’ myths than he or she is sceptical of the meta-narratives used by their fellow historians to edit all of the past into something far more manageable, something we call history. The words “history” and “past” have very different meanings. The past is inconceivably large, where history only refers to events that warrant mentioning in historical texts. What makes certain events worthy of mention in those texts, are often the meta-narratives that are conceived by historians. After Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as scepticism of meta-narratives, this second type could be called the Postmodernist historian. But “poststructuralist” and “postmodernist” are loaded terms: in this paper, the terms Rhetoric-Wary and Narrative-Wary will be used, and readers will be trusted to limit their understandings of these terms to the parameters described here. Our Rhetoric-Wary historian, to recap, is especially wary of architects’ plays, while our Narrative-Wary historian is even more wary of the meta-narratives conceived by his or her peers in academia.

It is worth pausing to imagine the kinds of histories that might be written by a third type of historian, one who is both Rhetoric-Wary and Narrative-Wary. Unable to engage with their subjects either in terms of architects’ rhetoric, or historians’ meta-narratives, such an author might be confined to indexing copious facts and arranging them into
many little stories. The story of a client's instructions to their architect, how an architect saw another building then copied it, the story of a planning authority's acceptance of a scaled-down version, the story of an engineer's suggestion being taken on board — lots and lots of very detailed and potentially mundane stories. Clearly, rhetoric and meta-narratives provide avenues for more engaging histories than the ones we would be reading if both the Rhetoric-Wary and the Narrative-Wary had Orwellian strangleholds on architectural historiography.

Of the two polar extremes, the approach of our Rhetoric-Wary historian is perhaps most suited to analysing buildings that quite obviously belong to broad movements, but whose architects may deny allegiance to those movements. Our Rhetoric-Wary historian would be well placed to identify the broad historical patterns according to which Glenn Murcutt's houses, for example, can be positioned historically. Where our Narrative-Wary historian might be sceptical of Frampton's thesis concerning the gradual tempering of universal Modernism by architects in this region, perhaps calling his thesis a meta-narrative, our Rhetoric-Wary historian would have no trouble positioning the Marie Short House on a time line, with The Farmhouse House at one end, The Marie Short House in the middle, and some as-yet unseen, ultra-regional Australian house, some time in the future, the fact that Murcutt remains ambivalent about being labelled a Critical Regionalist wouldn't concern our Rhetoric-Wary historian, for two reasons, first, Murcutt has cause to lie (he is, after all, an architect), and second, the overarching historical framework successfully describes a recognisable historical pattern.

But how should we approach the topic of totally unpredictable buildings? According to Charles Jencks, a defining attribute of iconic buildings (or those that emulate what many have called the Bilbao Effect), is that such buildings could not have been predicted. According to Jencks' argument, the success of such buildings is largely tied to their deviation from the historical trajectories taken by other architects. Insofar as Jencks' definition of an iconic building is concerned, successful icons are those that nobody could have seen on the horizon. Their architects were sufficiently versed in discursive meta-narratives, that they could consciously defy them. They knew what others in their discipline, especially the historians, expected to see next, and thus knew how to jump in an unexpected direction.

Arguably, Jencks' own text highlights the futility of trying to position such works. Having defined iconic buildings as one-offs, Jencks sets about categorising them according to two broad streams: the "enigmatic signifiers" (buildings that look vaguely like things other than buildings), and the "cosmogenetic" buildings (buildings that illustrate contemporary cosmology). While it would be inaccurate to call Jencks Rhetoric-Wary, neither is he genuinely interested in what architects have to say. That he is more interested in his own time-lines and categories than architects' spils is betrayed by the interview transcripts featured in The Iconic Building, in which the final word usually goes to Jencks. Our Narrative-Wary historian might be horrified, asking why Jencks would seek to position works that are, by his own definition, salient one-offs.

In a promotional interview for The Iconic Building, Jencks referred to the philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto, who, Jencks claimed, believes that an icon can be anything at all. The inaccuracy of Jencks' reference can be ignored (Danto actually says that artworks can look like anything, and may sometimes be iconic); what matters here is that Danto is a leading theorist of postmodernist historiography whose own works of architectural history exemplify the Narrative-Wary approach, an approach that seems to suit the analysis of trend defining (or "iconic"), architecture.

In his 1965 text Analytical Philosophy of History, Danto argued that — with the possible exception of simple inductons — historical patterns are notoriously unreliable predictors of the future or tools for understanding the present, and that is because past events themselves gain or lose significance as history unfurls, casting historical patterns into a constant state of flux. In what would become a landmark critique of meta-narratives (and what he called substantive-historiography), Danto argued that historical patterns are constantly changing in the light of present events, rendering those patterns meaningless, preventing us from prophesying, and preventing our assumptions about the future from in turn influencing our interpretation of the past. To give his philosophy of history an historical context, it reacts against Hempel's argument regarding general laws in history, predates what was later termed microhistory, and is the antithesis of approaches that see historians as scientists. Interestingly, Danto regularly demonstrates his way of doing history in his own writings, in which he indexes events while resisting the temptation to tie events together using overarching stories.

This is not to say that his essays are like the work of the hypothetical rhetoric and narrative-wary historian mentioned earlier, the one who tells many small stories, in a banal fashion. While not engaging with overarching histories, Danto's essays do engage, head-on, with artists' and architects' thinking, their rhetoric and their myths. In an interview with the present author, Danto agrees that his essay writing is a sophisticated kind of indexing that seeks to penetrate the deepest philosophical questions embodied in works and what their creators have to say about them. Not surprisingly, the subjects of his essays are often works that were shocking when they first appeared, that defied whatever historical trends historians may have been espousing at the time. Louis Kahn, the subject of two essays by Danto, bucked historical trends by producing form-driven buildings at a time when historians were docu-
menting the triumph of function over form. And in an age dominated by empiricism, Kahn inferred that his buildings were based on Plato's Forms, or Ideas. Seeing Kahn's National Assembly in Bangladesh as a one-off, Danto says, "whoever could have thought of that? Who could have thought of a narrative that lead to that?"

Where our Rhetoric-Wary historian might try to find some sense in which Kahn's quasi-Platonic pronouncements are the product of post-war American discourses, Danto takes a completely different approach, treating Kahn's Platonic rhetoric as an earnest attempt, by the architect, to explain his work. For Danto, entertaining Kahn's outlandish inference that his buildings might have transcendent models in Plato's realm of ideal Forms is the first step towards a sophisticated kind of indexing of events, to flesh out the historical record with details and insights of a philosophical nature, concluding, in the case of Kahn, that his notion of "form" is "exactly like its Platonic and Pauline counterparts, invisible and eternal".

His approach, it should be noted, differs radically from that of most historians of Kahn's work. Vincent Scully, for example, sees Kahn in terms of a meta-narrative which imagines architects drawing more and more on historical precedents. Through Scully's eyes, Kahn becomes something of a transitional figure, between Futurism in the early nineteen hundreds, and historicist architecture in the decade following Kahn's death. Scully portrays Kahn as a pioneer historicist architect, who travelled to San Gimignano before building the brick towers of the Richards Medical Laboratories. Scully ignores Kahn's frequent claims that he wasn't influenced by anything he'd seen — Kahn stated that an architect must "start right at the beginning, as though he were Socrates when he's talking about [a building's planning strategy]", and that an architect "must never think in terms of what did they do [sic] before, it's pure death architecturally to think that way". Like our Rhetoric-Wary historian, Scully has no trouble dismissing such quotations. There is a fundamentalist zeal, and otherworldly certitude to Kahn's statements about his own work, that is both unfashionable, and, for scholars like Stanford Anderson, unpalatable. Thus a major thrust of Kahn's lectures and texts from around 1960 until his death in 1974, is scarcely mentioned by the most influential historians of his work.

A natural place for Narrative-Wary historiography is in the analysis of works that do not fit historical patterns. By example, Danto shows one way that historians can analyse eccentric works in a sophisticated manner, without falling into our Rhetoric-Wary historian's habitual mode of thinking, the mode that looks for broad historical patterns.

How can the objection of our Narrative-Wary historian — that architects lie — be allayed at this point? One way, is to ask if it matters that architects' claims about their works are sometimes lies, or post-rationalsations. Would it matter, for example, if Mel van der Rohe coined his famous aphorism "Less is more", before of after conceiving a minimalist architecture? Over the past years, the present author has asked groups of incoming First-Year architecture students to raise their hands if they like The Farnsworth House when shown an image of it. When the image has been shown with the caption "Less is more", most students have raised their hands, indicating that they do like the house. When the same image has been shown on its own, without the caption, far fewer students have raised their hands. This crude experiment, that any lecturer can emulate, suggests that architects' words provide frameworks for appreciating their work, that the work and the words are often interdependent. Works of architecture, it could be argued, do not exist aside from their architect's spires. Even blatant lies can be viewed as essential parts of the overall package that an architect delivers to their clients and the public at large.

It is not being argued that Rhetoric-Wariness is inferior to Narrative-Wariness, or that architects should be trusted over the promulgators of overarching narratives. There will always be occasions when historical meta-narratives will ring true, while architects' claims about their work remain vacuous and dull. What has been said is that salient works or thoughts, ones that defied the historical trends of their time, are good subjects for Narrative-Wary historiography. Rather than cite specific works of architecture (and potentially offend members of SAHANZ who might have attempted to position those works according to a meta-narrative), one way to identify the distinguishing characteristics of such buildings is to ask what characterises the works that Danto has chosen to write about. A sense for what kinds of artworks can be illuminated by rhetoric-probing analyses, will give us a sense for what kinds of buildings call for such analyses.

According to Danto, Andy Warhol was the epitome of a trend-defying artist, so much so that he annulled the art world's meta-narratives entirely. Asking how Pop Art could have defied every standing definition of art, yet somehow gain acceptance into art's cannon, Danto concludes that art — insofar as art is an historically defined term — ended in 1964. The fact that gallery walls could now display screen-prints of popular media images, destroyed definitions of art as an original and rarefied endeavour. Clearly, a new definition was required, that was broad enough to accommodate Pop Art. Danto argues that previous definitions of art were tied to what Georg Hegel had identified as the art world's meta-narrative. Serving as a kind of litmus test for authenticating art and artists, this overarching story had sustained the art world for over half a millennium, before reaching its own point of attainment, or exhaustion, in Abstract Expressionism.

According to Danto, that trajectory, or meta-narrative, had witnessed two ages: one of mimesis, spanning from the Renaissance until the twentieth-century, and; one of manifestos, covering the Modern period, in which artists considered how
one should paint. He goes on to argue that art, as previously defined, was abrogated by the philosophically penetrating works of so-called post-historical artists. Works such as Warhol's Brillo Boxes (1964) became fulcrums for philosophical inquiry into what art, beyond the confines of the art world's meta-narrative, might be. Danto's celebrated thesis is that art can be anything at all. Artists who exploit this freedom, by producing works that cannot be categorised or placed on a timeline, are candidates for a Danto-style analysis.

As well as defying trends, the subjects of Danto's essays have one other trait. Either in the works, or in the artists' words about them, there needs to be scope for philosophical exegesis. Hence Danto opts to write about Jasper Johns' flag-sized orthogonal painting of a flag (Flag, 1954-55) since it arouses questions associated with representational theory; is it a picture of a flag, or is it actually a flag? He chooses to write about Komar's and Melamid's America's Most Wanted (1994) — a rather hackneyed painting that the artists based on a market research company's phone poll of Americans' tastes in art — since it invites viewers (once they stop laughing), to reflect upon the notions of people's art, taste and authorship. Danto teases out the philosophical dimensions of Andy Warhol's eight hour motion picture of the Empire State Building (Empire, 1964), which was shot from a fixed camera: unlike a still photograph, the film captures stasis, by demonstrating that the building remained still for at least eight hours. Warhol is clearly Danto's favourite artist, who he admires for "asking where the distinction is to be sited between art, high or low, on the one side, and reality on the other [...] a question that had driven philosophy from Plato onward".

Viewed in terms of the Western philosophical tradition, it is not surprising that a philosopher turned art critic, should appreciate paintings and buildings for their potential to engage both artists and viewers in philosophical inquiry. Danto is an heir to his discipline's own narrative sense of itself. If we are to believe Albert Whitehead, all of Western philosophy can be generalised as a "series of footnotes to Plato". Arguably, no trained philosopher could approach the topic of art without being affected, in some measure, by Plato's famous ban on mimetic art. Should Plato have accepted any kind of art, it would only have been that which edifies its viewers' minds, rather than their eyes, and that is precisely the kind of art that fascinates Danto.

It can be seen that the subjects of Danto's Narrative-Wary analyses have two things in common: they were (arguably) produced without regard for historical trends, and; they contain scope for philosophical exegesis. Danto sees Kahn's works in those terms, as being worthy of indexing by historians for their sheer brilliance (not their place on historians' time-lines), and for their philosophical intrigue, in this case, the philosophising of the architect.

Of our two hypothetical types, our Narrative-Wary historian is the less able to enrich our understanding of buildings that do fit historical patterns, whose designers might even have been conscious of their place on historians' time-lines and deliberately set out to produce buildings that fulfilled predetermined notions of progress. And it is true that meta-narratives can become self-fulfilling prophecies, especially when architects seek directions for their own work in the pages of magazines that select and present works in terms of meta-narratives, and when educators steer their students into streams: the ESD stream, the complexivist stream, or the regionalist stream. Our shared stories about where architecture has come from and where it is heading clearly serve many interests, including historians'.

But truly trend-defying architecture, if we accept that it exists, is an altogether different topic. At this point, referring to an exemplar would be most illustrative. However, any building that might be mentioned will most likely have been positioned by historians who, understandably, would deny that the building in question wasn't part of some tradition or another. For the purposes of this paper, and this conference, we can best appreciate the Narrative-Wary historian's potential contribution, by imagining hypothetical works of architecture, works that are unequivocally trend-defying.

Readers are asked to imagine two hypothetical, trend-defying works. The first is a civic building whose architect — inspired by the Russian artists Komar and Melamid — will commission a market research company to survey Australians' tastes in architecture. That data will then be used as the basis of a replacement Sydney Opera House, using roughly the same layout, but realised in the supposed style of the people, whatever that may be.

The second is a freestanding single-family dwelling that will be designed by the late Frank Lloyd Wright, using a spiritualist medium with the ability to speak with Wright's ghost. An architectural assistant will act as a scribe, recasting plans until Wright, speaking through the medium, confirms the design to be his own.

If The People's Opera House and Wright's Posthumous House were built, many in the discipline would claim that such buildings are not architecture at all, even if a registered (living) architect did sign the construction drawings. And, insofar as the word architecture implies a body of building-related concerns, with historic roots, that are being reinterpreted and advanced over time, it is true that neither building is very architectural. Hence our Rhetoric-Wary historian — the one who is interested in tracking historical developments and patterns, and weaving meta-narratives, but who is not interested in authors' rat-bag claims about people-power or speaking to ghosts — might have trouble writing about such buildings (unless, of course, they could find some tradition of ratbaggery by which to position them). Meanwhile, our Narrative-Wary historian, who wishes to index such
works (rather than posit them), but index them in a sophisticated manner by penetrating the designer’s rhetoric and exploring the deeper philosophical issues that are raised by such works, could reveal in these works, as Danto reveals in his indexation of Warhol’s works or Komar’s and Melamid’s.

In conclusion, this paper should not be viewed as an attack on architectural historians with a healthy degree of scepticism towards architects’ rhetoric, or who look for overarching historical trends — the problematic nature of that enterprise has been addressed by others. Furthermore, meta-narratives, even grandiose and prophetic ones of the kinds some post-modern thinkers deride, can engender a sense of interest in architectural history.

7 A simple proof of this is that the 1939 edition of The Statesman’s Yearbook does not record the birth of Lee Harvey Oswald, and neither does it record the birth date of a presently insignificant 66 year old, who may, in the future find a cure for cancer.
11 Interview, Steven Fleming with Arthur Danto, New York, April 2006. At the time of writing, discussions are in process with the editors of The Journal of The Society of Architectural Historians (JSAH) regarding the possible publication of an edited transcript.

Rather, this paper offers a framework for appreciating and defending the work of historians who do engage with architect’s rhetoric, who would see an architect’s building and their words as two inseparable parts of the one package. Such historians, who may often be Narrative-Wary, can be thought of as indexing works, recording the small stories and big thoughts that accompanied them. Should the architectural landscape begin to include more trend-defying and philosophically driven works (of the kind that changed the art world in the nineteen-sixties), then — at the risk of prophesying — the Narrative-Wary might increase in relevance and number.

13 Interview, Steven Fleming with Arthur Danto, New York, April 2006.
18 “The Scope of Architecture at The Cooper Union Hall, 1-20-60”,


