

The practice of history: the Smithsons, Colin St John Wilson, and the writing of architectural history

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Introduction

In 1967 John Summerson noted ‘There was a time, within living memory, when all, or nearly all, architectural history in England was written by architects; and not only architects but by the biggest and best architects...But somewhere about 1934 the game came to an end’.¹ This reflection was based on the arrival of the Fritz Saxl and the Warburg Library in 1933, shortly followed by Rudolph Wittkower and Nikolaus Pevsner in 1934, and their collective effect on the study of history in Britain. This is well-trodden ground.² Somewhat counter to Summerson, this essay proposes to analyse the architectural history written by practicing architects following the arrival of *kunstgeschichte* in Britain.

The distinction between practicing architects and the ‘architecturally trained’ is an important one. First, the study of history written by architects is an underexplored domain. Various studies focus on the lack of history written by architects or the influence on them by historians rather than directly examine the scholarship produced. David Watkin’s *The Rise of Architectural History* proposed applying E.H. Carr’s famous advice – ‘Before you study the history, study the historian’ – to the analysis of architectural history on account of its origin from practising architects.³ However, Watkin failed to discuss any history written by architects in his discussion of twentieth-century architectural historiography.⁴ Second, the relationship between contemporary history and the actions of architectural practice has consequential effects on all forms of architectural culture including practice and historical leanings. Since the Second World War this has oscillated from the supposed total rejection of historical styles to the *imitatio* of the

¹ John Summerson, ‘Nikolaus Pevsner 1967 Gold Medallist’, *RIBA Journal*, August 1967, 316.

² Neil Jackson, ‘Where Now the Architect’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6:13, 2003, 207-217. Neil Jackson, ‘John Summerson and the view from the outside’, in Frank Salmon, ed., *Summerson and Hitchcock, Centenary Essays on Architectural Historiography*, London: Yale University Press, 2006, 263-280. Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008.

³ David Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History*, London: The Architectural Press, 1980, ix, quotes: Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History*, London: Macmillan, 1962, 34.

⁴ David Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History*, 183-190.

late 1970s and 1980s where architectural styles were plundered at will in the design of contemporary buildings (often on the authority of 'history').

Following Michael Baxandall's analysis of art history, the use of language in architectural history to describe and explain buildings is not unmediated: it is a constructed, interpretive description.⁵ For the architect-historian, descriptive language is just one method of communication as, in comparison to other disciplines, few historians of painting or sculpture are directly involved in the production of new objects of study in the same way as the architect-historian. But how is this history then related to contemporary architecture? Or rather to rephrase Peter Reyner Banham's remarks in 'The New Brutalism', what has been the influence of architect-historians on the history of architecture?⁶

Alison and Peter Smithson

In 1950, Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson won the open competition for Hunstanton School in Norfolk, which resulted in a landmark building for the energy and ideas of post-war British architecture. Following this the couple built twelve buildings of various uses and sizes, participated in several exhibitions, and taught in several schools of architecture in the United Kingdom and Europe. Alongside this output of buildings, exhibitions, and drawings was a large quantity of writing. Charles Rattray, in his study of the architectural profession's obsession with the Smithsons, estimated that the couple wrote over a million words, which he attributed to the lack of design work in the practice over their career.⁷ Two architectural histories written by the Smithsons will be examined. The more theoretical and polemic writing such as the *Team Ten Primer*,⁸ *Urban Structuring*,⁹ and *Ordinariness and Light*¹⁰ will not be assessed. The reason for their exclusion is simple: those works have been examined by the secondary literature in depth, whereas the historical writings have not.¹¹

⁵ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 11.

⁶ Peter Reyner Banham, 'The New Brutalism', *Architectural Review* 118:708 December 1955, 355-361.

⁷ Charles Rattray, 'What is it about the Smithsons?', in Paul Davies and Torsten Schmiedeknecht, eds, *The Architect's Guide to Fame*, Oxford; Burlington, MA: Elsevier/Architectural Press, 2005, 10.

⁸ Alison Smithson et al, 'Team 10 Primer', *Architectural Design* 32:12, December 1962, 559-602.

⁹ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *Urban structuring: Studies of Allison & Peter Smithson*, London: Studio Vista, 1967.

¹⁰ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light; Urban Theories 1952-1962 and their Application in a Building Project 1963-1970*, London, Faber and Faber, 1970.

¹¹ Pamela Johnston, Rosa Ainley, and Clare Bartlett, eds, *Architecture is not made with the Brain: The Labour of Alison and Peter Smithson*, London, Architectural Association, 2005. Max Risselada, ed., *Alison and Peter Smithson A Critical Anthology*, Barcelona: Poligrafa, 2011.

The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture was first published within *Architectural Design* in December 1965 before republication in 1981.¹² The study has clear chronological boundaries from 1915 to 1929. Allied to these boundaries is a clear sense of purpose and methodology: 'This Heroic Period of Modern Architecture is the rock on which we stand. Through it we feel the continuity of history and the necessity of achieving our own idea of order.'¹³ The Smithsons refer to the history as a 'work-document' with a series of 'documents...arranged chronologically, recording without comment or explanation the flow of ideas from mind to mind as realized in buildings and projects'.¹⁴ These documents are formed from a variety of sources collaged together on spreads. No distinction is made between the type of material shown nor the geographical range. For instance pages six to seven cover the period 1910 – 1915, which is dominated by photographs of the Fagus Factory building in Lower Saxony, Germany (1911 – 1913) by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer (although the Smithsons do not attribute the building to Meyer).¹⁵ Taken from Sigfried Giedion's *Walter Gropius* (1931) and *Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork* (1952), these photographs show external views of the building, interiors, and details of the corner construction. The Smithsons' intention was 'to recapture the excitement and confidence felt by architects at that time'.¹⁶ The result is a study that has more in common with an annual rather than architectural history. The teleological, from-to narrative with little regard for investigation provides no description of composition or technical innovation or conditions for how these projects came into being.

A later work, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic 1955-1972*, is in a similar vein.¹⁷ A glance at the index might suggest ten different essays on a variety of topics including the Doric order, the construction and materiality of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's American buildings, and American Advertising in the 1950s. But instead the book is a stream of consciousness with no methodological structure with each essay running into the next. Here architectural history is shown at its worse as buildings are only ever explored on the visual attributes of a photograph. Despite the book's title the Smithsons used a photograph of the façade of The Economist Buildings (1962 – 1964) to illustrate the idea of repetition both compositionally and in the mass production of building elements.¹⁸ Later the idea of repetition, more specifically 'built-form and counterpart space', is thread through three very different buildings: Royal Crescent in Bath, St Peter's in Rome, and Robin Hood

¹² Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, 'The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture 1917-1937', *Architectural Design* 35:12, December 1965, 587-642.

¹³ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*, 5.

¹⁴ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*, 5.

¹⁵ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*, 6-7.

¹⁶ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*, 5.

¹⁷ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic 1955-1972*, London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1973.

¹⁸ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric*, 29-30.

Gardens.¹⁹ The reduction of these buildings to diagrams ignores the very specific – and in the case of St Peter’s almost impossible to map – series of correlations and causations instigated by individuals and processes involved in their production.

The work of Rudolf Wittkower, specifically *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (1949), has been discussed by many historians in relation to the design of buildings by architects and the construction of twentieth-century architectural history.²⁰ As noted by Anthony Vidler, Peter Smithson declared that ‘Dr. Wittkower is regarded by the younger architects as the only art historian working in England capable of describing and analysing buildings in spatial and plastic terms and not in terms of derivation and dates.’²¹ It might be suggested that Wittkower’s work influenced not only the Smithsons’ approach to designing buildings but what constituted architectural history long after the demise of the interest in Palladianism by contemporary architects in search of formal legitimacy. Indeed the abstraction and comparison by the Smithsons of Royal Crescent in Bath, St Peter’s in Rome, and Robin Hood Gardens could be seen as comparable to Wittkower’s own abstraction of Andrea Palladio’s villa projects to context-less diagrams in *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*.²²

This analysis of the historical studies written by the Smithsons would suggest a clear conclusion: the Smithsons were the curators of a past, who interpreted the work of previous generations in order to substantiate their own contemporary practice. This interpretation relied upon rejection as much as connection with the actions and products of previous architects. In the second edition of the *Heroic Period* Peter Smithson wrote, ‘functionalism superseded all the separate and distinctive flavours of the heroic period... The passage of the fifteen years since this document was first assembled allows us to begin to see... certain bright clearings where a few trees stand alone’.²³ It might be suggested that one of the reasons for establishing a hagiography of the Heroic Period was in order to demonstrate that the Smithsons are, as Peter Smithson declared, ‘fresh stock bred-out from the first true beginnings’.²⁴ And therefore their work should not be considered alongside the failure of post-war functionalism. My second example of

¹⁹ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric*, 34.

²⁰ Henry Millon, ‘Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*: Its Influence on the Development and Interpretation of Modern Architecture’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 31:2, 1972, 83-91. James S. Ackerman, ‘Rudolf Wittkower’s Influence on the History of Architecture’, *Source* 8/9 (1989) 87-90. Alina A. Payne, ‘Rudolf Wittkower and *Architectural Principles in the Age of Modernism*’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 53:3, 1994, 322-342.

²¹ Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, 72, quotes: Peter Smithson, *RIBA Journal* 59, 1952, 140-141

²² Pier Vittorio Aureli, ‘The Geo-Politics of the Ideal Villa’, *AA Files* 59, 2009, 76-77.

²³ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1981, 70.

²⁴ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*, 70.

an architect-historian is both guilty of a similar crime of the Smithsons and demonstrates what the architect can bring to the practice of history.

Colin St John Wilson

Although best known as the architect of the British Library, Colin St John Wilson held a chair at the University of Cambridge, as well as publishing two collections of essays on architectural history and a book on the artists William Coldstream and Michael Andrew.²⁵ As Reinhold Martin has noted, 'short, telegraphic texts are more likely to be assimilated than long, scholarly, excurses'.²⁶ This is apparent in the writing of Wilson who explained that many of his essays were 'for the most part written as campaign despatches to peg out and define my position during lulls in the fighting of our Thirty Years War to build the British Library at St Pancras'.²⁷ There are two aspects to the writing of Colin St John Wilson that this portion of the paper will discuss. The first relates to the blurred line between theory and history; whilst the second discusses what the architect might bring to the study of history that a non-architect cannot.

In *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project* Wilson proposed that there was an alternative tradition of twentieth-century architecture at odds with the prevailing orthodoxy established by the first meeting of Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM) at La Sarraz in June 1928.²⁸ Wilson suggested that an alternative tradition was been established by a series of individuals, designed a number of buildings 'that have enjoyed satisfied occupation for fifty to sixty years'.²⁹ In addition to exploring the various theoretical positions of the architects present at CIAM, Wilson used four case studies: a competition for a town hall, an art gallery, a student halls of residence, and a pair of houses. Each of the four case studies compared one building from the 'other tradition' with another from the prevailing modern orthodoxy in order to compare design intent and its output. There are some problems with this approach. First, whilst architecture is a slow business, can two buildings such as the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin by Mies van der Rohe (1962-68) and the Museum of Modern Art Aalborg by Elissa Aalto, Alvar Aalto, and Jean-Jacques Barué (1958-72) best represent the orthodox and counter positions of architecture that were established thirty years before? Second, whilst Wilson intelligently analysed the programmatic requirements of the buildings' galleries, there is no discussion of the prevailing social, political, and

²⁵ For a bibliography of Wilson's published writing see: Roger Stonehouse, ed., *Colin St John Wilson: Buildings and Projects*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007, 506-507.

²⁶ Reinhold Martin, 'History after History', *AA Files* 58, 2009, 14.

²⁷ Colin St John Wilson, 'Apologia', in *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, xvi

²⁸ Colin St John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project*, London, Academy Editions, 1995.

²⁹ Colin St John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture*, 7.

economic factors without which the two buildings would not have even become drawings and models let alone construction sites. With one set of architects established as heroes and the other as villains, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture* appears to be the establishment of a counter theory for contemporary architectural practice. In this regard, *The Other Tradition* is in many ways a cousin of the Smithsons historical writings.

Prior to *The Other Tradition*, Wilson published *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture*, a four part collection of essays subdivided into: five thematic essays on architecture, five studies of twentieth-century architects, five polemic essays, and a single essay on nineteenth-century architecture.³⁰ In contrast to Wilson's approach in *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture*, these case study essays combined visual description and qualitative analysis together with social, political, and economic aspects to explain why and how buildings such as Sigurd Lewerentz's Church of St. Peter's, Klippan (1962-65) came into existence.³¹ The final essay in *Architectural Reflections*, on Alfred Waterhouse's entry to the law courts competition in London (1866-67), demonstrates the ability of the architect-historian to analyse and explain buildings and drawings in a way that others might overlook.³²

Beginning from a broader position, John Summerson's essay on the law courts competition analysed the development of the public architectural competition in relation to the nascent professionalism of architects throughout the Victorian period.³³ Summerson focused on how the complex circulation requirements of a modern building were tempered with the desire to compose the building 'into an intrinsically Gothic unity'.³⁴ In 1969, Michael Port published a short article on the law courts competition, which introduced the background to the competition before each architect's entry was discussed in quantitative terms based solely on archival sources.³⁵ As Port's objectives for his article was much boarder, only 128 words were dedicated to Waterhouse's competition entry. However, Port noted: '[Waterhouse's drawings were] tinted in sepia and a bluish shade...were expected to seduce the public'.³⁶ Following the earlier studies in 1984 David Brownlee published a definitive monograph on the subject: *The Law Courts: The*

³⁰ Colin St Wilson, *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture*, Oxford; Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1992. Later republished as Colin St Wilson, *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

³¹ Colin St Wilson, 'Sigurd Lewerentz', in *Architectural Reflections*, 110-137.

³² Colin St Wilson, 'The Law Courts Project: by Alfred Waterhouse', in *Architectural Reflections*, 206-226.

³³ John Summerson, 'A Victorian Competition: The Royal Courts of Justice', in *Victorian Architecture: Four Studies in Evaluation*, New York / London: Columbia University Press, 1970, 77-118.

³⁴ John Summerson, 'A Victorian Competition: The Royal Courts of Justice', 100.

³⁵ Michael Port, 'New Law Courts Competition', *Architectural History* 11, 1968, 75-94

³⁶ Michael Port, 'New Law Courts Competition', 89.

Architecture of George Edmund Street, which charted the development of law reform in the Victorian period, the competition for the new courts won by Edward Middleton Barry and George Edmund Street, revised and final designs, the building's innovative service layout, and the construction process.³⁷ The strength of Brownlee's work is in his ability to situate the competition and commission within the socio-political context of Britain at that time and in relation to other contemporary public building projects.

It is clear that the history of the commission, design, and construction of the law courts was well-trodden ground prior to Wilson's essay in *Architectural Reflections*. Wilson, whose knowledge of designing large-scale institutional buildings was second to none due to his career working for the British government, London County Council, and various universities, analysed the text and drawings of Waterhouse's competition entry. In particular Wilson focused on the plan drawings and overlaid the originals with colour to show the sophistication of Waterhouse's functional layering. In order to explain the layering of the space in three dimensions, Wilson drew an axonometric projection of a typical staircase core and courtroom that showed the six different types of actors involved in a legal case: general public, public involved in court, judges, legal profession, jurors, witnesses.³⁸ Wilson cross-referenced the axonometric drawing to Waterhouse's competition report to demonstrate how the design for the law courts responded to the operational requirements set by the competition brief. A second axonometric drawing was drawn and used by Wilson to demonstrate the integration of the plan and its hierarchical layering in relation to the surrounding streets, topography, and connections to the adjacent Middle Temple.³⁹ Wilson explored the integration of the functional requirements for building services in Waterhouse's scheme, which included a fire suppression strategy with integrated heating and ventilation supplies.⁴⁰ For instance, Waterhouse's proposal featured four towers: one for a clock, two for the deposit of wills and legal documents, and one 'smoke tower' for the control of smoke and foul air. Wilson noted that the perspective drawings submitted by Waterhouse demonstrated how these towers not only fulfilled a functional requirement but also became compositional devices that situated the law courts in the city. Waterhouse was the only architect to submit a representation of the proposal from the south bank of the River Thames. This vista showed the composition of the courts in its entirety and the demonstrated the use of various towers as urban figures on the horizon.⁴¹

The analysis made by Wilson is absent from other histories of the law courts competition despite the capability and strength of writing by pure historians.

³⁷ David Brownlee, *The Law Courts: The Architecture of George Edmund Street*, Cambridge, Mass./ London: MIT Press, 1984.

³⁸ Colin St John Wilson, 'The Law Courts Project: by Alfred Waterhouse', 221.

³⁹ Colin St John Wilson, 'The Law Courts Project: by Alfred Waterhouse', 223.

⁴⁰ Colin St John Wilson, 'The Law Courts Project: by Alfred Waterhouse', 224.

⁴¹ Colin St John Wilson, 'The Law Courts Project: by Alfred Waterhouse', 223.

(Whilst John Summerson was architecturally trained but he had little experience in practice or in the design of complex public institutions). This example of what an architect-historian can bring to the study of history is aligned to the distinction between the outside and the inside of a historical event proposed by R. G. Collingwood.⁴² The historian's 'work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent.'⁴³ With his experience of designing institutional buildings, Wilson was able to study Waterhouse's actions more effectively than prior historians.

There are two copies of *Architectural Reflections* held in the collections of the British Library in London. Wilson presented one of these at a reception on 23rd November 1997 to mark the opening of the reading rooms at St. Pancras. On the title page and inscribed above his signature and the date Wilson wrote, 'The key that unlocks it all is to be found in Chapter 15.'⁴⁴ This chapter instigated the background to the law courts competition. It is likely that Wilson saw a reflection in history of his own personal struggle to build the British Library: 'The building of the Law Courts in the Strand was not only a tragi-comedy of the political and professional behaviour of 100 years ago but also the re-enactment of the archetypal tragi-comedy that is not without precedent when an English government finds itself committed to the building of a monument.'⁴⁵ There appears to be another reason for the writing of history: to seek solace in the heroic struggles of past architects. Arguable for Wilson, history became autobiographical through the re-enactment of past actions in in the historian's mind; the final line in the essay regarding the law courts could easily have been about the design and construction of the British Library: 'In the end we got a masterpiece of sorts, but it was a "damned close-run thing".'⁴⁶

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyse the methodology of two different architects in their writing of architectural history. In turn this lead to a series of reasoned propositions as to why these historical studies had particular outcomes. As demonstrated by Colin St John Wilson's brilliant analysis of the law courts competition, there is obviously a role for the architect in the study and writing of architectural history. However, this role is evidently more relevant in the intense study of primary material rather than the loose and irrelevant history written by Alison and Peter Smithson, which supported the products of architectural practice through the connection of certain buildings into a historical narrative. In

⁴² Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 213.

⁴³ Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 213.

⁴⁴ Colin St Wilson, *Architectural Reflections*, 1. British Library reference: YD.2013.a.3835

⁴⁵ Colin St Wilson, 'England Builds', *Architectural Reflections*, 199.

⁴⁶ Colin St Wilson, 'England Builds', 203.

comparison, Wilson rejected the established narrative of CIAM to propose an alternative tradition, which was more closely aligned to his architectural tendencies. Following Hayden White, John Gold has noted that whilst the construction of narrative is an essential part of historical discourse, these narratives are the foundations of power through which the historian can structure accounts in order to validate opinions.⁴⁷

In the case of the examples discussed, these accounts and opinions often form theoretical positions, which utilise history as a justification for trends in contemporary practice. All of the examples show, in one way or another, that all history is contemporary history, 'because, however remote in time events thus recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate'.⁴⁸ Often the action of categorising books as 'history' helped to disguise this distance between discourse and polemic, past and present. However, this paper demonstrates that the association between history and its architect-author was not a simplistic condition but a variable one. It is clear that through their study of the past there was a more complicated series of intention and reflection at play by the architects of late twentieth-century Britain.

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⁴⁷ John R. Gold, 'The Power of Narrative: The Early Writings of Charles Jencks', in Louise Campbell, ed., *Twentieth-Century Architecture and its Histories*, Otley: Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, 2000, 208.

⁴⁸ Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, trans. Sylvia Sprigge, London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1941, 19.