Joan Kee on the geometry lessons of Afro Asia

Daniel M. Abramson, Zeynep Çelik Alexander, and Michael Osman on evidence, narrative, and writing architectural history

Adrienne L. Childs and Christa Clarke on finding Black Baroque
What kinds of evidence does architectural history use? How is this evidence organized in different narratives and toward what ends? And how can consideration of evidence and narrative help us reimagine the limits and the potentials of the field?

Our forthcoming edited volume, Writing Architectural History: Evidence and Narrative in the Twenty-First Century, produced under the auspices of the Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative, asks these questions as a means of examining some of architectural history writing’s foundational practices and contradictions.1 These preoccupations have particular resonance today. The project’s formation took place during the presidency of Donald J. Trump, a period that surely registered in each contributor’s life and work and in their thinking about evidence and narrative, especially for those of us based in the United States. Then, intensively, the global pandemic coincided with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, upheavals that are, in turn, set against the background of climate catastrophe and migrant dislocations, thus laying bare and intensifying persistent, systemic inequalities and injustices.

Overlapping crises and immediate emergencies often prompt practitioners in various disciplines to rethink entrenched concepts and practices and to seek analysis and restructuring. As is the case in most collaborations—and this Aggregate project is no exception—differences abound in how to respond. Some contributions in this volume explicitly engage political goals. Others do so more indirectly. Some authors hold on to the “semi-stillness” of history’s infrastructure, identifying, in the words of Fernand Braudel, change in deep bedrock. Other authors have reflected on the present in what Braudel called a “breathless rush of narrative,” urgently applying historiography to the here and now.2 These differences of approach vivify the project’s ambitions and content.

The volume ranges widely from medieval European coin trials to present-day refugee camps in Kenya. But the subjects are still restricted by time and place and the project’s norms generally reflect architectural history writing within North American contexts. Established relations of authority and power are thus inevitably reproduced. But self-consciousness of these conditions may be starting points from which disciplinary boundaries could be expanded and conventions rethought.

Given the exigencies of the moment, one might ask, Why rethink the field through themes of evidence and narrative? Wouldn’t “climate” or “decolonization” be more productive categories with which to reexamine architectural history writing today? Our interest in evidence and narrative is informed by historical epistemology, an approach that insists on asking questions about the historical conditions that make knowledge possible in the first place.3 We adopt this approach strategically. We asked the contributors to detach themselves temporarily from the thick, focused descriptions in which they are so heavily invested as historians and instead to ask broad questions about their modus operandi—the kinds of evidence they rely on and the tactics they use for weaving that evidence into narratives. For some authors, this approach has pushed them away from their explicit political priorities. However, we used this prompt with the expectation that examining the implicit structural forces at work in history writing will allow us to return to social and political thesmatics with renewed vigor and focus.

Above all, the project was undertaken with the assumption that changing the politics of a field begins with re-examining its tools—in particular, how practices of evidence and narrative intertwine with core concepts in history writing.

How, for example, have concepts of environment, race, and migration—three current crises analyzed architecturally in this project—been produced in the field through certain evidential and narrative practices? How might such globally pressing matters be rethought architecturally with different practices, to account for and reconsider how knowledge is produced within today’s unjust dynamics of social power?

Can practices of collective research and writing, which this project’s collaborative editorial and several contributions exemplify, produce different kinds of knowledge? Do collaborative practices working within and across disciplines engage cross-cutting evidentiary and narrative possibilities that undermine presumptions of purity and rigor in favor of hybridity and unorthodoxy? Might collaborative work also re-situate the field and its practitioners in relation to the liberal arts academy and professional architectural education, which still largely expect individuated achievement, reflecting the dominant values of capitalist democratic societies? What this project ultimately offers is not so much answers as questions through consideration of evidence, narrative, and writing architectural history. The hard work of re-tuning the field addresses a complex past, an exigent present, and our opaque futures.

1 This essay is adapted from the introduction of the forthcoming volume Writing Architectural History: Evidence and Narrative in the Twenty-First Century (University of Pittsburgh, December 2021).


3 Uljana Feest and Thomas Sturm, eds., “What (Good) Is Historical Epistemology?” Erkenntnis 75, no. 3 (November 2011).