

## Time, History and Architecture: Essays on Critical Historiography

by Gevork Hartoonian, London, Routledge, 2018, 198 pp., AUD\$193.60  
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that shaped architectural representation in different time periods from a bottom-up and local perspective.

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**Time, History and Architecture: Essays on Critical Historiography**, by Gevork Hartoonian, London, Routledge, 2018, 198 pp., AUD\$193.60 (hardcover), ISBN 9781138283510; AUD\$46.14 (eBook), ISBN 9781315270210

*Time, History and Architecture: Essays on Critical Historiography* is the latest in a line of authored works by Gevork Hartoonian to interrogate key concepts of the architectural discipline focused on questions of its autonomy. With *Ontology of Construction: On Nihilism of Technology and Theories of Modern Architecture* (1994) he opened an inquiry into theories of construction engaging the work of Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos and Mies van der Rohe through Gottfried Semper's discourse on the tectonic. *Modernity and Its Other: A Post-script to Contemporary Architecture* (1997) presented his take on postmodernism in the post-war period re-evaluating it beyond questions of style and aesthetics and towards historical and cultural debates. With *Crisis of the Object: The Architecture of Theatricality* (2006) Hartoonian arrived in a more present moment, redescribing the work of Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry and Bernard Tschumi by reaching back again to Semper's theories in order to situate the approaches of these architects in a clear historical framework. From there he sought to recast distinctions between architectural history and the tradition of art history in *Mental Life of the Architectural Historian: Re-opening the Early Historiography of Modern Architecture* (2010), developing arguments around the issue of disciplinary autonomy through the rubric of history. Next came his attempt to rethink contemporary architecture and its propensity to form through image-making in *Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique* (2016). Here Hartoonian broadened his discussion of recent work, interrogating projects by Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry and Bernard Tschumi and, beyond them, those of Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Steven Holl. His critique sought to claim theoretical underpinnings in contemporary architecture out of nineteenth century thought, specifically Semper's idea of theatricality, a concept that he had previously explored. Hartoonian's next project, the edited book *Global Perspectives on Critical Architecture: Praxis Reloaded* (2016) drew attention to issues of autonomy and crisis in present-day architecture, which emerge in both education and practice, addressing globalisation in the era of late capitalism. Out of the writing of its various authors, the book attempts to bridge between architecture and its autonomy as it is cast in the socio-political moment, seeking to re-engage in a critical way with the present time and pressing issues faced by the discipline in asserting its autonomy.

Identifying this chronology is essential to understanding the ambition of *Time, History and Architecture*, which stands as the latest contribution to an arc of thinking sustained by Hartoonian over a period of almost 25 years. In this latest book, he ranges over his previous work and thinking, looking for further angles and

insights from which to interrogate and comprehend the present situation of architecture and reappraise the issue of autonomy. Notionally at his side in this endeavour are the two theorists towards whom he has paid the most attention: Gottfried Semper and the German Jewish philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin. Hartoonian uses Semper to initiate an historical discussion of architecture around constructional values and counter the tendency towards simple formal readings of architecture related to concepts of style. From Benjamin, he draws an understanding of history and its articulation to the present, based on Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's 1920 painting "Angelus Novus", the angel of history, a figure who is blown into the future whilst they look back to the fragments of the past. Between these major figures and their thinking, Hartoonian finds the opportunity to pass back and forth over issues of autonomy, history, ideology and crisis.

What comes forward strikingly for Hartoonian is the characterisation of architecture in the contemporary moment, an ever-present "time of the now" which devalues history and leaves no space for the evocation of the future. Both the historian and the architect are caught in this moment, where they experience, consciously or not, an unfolding and evolving crisis in relation to their discipline. For the latter, for instance, where the proliferation of techniques available for architecture's fabrication reduces the ability towards any type of mastery, in particular, is a significant plight of architecture's making. Buildings with the status of commodified objects exist in a world built upon the circulation of images – without taking account of architecture's tectonic value. In reminding us of a crisis faced by architecture – directed towards its very structure as autonomous discipline and practice – Hartoonian compels us to see these problems for ourselves as historians and architects and, in a way, also confront them.

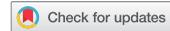
Here we are reminded of the book to which the present book owes its title, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (1941) by the architectural historian, Sigfried Giedion. Hartoonian's manoeuvre is to remove "Space" and emphasise "Time" with the inclusion of "History" and set up his focus on critical historiography. Giedion's book, as Hartoonian reminds us, was ideologically driven and operative in intent, casting modernism as a monolithic movement related to the zeitgeist and notions of progress. Yet beyond this, it was also driven by the alliance of an historian and an architect. Giedion, alongside Le Corbusier, were the key individuals behind the formation of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). They had overseen the Working Program of the Congress (La Sarraz, 1928) and both promoted the possibilities of modern construction, which Le Corbusier's architecture exemplified. The design of the Villa Savoye directly followed the 1928 Congress, the opportunity to realise programmatically modernist principles. With the concept of "the critical" entering the discipline in the post-war period the modernist ideology would begin to be questioned, and, in addition, the explicit link between the agendas of the historian and the architect. Manfredo Tafuri's attack on what he called "operative criticism" was a defining moment, based on the premise that the tasks of the historian and architect were fundamentally different, with a key role of the former the unmasking of ideologies.

As an historian, Hartoonian is nothing if not erudite in looking back into architecture's history to frame analogical readings of contemporary architecture and reveal those ideologies which are dominating the present. It is not simply his insights that catch attention but the patient presentation of a critical method, deftly constructed. It is a method built through the chapters of the book, thus in spite of its presentation as discrete essays, the full impact of Hartoonian's thought is best received by reading through them chronologically. The work as a whole is a significant contribution to the

field of critical historiography in architecture, a field to which Hartoonian is undoubtedly a major contributor. The only question that remains in relation to the architectural historian's task is "where to next?"

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**Laboratory: Speaking of Science and Its Architecture**, by Sandra Kaji-O'Grady and Chris L. Smith, Cambridge, MA & New York, MIT Press, 2019, 345 pp., AUD \$55.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0262043328

In 2017 I implored the editor of *Architecture Australia* to let me review the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre (VCCC),<sup>1</sup> based on the stories that preceded its opening. At the VCCC, architecture was going to accelerate the translation of cutting-edge medical research from lab bench to bedside; it would attract the best and brightest minds from across the globe; and in the many conversations that would take place between the entrance and elevator, cancer treatment would be redefined. Did I believe architecture was capable of facilitating all of this? Not at all. But nor am I willing to dismiss the idea that architecture can make a contribution, small but no less valuable. Ironically, given the vast amounts of philanthropic and public money spent on facilities of this type, sparse research has investigated the actual impact of these buildings relative to their lofty ambitions. In *LabOratory*, Sandra Kaji-O'Grady and Chris L. Smith claim they are concerned with "the nature and consequences of the expectations scientists and architects have for their new buildings, not the elusive evidence that might justify them".<sup>(11)</sup> Questions of nature, in this context, are easy enough to answer and unlikely to surprise, but the *consequences* of those expectations – that is a far more exciting prospect.

*LabOratory* is contemporaneous with the authors' edited volume *Laboratory Lifestyles: The Construction of Scientific Fictions*, published in collaboration with Russell Hughes, ten months earlier.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, it employs Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's ethnographic work with the scientific community in the 1970s as a lens for reading the relationship between scientific practice and inhabitation of these contemporary facilities. The authors expand this social theory to acknowledge the role that architecture plays in the construction of scientific knowledge: reinforcing the expectations that shape scientific culture, communicating its value to the wider public, and helping to entice the philanthropic funding that enables it. While the book is divided into three parts, with its chapters structured around a series of case study projects, these buildings appear almost fleetingly at times, not always as the focus of the discussion per se, but rather a means of opening up an eclectic set of deliberations regarding the fascinating disciplinary culture in which they are procured and occupied.

*LabOratory* is organised around the tension that laboratories "are constructed but also construct."<sup>(266)</sup> Tensions that, the authors observe, play out most powerfully in the discussions concerning boundaries, expression and socialisation. Part One addresses boundaries, specifically those geographical, visual and dissolved. The geographical chapter reviews the