

**THE RISE OF
THE SO-CALLED
PRE-MODERN
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We need to think critically about our historiographical formations, and in particular about an unstated and untheorized complicity between the discourses around contemporary practice and the broader disciplinary/theoretical frameworks of our understanding of modernism. The way to start is not to address the question head on but rather to look behind it, at its wake, so to speak, for we have witnessed a important secondary revolution in our field—a revolution that has been so silent that we are yet to discuss it even once. We have not noticed that as modernism became an established field, it produced a ghostly shadow of itself that is now a full-bodied discipline. It goes by the moniker “The Pre-Modern.” The term was first used about fifteen years ago. Witnessing the birth of a new discipline is such a rare occurrence that it is usually celebrated; in this case, we have not even noticed it.

Part of the problem, of course, is that we (and by *we* I mean the architecture history/theory world) have abandoned much of our interest in a whole host of disciplines. In the 1970s, there was a sociologist at the Department of Architecture of the E.T.H., an anthropologist at MIT, a classicist at Cornell, and so on. All of these positions have disappeared, and indeed an ethos has disappeared along with them, perhaps for reasons that were relatively legitimate. Eduardo Souto de Moura stated it best when he pointed out that in the early 1970s, “context, structuralism, semiotics, anthropology, sociology, and economics predominated our training, and the mention of architecture was almost an insult.”¹

Even Renaissance architectural history fell victim to the vast housecleaning that began in the 1980s. Once thought to be the mainstay in architectural academia, it is now a dead discipline. The number of Ph.D.s in the history of Renaissance architecture that have been produced in the U.S. in the last ten years is close to zero. But who in my generation did not read James Ackerman’s amazing analyses of Palladio’s drawings? You didn’t dream of talking to Colin Rowe without first having visited the Palazzo Pitti. And if you did not know quite a bit about Piranesi, don’t even bother reading Tafuri. But today there is

only one officially sanctioned academic position for Renaissance architecture left in the country, at MIT—and even there it is holding on by a hair.

But it gets worse. “Pre-Modern” has captured and embraced *all* that we “moderns” have ignored, and here I would include the field of global architectural history. Global history has finally come into its own in the last ten years, and architecture schools across the country are struggling to come to terms with this new disciplinary formation. But since it is being created at the same time as the discipline of Pre-Modern, the two are poised to be put into the same box. The potentially positive turn of the global will be undercut by the terrible negative of bracketing it off as somehow pre-modern. This is a very disturbing situation.

To prove my point, look at Harvard University’s library catalog. The earliest references to Pre-Modernism start in the late ’80s, and it has escalated from there. We see such titles as *Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe* or *Pre-Modern Art of Vienna*. The venerable Max Planck Institute has just organized a conference called *Art and Knowledge in Pre-Modern Europe*. If Europeanists want to use the term to talk about the sixteenth century, then fine—but let them keep it focused on Europe. Sadly, that is not the case. There are now books like *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization* and *Multiples in Pre-Modern Art*. Even Gaudí is bandied about in reading lists as an example of “Pre-Modern art.” A new periodization has even developed—the Late Pre-Modern!

I will say point blank: This concept is nonsense.

There cannot be such a thing as a Pre-Modern, for it would mean that modernism has become the Archimedean point of understanding history *backward* into all of time and space. Why should the rise of European technology, nation-states, and regimes of control—the concepts most associated with modernism—be the concepts against which human and architectural history is measured? It is the epitome of a civilizational arrogance, and it cuts to the core of our disciplinary project of research in the architecture history/theory world, casting a pall over its ascendancy.

The results are real. Many architectural history survey courses—90 percent of which deal with the so-called Pre-Modern—are taught by archaeologists, art historians, and anthropologists. These are all nice people, but where are the architects? Where is the architectural imagination, and the architectural history/theory world? Our recent Ph.D.s could no more tell you why Borobudur is one of the most important buildings in the world than they could the Pantheon. We have retreated from all of this; we allow these other disciplines to invade our world. My generation and our teachers fought the art historians and made architectural history/theory into a legitimate disciplinary enterprise—but we have now gone so far in that direction that soon we will be going back to them on our hands and knees, creating a situation that will be even worse than before.

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My thought is this: Today's architectural history/theory world is less messy than it was in the 1970s, but this is because we have abandoned large chunks of our epistemological formation to people who do not have our architectural interests at heart. Admittedly, architectural education has become more efficient with regard to the problem of "the contemporary," but in so doing it has lost traction, ironically enough, with the broader problematic of modernity and its theorizations.

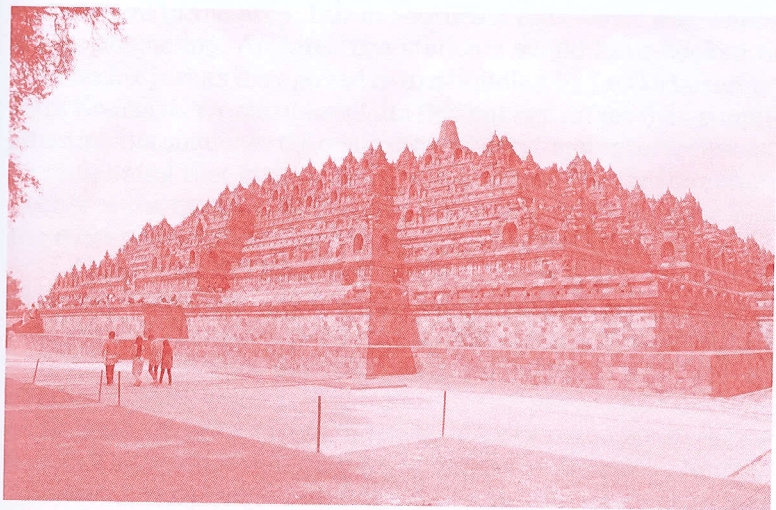
This is not the old and tired debate about history versus theory. Nor is this a question of how to integrate the proverbial humanities into architectural education. On some level it is simply a question of erudition. We live in a globalized world, and architecture students should know the range of issues associated with their discipline as they encounter that world. Their necessary erudition should include a critical take on that world's formation.

Take the example of Borobudur. It is a proto-computational building, designed completely around mathematical principles. Could we not spend some time thinking about it in a CAD studio? Its construction involved the tremendous reengineering of the surrounding hills. Could we not spend some time discussing it in the framework of buildings and landscape? In the last

century, it underwent not one but two major rebuildings, the last one requiring serious transformation of its substructure. Could we not dwell even briefly on the thematics of the social construction of time? It is a UNESCO Heritage Site. Could we not discuss the nature of our officially sanctioned compulsion to restore buildings? It is a national landmark. Could we not spend time on the complex relationship between architecture and national identity in the modern world? The topicality of Borobudur continues endlessly, raising provocative, technical, disciplinary, and even philosophical questions about the status of architecture.

The main thing to recognize is that at the time of its construction, Borobudur was a *modern* building. Whenever I say something like that, I get asked, "Well, what about postmodernism? Are there then many postmodernisms?" Though I understand the nature of the question, it puts the wrong train on the track. I am not interested in modernism as an art-historical category. My definition of *modernism* is purposefully simple: Modernism is a condition of rupture. I realize full well that modernism could be other things as well, but this is my working definition, which I like in its simplicity since there is always a backward and a forward to any rupture—there will always be an erasure and a projection.

The ruptures that help us understand Borobudur are numerous. First of all, this was a building exported from India and placed (from the Indian perspective) in a remote rain forest. The idea of designing a building as a mandala at the scale of a mountain was particularly innovative. It was borrowed, however, from Hinduism. In that sense the building is significantly different from the traditional stupa, which may be big but is not "a mountain." To design a building/mountain so that it is not just accessible, but accessible in a certain complex way that allows the devotee to both become Buddha *and* visualize his life, is part of the unique genius of the design. No building today in our secular world can even try to approach this operation—to inscribe the identity of Buddhism in your being through the architectural trace. The building is a launching into the realm



Borobudur, Buddhist temple at Magelang, Indonesia, ninth century

of metaphysics. To say it crassly, all this boggles the mind, and was designed to do just that.

I could continue, but my point is only that this building—as a representation, as a philosophy, as an operative space of devotion, as a mathematical puzzle, as a feat of engineering—was entirely astonishing in its day. If you were a young architecture student in the year 800, where would you want to go to see the latest? To Europe? No way. Most buildings there were squat and posed few design challenges. Byzantium and Armenia had lost their charm, and there was little money for great building given all the political turmoil in the area. But in Southeast Asia—that was where it was happening. Architecture students would have flocked to Borobudur just as they go today to a building by Le Corbusier or Rem Koolhaas. We should reclaim that energy rather than simply situating Borobudur in the context of “history” and “preservation.” In reclaiming that history and the excitement that architecture brings to the question of cultural definition, we are tapping into the most philosophical condition of architecture.

Hegel was the first to identify this condition. He argued that architecture and philosophy emerged at the same historical moment. He also argued that architecture over time lost its philosophical edge to the other arts, and indeed I think that our emphasis on modernity *über alles* almost proves him correct, or at least we associate “the modern” with our contemporary world. The truth is that only some buildings rise to the level of “modern.” Only some buildings “rethink” the present in new terms. In that sense, I would argue that if Rem Koolhaas had lived in the ninth century, chances are good that we’d know him as the architect of Borobudur.

I admit that this is all a type of mind game, and you might think that I have abandoned my identity as a historian. Let me worry about that. What I want to convey is the basic fact that history is filled with moments in which architecture discovers new potentials to speak to its times, and beyond. This is why the category “Traditional Architecture” is as absurd as “Pre-Modern.” A lot of so-called traditional architecture is indeed “traditional” in that it blandly replicates what has been done

before, and perhaps for good reason. But to think that everything that has come before the modern is traditional is absurd. One sees the problem at the University of Virginia, where the course ARH 581: The Architecture of East Asia is described as “a survey and introduction of traditional architecture and allied arts in China, Japan, and Korea.”² Just as it makes no sense to say that modern exists exclusively after 1890 (or whatever date you choose), it makes no sense to argue that Asian art before the era of modernism is “traditional.”

There have been many modern moments, most associated with changes in power and economy. Borobudur, to continue the example, was built as a magnet for Indian traders and colonizers who settled in the area and turned it from a rain forest to a rice-producing region. It was a building at the frontier of reality. Like Timgad for the Romans—which was in a sense also overdesigned so as to attract settlers—this building was meant to attract devotees as a means of building the economy. It was a bravura building. What better way to import and inspire workers than to bring religion to their doorstep? It would be just as true now as then. In other words, there is more to Borobudur than just Buddhism.

Scholars describe the whole process of India’s cultural expansion into Southeast Asia as Indianization. It began in the fifth century and lasted until the tenth, by which time the local regions had more or less internalized both Buddhist and Hindu practices as their own and made wealthy empires out of them. The time between the ninth century and the thirteenth century was the great high point of Southeast Asian civilization. Borobudur was perfectly timed at the turn from experiment to success, its influence spreading from Indonesia to Cambodia and up to the Kingdom of Dali (centered in what is now Yunnan province of China). The modernist experiment of re-landscaping the environment (i.e., adding a “sacred mountain”), of reengineering the plains for rice, and administering the resultant economy (as empire) was the prototype of the Khmer. They copied the success of what you might call the “Borobudur Effect,” and magnified it to produce Angkor.

But like all modernities, this was all built on massive amounts of risk. The rice economy is fragile since it by necessity requires an export and import economy, open to the vicissitudes of regional and macro-regional conflict. The landscapes were also fragile, whether because of volcanoes or deforestation. Just as economies in the modern world can be here today and gone tomorrow—as in the “Rust Belt” of the United States—so, too, in Southeast Asia. Once Borobudur lost its edge (because of flooding, cheaper markets elsewhere, and even the rise of the Mongolians, who shifted the global economy to the far north), the whole thing collapsed in the thirteenth century. People still made rice, but the great Borobudur was not needed. It fell into disrepair and was soon little more than a heap of stones until the arrival of the European colonialists, who, touching it with the wand of their own modernity, thought that it should be restored. But as much as we might be interested in the preservation story, should we not be interested in the larger historical arc of the building? It is not an arc of “history” or “tradition,” but the arc of modernity. Like all modernities, it belongs to us, as moderns.

In our current academic world, one that saps our understanding of the history of the so-called “Non-West,” these questions are simply absent for architects. The building might be discussed by an art historian in a survey class. He or she will most likely emphasize the Buddhist representations on the walls of the temple and its sculptural profile, for that is where most of the literature concentrates, but what about the questions that interest us? There is no reading list on buildings like these, or a paltry one at best, since we—on the architecture side—don’t write about these things. Nor do we try to excite the architectural student or the history/theory world to speculate about these things. Compound this by the thousands of missed opportunities with students, and then compound that by the hundreds of architectural schools, and you begin to see why I think that this is a major disciplinary problem.

The consequences are real and palpable. If we abandon these historical territories as just “history,” or as just a question of archaeology and preservation, then don’t imagine for a

moment that those disciplines will respect our interests. The first line of defense is to refuse the creation of history positions in the "Pre-Modern." We must at all costs avoid adding legitimacy to the division between those who teach modern and those who teach Pre-Modern.

But we can do more. We must go on the offense. We must take back what is ours. Our history/theory world does not begin in the 1920s, or the 1890s. It even precedes the era of colonial entanglements. I am not saying that we should all be experts in Southeast Asian architecture of the ninth century, but if we are truly interested in "the modern," then we should realize that in the ninth century, Borobudur *was* the modern. The Borobudur Effect was just as palpable then as the Bilbao Effect today. So it is in this context—in the context of innovative design and architectural teaching—that we need to reimagine some of these places. We need to take these buildings out of what we sadly call "history" and put them back in what I hope we can all proudly call "architecture."

The Rise of the So-Called Pre-Modern

1 Eduardo Souto de Moura,
1995-2005: *El Croquis* 124 (2005),
16.

2 Online course description
at [www.virginia.edu/registrar/
records/97gradrec/chapter6/
gchap6-3.5.html](http://www.virginia.edu/registrar/records/97gradrec/chapter6/gchap6-3.5.html), accessed July
15, 2014.

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