


Rethinking Europe's Position in the Formation of Architectural Histories: Is a Non-Eurocentric Narrative Possible?

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Rethinking Europe's Position in the Formation of Architectural Histories: Is a Non-Eurocentric Narrative Possible?

As a concept or idea Europe is a project, the task of thinking and accomplishing universality. Eurocentrism as a concept is specifiable only within the context of modernity and is crucial for thinking modernity. Modernity is here understood as an attitude, as a way of relating to contemporary reality. The efforts to incorporate postcolonialist criticism into architectural discourse, during the last four decades, have been proved risky, as they cannot avoid the peril of "provincializing" Europe. In order to write a history that is not based on the western canon, it is necessary to avoid labels such as "other" or colonial. By depicting Europe and the West as a homogeneous power of domination over the rest of the world, postcolonial criticism turns 'Europe' into the blind spot of its own discourse. The fallacious character of dichotomies, such as western/nonwestern or Eurocentric/non-Eurocentric, becomes evident if we think that various societies have adopted aspects of western modernity without fully adopting them, fitting them into the indigenous culture. Europe, as a concept, represents the potential for an enlightened resistance in a world that is progressively becoming dominated by the mono-perspectivism of globalism. Placing Eurocentric narratives under critical scrutiny, an attitude which is symptomatic of the development of architectural history since the dissolution of colonialist models, is accompanied by the questioning of the earlier zeitgeist theories, which, for a long time, had served to legitimize modernism. What seems to be at stake nowadays is the complicity of architecture with structures of power and dominant ideological agendas in society. The tension between the scientific ethos of the task of the historian, which demands a commitment free of preconceptions and value judgments, and the political function of the project of history, which is based on a certain social order, has always existed since the emergence of the profession of the historian and was reflected in the educational mission of the nineteenth century university. Enlightenment is defined by a modification of the preexisting relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason. The very notion of Enlightenment is related to the task of the historian and to the concept of Europe.

The task of rethinking the role of Europe in the formation of architectural history cannot but be related to an institutional analysis of the evolution of architectural history's position within the universities and the production of knowledge at large. Bannister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (1896) is a good illustration of the Eurocentric biases of architectural historiography, periodization, and classification. Spiro Kostof's *A History of Architecture* (1985), including non-monumental and non-western traditions in his architectural survey, is an attempt to rethink the western canon. Kostof made a significant effort to present nonwestern architecture as an important factor in our understanding of western architecture, but his point of view still remains Eurocentric. Ákos Moravánsky, in *Competing Visions. Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918* (1998), intends to dissect the tight web of biographical, cultural, and aesthetic cross-connection. For this reason, he chooses a thematic structure, exploring architectural history in clusters, rather than through a linear development toward a monolithic modern form. Jean-Louis Cohen, in *The Future of Architecture since 1889* (2012), adopts a narrative structure, deriving from Fernand Braudel's conception of multidimensional "planes", and manages to take into account multiple, overlapping temporalities.

In my opinion, the most important challenges facing the architectural historian attempting to enunciate a non-Eurocentric or nonwestern discourse are the following: an overwhelming majority of the buildings that

have an important place in scholars' collective memory, and in what we could call the epistemology of architecture, are designed by architects whose approaches are based on Eurocentric or Western values. Secondly, the majority of archival resources contain material that is either representative of Eurocentric or Western values, or comes from architects who were legitimized according to Eurocentric or Western values, thus playing a dominant role within Eurocentric or Western contexts. Thirdly, the protocols that define what is evaluated and legitimized as scholarly research are based on Eurocentric or Western criteria. These three dimensions of the problem make the task of narrating a history that takes critical distance from Eurocentric or Western principles very difficult. One possible path could be to show the interaction between the different factors that contributed to a built result, revealing the non-realized episodes of a project and the controversies that preceded or accompanied its realization, having access to primary sources, that is to say archival materials, representing all the agents. That is to say, historians who aim to narrate certain events while avoiding a Eurocentric approach and revealing the many agents that took part in their realization should found their survey on sources coming from different archives that represent western and non-western or Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric perspectives, since archives are also constructed according to criteria that - in most cases - are Eurocentric or western.

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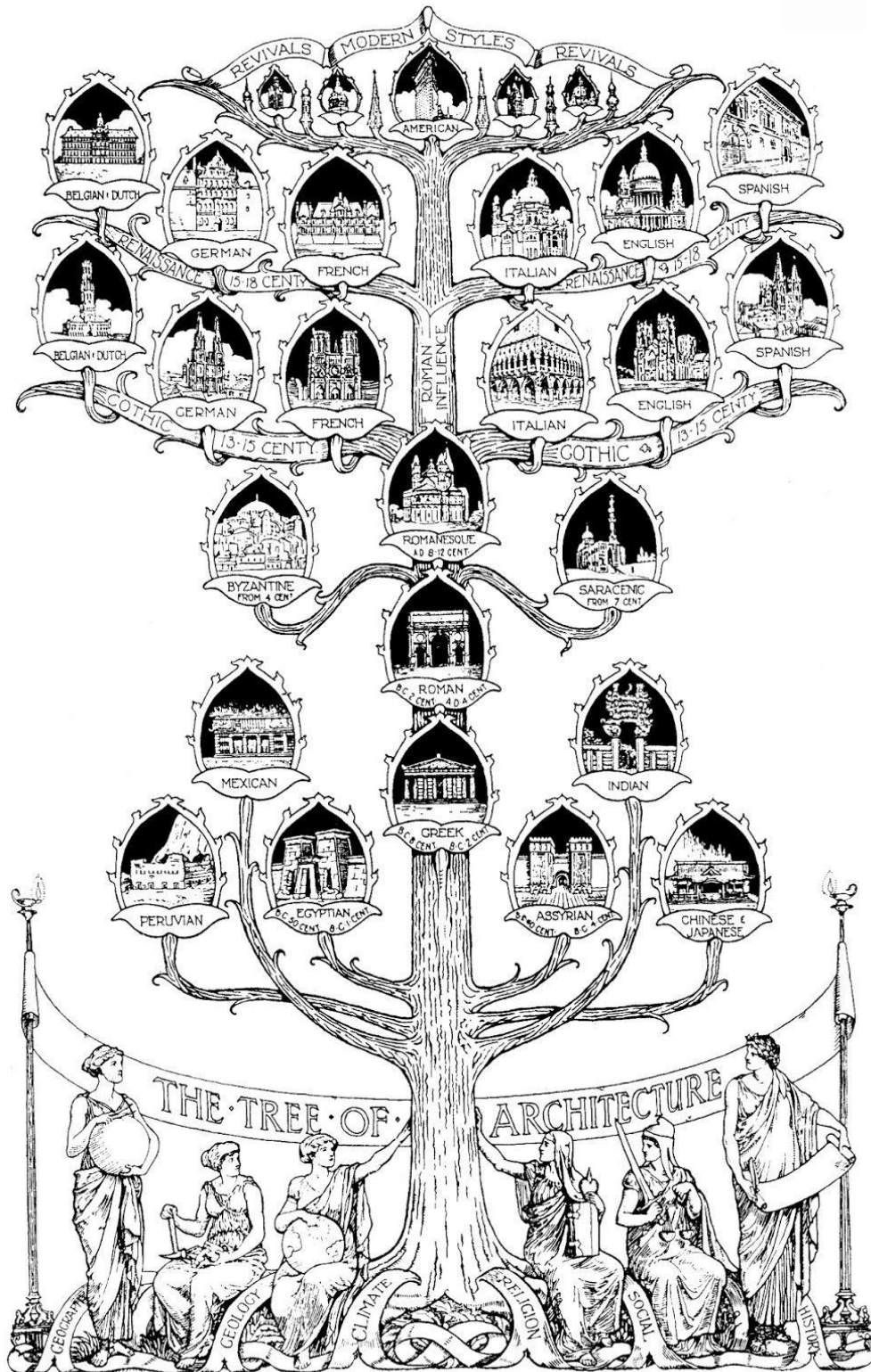
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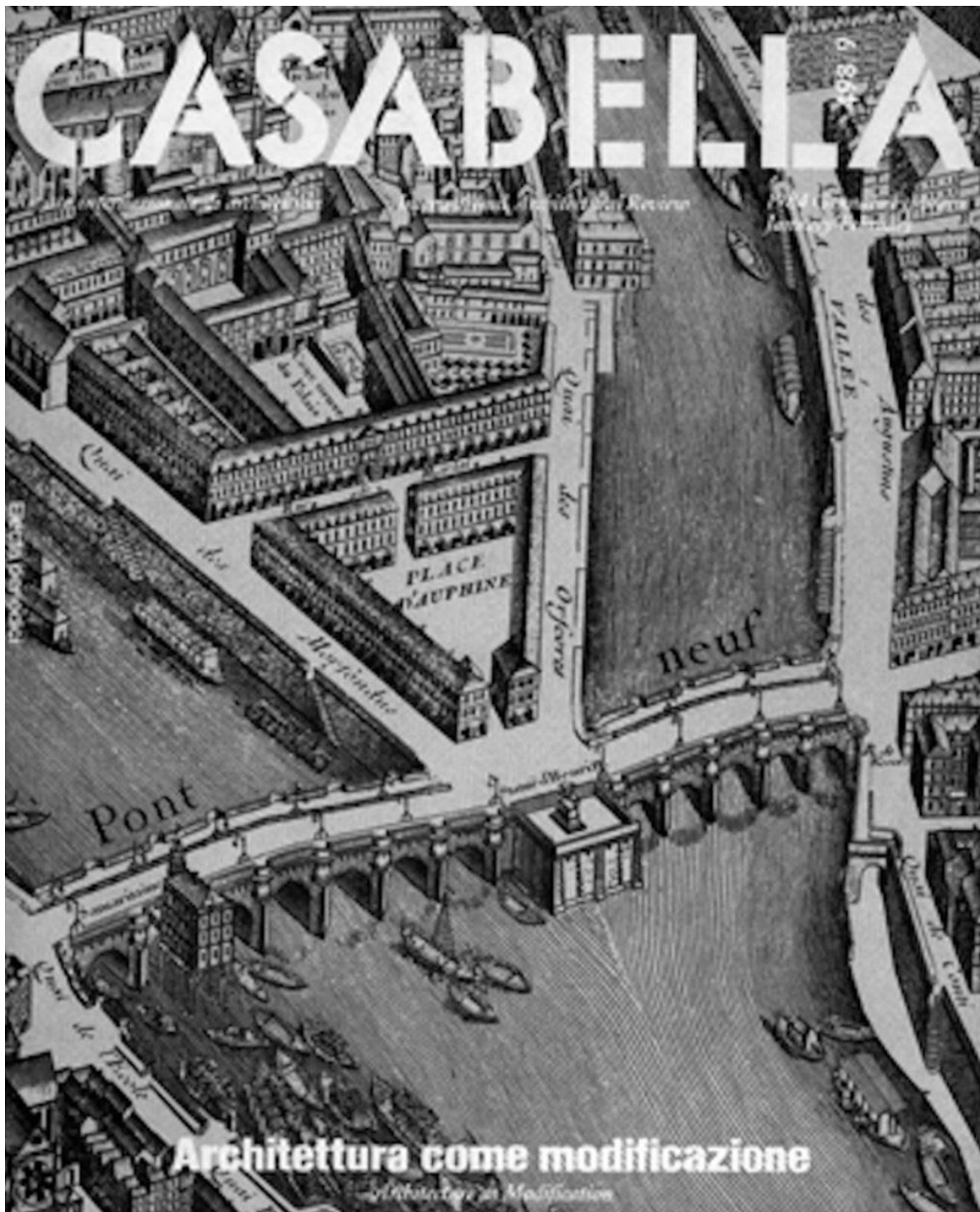
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Cover of the issue of *Casabella* that included Giorgio Ciucci's article entitled "Roprogettare storie/Replanning the Histories".