Architectural History in a “Transformed World”: A Response to Alex Bremner

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Texte intégral

1 In Alex Bremner’s recent essay “Does ABE Journal need a rethink?”, he develops a plea to rethink the journal’s scope by introducing contributions on “early modern” topics to its pages. I will develop my argument about this request from two standpoints. Speaking as an architectural historian whose work has focused on central Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I can be rather sympathetic to Bremner’s call. However, as a member of the ABE editorial board, I feel that in this stage, it might be more reasonable to continue the current editorial policy, limiting contributions to the time frames of the “moderns.”

2 Let me begin by stating unequivocally that architectural historians working on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can surely benefit from having a sound understanding of the history and theory of the “early modern” period and thereby specifically, what this history might offer in methodological terms. But if one studies Africa, this is not a research area where one always finds a clear boundary between the “early modern” period and the “moderns.” Historians of the longue durée of African history are particularly inspired by the concept of “longue durée.”

3 Nevertheless, if we want to set a time frame, it seems sensible to focus on the period from the sixteenth century and, possibly, even the fifteenth century on. In Alex Bremner’s recent debate essay “Does ABE Journal need a rethink?”, he develops a plea to rethink the journal’s scope by introducing contributions on “early modern” topics to its pages. I will develop my argument about this request from two standpoints. Speaking as an architectural historian whose work has focused on central Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I can be rather sympathetic to Bremner’s call. However, as a member of the ABE editorial board, I feel that in this stage, it might be more reasonable to continue the current editorial policy, limiting contributions to the time frames of the “moderns.”

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5 When one studies the architectural landscapes of colonial trade, or the findings I made in 1991, when writing my master’s thesis on the eighteenth-century debate on the origins of architecture and, in particular, the peculiar focus on Egypt in architectural scholarship on the earlier periods that construed concepts such as patronage, the reception and mediation of buildings in print culture, or even the transregional/translocal manifestations of European-African trade relationships. Alain Sinou’s work on the

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could also be acknowledged by architectural historians. But it is likely that the ways in which we have mapped and charted the emergence of such “modern” typologies have been too simplistic. They have been viewed mainly as products of an export logic from the center to the colonies, even if a few scholars have tried to dissect them, inversely, as the result of an import logic. Do we really have a sound understanding of the sometimes complex transnational or even transversal connections that underlie the design and the construction processes of such public buildings?

I would argue that we do not. In order to gain a better understanding of how, as Ostervall metaphorically puts it, the world “transformed” in the nineteenth century because of a profound reorganization of power (“state-nation”), a massive redistribution of wealth and power, and the conception of new public functions for public buildings, we have to move beyond the obvious dichotomy of “western” versus “eastern” and consider the very specific colonial and imperial differentiations.

This brings me to the last issue in Bremner’s two texts, namely his call to focus on the “study of buildings.” Of course, I endorse the call to give ample attention to in-depth analyses of buildings (and urban landscapes, for that matter), and to be wary of drifting off into discussions on the “politics of design,” if we, as architectural historians, want to contribute to larger debates on (colonial) history. Here, I align with what Antoine Picon already called for in 2010, in his concluding remarks on the fiftieth and sixtieth conference in Guimarães (Portugal), that “we may think of design—architecturally oriented design—at the top, and the bottom—what we have to do to produce design objects.”

Moreover, and this is my central point, in large part innovative “studies of buildings” still remain focused on particular national or colonial/imperial spheres, with a strong dominance of Anglophone scholarship. One of the major challenges in writing the narrative of architecture (and urbanism) in the “transformed” world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lies in crossing the boundaries of such spheres. Undoubtedly, an ability to access and read sources in several languages will become a crucial asset for future research in this direction, which is why the ABE Journal has a policy of publishing contributions and providing keywords in languages other than English. For me, no matter how sympathetic I am to Bremner’s request as a scholar, the priority is to go beyond the national, colonial/imperial, and linguistic boundaries that confine current scholarship when thinking about the future editorial project of ABE Journal. From the above it should be clear, however, that I believe the most stimulating contributions in this sense might well come from those scholars who are able to write on specific projects, figures, and developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with an acute awareness of how building labor was organized, and this is my central point.

So far, conferences in the field of construction history have been mainly centered on “western-based” research, but the 2018 edition of the International Conference of Construction History, held in Montreal, explicitly aimed to be more transnational.

In this regard, the ABE Journal should play a rather than a dichotomous, rather than dichotomous, role in forcing to define the specificity of the architectural and urban landscapes of this “transformed” world and what makes them “new.”

This is not to say that this has not been done, or not that there are not exciting contributions. But limiting the temporal focus of such scholarly debate to particular national or colonial/imperial spheres, with a strong dominance of Anglophone scholarship, and the construction process in these geographical contexts. For instance, is the term “French architecture in Egypt, or Ezio Godoli’s tireless effort to document the production of Italian architects and builders in the Mediterranean over the last two centuries, remains pioneering, as it shows the limitations of the colonial/imperial framework for architectural history research in these geographical contexts. For instance, is the term "French architecture in Egypt, or Ezio Godoli’s tireless effort to document the production of Italian architects and builders in the Mediterranean over the last two centuries, remains pioneering, as it shows the limitations of the colonial/imperial framework for architectural history research in these geographical contexts. For instance, is the term “French architecture in Egypt, or Ezio Godoli’s tireless effort to document the production of Italian architects and builders in the Mediterranean over the last two centuries, remains pioneering, as it shows the limitations of the colonial/imperial framework for architectural history research in these geographical contexts. For instance, is the term "French architecture in Egypt, or Ezio Godoli’s tireless effort to document the production of Italian architects and builders in the Mediterranean over the last two centuries, remains pioneering, as it shows the limitations of...