Afterword:

On Borrowed Time

Few authors have traversed the fields of architectural and design history with such persistence and perspicacity as the German critic Walter Benjamin. The spirit of Benjamin hangs over this book, and while his name is only directly invoked in the introduction and in Swati Chattopadhyay’s chapter on a set of bookshelves in Colonial India, you can feel his presence in the constellation of objects and themes running through all the sections. Benjamin, and others, showed us the way to grasp the modern not ‘directly’ through its own self-image but from the side, by taking the epiphenomena of material actuality as our entry points. While freeways and televisions, convenience stores and air-conditioning units, high-tech architecture and portable emergency shelters, for instance, were either unknown or in development in Benjamin’s lifetime, it is surely his spirit that has sensitised generations of historians of buildings and objects to look for illumination via the overlooked, the outmoded, and the seemingly incidental or banal. Benjamin liberates us from the auditor’s exhausting demand for canonical histories of architecture and design by steering us towards the generative pursuit of histories through architecture and design. Benjamin shifts the ground; we are no longer burdened with having to account for the thing as a ‘work’ or a ‘text’ and positing it within hierarchies and taxonomies of established values. But with this liberation comes a much heavier obligation; we become answerable to the angel of history.

In his unfinished and unfinishable Arcades Project, which he worked on from 1928 until his suicide in 1940, Benjamin collated statements about nineteenth century Paris, its buildings, its furnishings, its entertainments, its emergent consumer culture, and threaded this through with his own commentary, to create a vast montage for what he refers to as the ‘capital of the nineteenth century’. And yet to recruit him and his work for a rapprochement or synthesis between the disciplines of architectural and design history would seem ill-advised: his subjects, after all, extended beyond buildings and objects to take in fashion, literature, advertising, philosophy, urbanism, memoir, technology, and the lingering presence of the ancient and outmoded in the new. In this Afterword my intention is not to corral

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1 I am borrowing Craig Clunas’ formulation when he suggests that in the ‘social history of art’ tradition of scholarly research the most productive art history existed as ‘a social history with or through or by means of art rather than a social history of art’, in his ‘Social History of Art’ in, Critical Terms for Art History, second edition, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, Chicago: University of Press Chicago, 2003, p. 475.
Benjamin to the cause of multi-scalar accounts of our thingly environment, merely to pursue a central insight that governs his historical practice. This insight is in many respects a commonplace within the field of historiography: namely, that what we call history is not the reclamation of the past as it really was (there is no communion with the dead, no séance that would allow unmediated access to past experience), but a reconstruction of a past as it is seen to be in the present. Historians, whether their field is political history, literary history, architectural history, social history, or material history are writers not time travellers, and they make ‘history’ by stitching together sources and interpretations. What Benjamin does though, and what makes him a compelling voice for anyone interested in the practice of materialist history today, is to take this routine insight and return it to us as ‘our’ problem, ‘our’ potentiality.

In The Arcades Project, Benjamin writes that ‘the events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink’. Aside from its masculinist presumption, Benjamin is declaring that the events of the present are unavoidably written into the writing of the past, but not in any straightforward manner. The events surrounding Benjamin (a German Jew) and the writing of The Arcades Project would include, most obviously, the rise of Nazism in Germany, Benjamin’s exile in Paris, and the general precariousness of his material existence. You wouldn’t need to be a cryptographer to sense the presence of these events in the tone and general approach of Benjamin in The Arcades Project – the sense of melancholy that pervades his commentary, for instance, and his refusal to reproduce ideas of historical progress in his account of nineteenth century Paris. But Benjamin’s point is that events would invisibly inscribe themselves in the historian’s narrative whether or not the historian was a refugee fleeing from fascism or a supporter of Hitler, whether they were financially insecure or privately wealthy. The conditions of the present impinging on how the past is imagined and articulated is, for Benjamin, a universal, inescapable aspect of historical writing.

In his final essay Benjamin takes up this issue again, but now not as a universal condition, but as something that could drive the writing of a particular type of history: historical materialism. ‘Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was”’, writes Benjamin in ‘On the Concept of History’, ‘It means appropriating

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2 Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 476. The Arcades Project was published posthumously and had Benjamin not died in 1940 would, no doubt, have been developed further.
a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger.

‘Events’ are no longer just the invisible ink of history, instead they have become ‘dangers’ that animate the historian; instead of the universal condition of the present impinging on the articulation of the past, he poses the figure of a historian who struggles to grasp a past that ‘unexpectedly appears’ in a moment of danger. ‘Danger’, ‘wishes’, and the ‘unexpected’ are the terms for pursuing historical materialism. What seems clear (if this is the right word) is that this is no prescription for undertaking historical research, no roadmap for a ‘correct’ approach to history.

It is difficult to avoid the fact that today’s ‘events’ and ‘dangers’ – which surround us and which we are unavoidably involved – include a catalogue of competing emergencies: the rise of right-wing populism across the globe; misinformation peddled with alarming efficiency and effectivity across the internet; the continual hoarding of resources and opportunities to benefit structures of class, race, and gender; the cavalier indifference by power blocks to swathes of suffering and poverty; pandemics and the long tail of their mutations; and so on. And overlaying all this an impending climate catastrophe that is already causing devastation and looks set to remake the world on a planetary, creaturely scale. Given the scale and urgency of these ‘events’ it would be overreaching in the extreme to imagine that historians of buildings and objects are well-placed to respond to these conditions in any practical or effective way. Yet the angel of history means that we can’t look away either.

The humanities have a much slower rhythm than the world of social policy, politics, and political activism. Cultural history takes time, its accomplishments are often slow accretions rather than sudden gains or losses (look how long Benjamin was working on The Arcades Project). The urgencies of the world imprint themselves on scholarly activity in the humanities in the name of ‘new’ sensitivities and attunements: queer theory; critical race theory; decolonisation projects; digital humanities; environmental humanities; and so on. These attunements and their amalgamations go some way to connecting the urgencies of the

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4 Achille Mbembe uses the deadly but evocative phrase ‘necropolitics’ to diagnose the overarching political climate orchestrating today’s global society. See Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

5 Of course, there is no reason to jettison older attunements and sensitivities: Marxism, semiotics, feminism, psychoanalysis, etc.
world to academic life. By way of these new concerns researchers are sensitised to gaps and fissures in the historiographic record and are newly attuned to phenomena that might previously have gone unremarked. As part of this attunement, one necessary task for humanities researchers has been the scouring of the past for the voices of the unheard and unheralded: architects of colour, women designers, alternative modernities from the global south, and so on, as well as the analysis of how processes of marginalisation and erasure are maintained. Alongside this, researchers have looked about for ‘useable histories’ – utopian and radical ecological projects from the past, accounts of forgotten forms of activism and collective effort – that might inspire new projects in the present, or can recalibrate an image of the past (for instance by shifting the historical account of slavery by recognising the resistance of chattel slaves to puncture the ‘heroic’ narratives of white abolitionists).

From the perspective of impending climate catastrophe, it is difficult not to look at most of the recent past of architecture and design as a catalogue of environmental disasters. For instance, 1950s car styling not only evokes dreams of a streamline future, but now comes heavy with the fumes of polluting emissions and the depletion of fossil fuels. 1960s and 1970s attempts to give the furniture industry the same short-term modishness as the clothing industry now looks like the worst sort of wasteful profiteering. This is the other way that the present presses its own urgencies on a past that appeared (at the time) ‘blissfully’ unaware of them. Today Benjamin’s assertion that ‘there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’, is an accusation that can put the entire history of modernity (powered by fossil fuels and its petrocultural imaginations) in the dock. But finger-wagging moralism was not Benjamin’s scene. He was too much of a dialectician for that. Rather than imagining a clerisy of clean-handed historians driven by moral rectitude, Benjamin’s melancholy method was always to try and glean the obscured and unfulfilled promissory notes hiding in plain sight amongst the material culture abandoned by the relentless drives of fashion, to resuscitate other possibilities within barbarous history and its ruins.

How will the events of the present inscribe themselves in the material and materialist histories that are being written now? Today’s events are not only altering how we think about

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6 This isn’t the place to catalogue this growing body of literature and the work of critical reclamation, but I have in mind books like Mabel O. Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

the past; they are also altering the very nature of time and how we experience it. In 1949 Fernand Braudel imagined three durations of historical time: the quickest of these was ‘event time’ – the froth of notable individual actions and interactions – a world of declarations, manifestoes, arguments, inventions, interventions, and so on. The much slower duration of social time was history measured across a lifetime, a generation. This might involve the slower roll-out of the irruptions of event-time (the mass take-up of a technology, for instance, rather than its spectacular invention) as well as the gradual build-up of cultural infrastructures such as comprehensive education and national health systems. The slowest duration was the longue durée: ‘a history whose passage is almost imperceptible, that of man in his relationship to the environment, a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles’. Today the rhythmic identity of these three durations are being constantly unsettled: the climate and the geological, rather than heralding the slow, almost invisible changes that can only be registered across millennia, now behave more like the event-time of sudden explosive change; the slower infrastructural building that was so representative of social time can be undone in a blink of an eye. We are living a complex recalibration of time itself.

The Swedish ecologist Andreas Malm describes this recalibration as the discordant and inchoate activation of history:

Now more than ever, we inhabit the diachronic, the discordant, the inchoate: the fossil fuels hundreds of millions of years old, the mass combustion developed over the past two centuries, the extreme weather this has already generated, the journey towards a future that will be infinitely more extreme – unless something is done now – the tail of present emissions stretching into the distance… History has sprung alive, through a nature that has done likewise.

If the study of objects, buildings and material infrastructures insist that we live across exponentially disparate scales of space (from the cellular to the global networks of communication and exchange), then the study of historical ecology insists we are living

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across disjunctive scales of time.\textsuperscript{10} The fuels that took millions of years to form, have powered our sense of the modern for a couple of centuries, and the effects of this combustion is shaping our present and \textit{has already} shaped the future.\textsuperscript{11} We are living on borrowed time – time borrowed from an expansive planetary history that we have used to pay for our carbon-fuelled modernity.

The recalibration of time undoes any neat parcelling out of historical periods: historical periods of invention, of human achievement, of aesthetic accomplishments. The invitation to historians is unclear. What can we make of this? What do historians of buildings and objects have to offer in this situation? Personally, I think that there are two temptations that are worth treating with caution: the first could be thought of as the ‘funding-call’ approach to the world’s problems. This is the constant lurching towards different agendas: one year all the funding seems to be aimed at AI, the next year or two money is reserved for sustainability; one year the focus is on diaspora and refugees, the next on infrastructures. It seems to pander to an all-or-nothing logic: either you are concerned with environmentalism or you are not; either you are working towards racial emancipation or you are not. To see the present as caught up in conflicting and competing emergencies can produce a sense of chasing the research agenda that is currently most demanding (and most fundable). The second temptation that I would want to treat with caution is the lure of the overarching theory that could magically connect all the tensions and conflicts between say environmental depletion and anti-black racism, between a global class struggle and ‘fake news’. Instead of a universal and universalising theory something more modest might be in order.

The spirit of Benjamin could be our guide. His work might continue to sensitise us towards a creative way of connecting across things and ideas, across different scales of time and space. Benjamin’s spirit steers us away from the programme and the programmatic and points us towards the constellatory. It encourages us to adopt an intellectual nimbleness and fleet footedness that could make way for the unexpected, the unanticipated, the unruly. It entreats us to look-out for the surprising connection and to resist the path of least resistance. At their best, architectural and design history are empirical and connective ways of


\textsuperscript{11} Malm calls this the ‘ongoing past’ – Malm, \textit{The Progress of this Storm}, p. 5. For a more extensive account of the ongoing past see Andreas Malm, \textit{Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming}, London: Verso, 2016. An example of what this means is that if carbon emissions simply ended the oceans would continue to heat up, because the warming work of previous decades of carbon emissions would remain ‘ongoing’.
understanding the artificial environments that we inhabit. These artificial environments have been entangled in a vision of the earth dominated by an extractivist logic, but they have never been reducible to such a way of imagining the world and its resources. Looking towards the year 2000 from the perspective of the mid-1980s, Raymond Williams offered a stark statement about what is at stake in extractivist logic:

What is really at issue is a version of the earth and its life forms as extractable and consumable wealth. What is seen is not the sources and resources of many forms of life but everything, including people, as available raw material, to be appropriated and transformed. Against this, the ecological argument has shown, in case after case, and then as a different way of seeing the whole, that a complex physical world and its intricate and interacting biological processes cannot for long be treated in such ways, without grave and unforeseen kinds of damage.\(^\text{12}\)

Even if the future looks bleak, we need, in our small way to be able to imagine a different way of seeing the complex lifeworld, of providing non-extractivist visions of the past and the future. Benjamin suggests that such seeing might be undertaken, not from above, but glimpsed through constellations of seemingly disparate materials. What is at stake is not just a liveable planet for humans, but a creative capaciousness capable of imagining what a liveable planet might actually be like.