

**KEY WORDS:**

Architectural History, Architectural Object, Object Studies, Object Histories

## The Architectural Object as the Vanity of History

**Kaiwan Mehta**

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay reflects upon several questions on teaching of history of architecture arising out a sustained and thoughtful engagement with the subject in various forms. A most basic question that needs asking is about the purpose of teaching history of any domain in the curriculum towards a primary degree in that domain. The bent of asking such questions and answering them may lead to many directions. Besides pragmatic and conservative reasons of studying the past, it is necessary to acknowledge its shaping of the discourse of the present because our beliefs and imaginations in the present are based on what is inherited, remembered, and celebrated; equally on what is left as forgotten. An architectural object from the past with its embedded knowledge is inherited in the present, holding different meanings than originally intended. Therefore, to study and teach history to fathom and debate the present maybe a more fruitful exercise, a more productive engagement. The essay argues that creative working with historicity may allow us to understand architecture and what it represents better, and for that one needs to engage with newer ways of enquiry.



**Kaiwan Mehta** is a theorist and critic in the fields of visual culture, architecture, and city studies. He holds a PhD in Cultural Studies from the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bengaluru, Manipal University. He has authored '*Alice in Bhuleshwar: Navigating a Mumbai Neighbourhood*' (Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2009) and '*The Architecture of I M Kadri*' (Niyogi, New Delhi, 2016). He has delivered keynote lectures and seminars at Cornell University, Centre Pompidou, Paris, besides other Indian and international universities, institutions, museums, and organisations; and has also contributed a section on Modern and Contemporary Architecture in India and South-Asia for the recent and updated edition of Bannister Fletcher's '*A History of World Architecture*'. Besides being a curator for several seminal exhibitions in India and abroad, and an educator at a few prestigious institutions, he has been the Managing Editor of Domus India. Presently, he is the Dean at Balwant Sheth School of Architecture, NMIMS, Mumbai.

kaiwanstudio@gmail.com

## Why History of Architecture?

This essay is about the trials and travails of being a teacher of History of Architecture over the last 25 years. It is not about the very personal in the teaching as much as it is about the times in which a subject such as History had to be taught. What purpose would have ever existed to include the history of any domain, as a subject in the curriculum towards a primary degree in that domain, especially one (the subject and the domain) that is largely perceived to be of a nature of pragmatic application and the ability to perform a task, however creative, a task at the end of the day? Would it be a simple familiarization, a kind of ego of the discipline to say it had a history with trials and tribulations, or was the subject an investigation into some key principles that leads the profession and practice in the present? Would it be to provide the student with a ready reckoner of sorts?

Teaching of History of Architecture in the last few decades could lend in more contemporary interpretations for teaching the subject – some more conservative, some more argumentative. History of the subject itself may tell you different stories of the compulsions and interpretations of why a subject such as the history of a domain should be taught. The pragmatic and the conservative reasons are always easy to digest – pride in the good past, ready reference to identity building (and identification), remind oneself of civilizational achievements to instill a sense of pride and civilizational progress, build a list of iconic ideas and canons, and so on.

All of the above treat history as a standard set of samples or examples, fixed in time, inherited in the present with a fixed and readable history, and now for the reverence or reference, or marking of time. Clearly history has no place in the active and alive present, except as an object inherited from the past, to be enshrined for rituals we wish for today – rituals of pride and honour or rituals of upholding ideological integrity. But, is an object from the past, inherited untouched in the present, the one and same object? Has not pure passage of time, if nothing else the vagaries of use, love and anger, altered the object? Have we as the human tribe with a civilizational passage of time, shifts in cultural and

political thinking, changes in thought and mind with changing technologies and relationships, not changed in our seeing and thinking? Can we surely and safely claim to have the same seeing and thinking as the beautiful minds, hands, and eyes that built the Khajuraho or Dilwara temples, or fathomed the domes of Taj Mahal or Gol Gumbaz, or Hagia Sophia, or the buttresses flying out at Chartres, or designed the gardens at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi? We live in a culture and time where change of names is imagined to change histories, or allow for a forgetting of a slice of history, and if that be possible, how do we imagine an entire object means the same to us as it meant to its creators and the audiences it sat within over time?

### **History in Service of the Present**

Teaching History is always in love of the present, a wished present, a hoped for the present! If someone teaches history because they are fascinated by the past, it may only be half the worth of that entire effort and interest. But to study and teach history to fathom and debate the present, maybe a more fruitful exercise, a more productive engagement. History is not an engagement with the past for the sake of retrieving the past only, but it is an engagement with knowledge – as inherited, as remembered, and as traced in some corners and leftovers of time. That knowledge is in many forms – physical forms – books, fabrics and textiles, food and ceremonies, or architecture and objects/space built and carved, and crafted, with solid materials and engineered techniques and technologies. History is the search for that knowledge embedded in these forms, because that knowledge is either too present and overwhelming, or we can see only in traces, buried deep somewhere, till we discover it.

Why is this historical knowledge overwhelmingly present, and was it always so? Why did these traces not get wiped out, as the rest and most of it? Why did this get buried, was it time or design? These questions are important to us for the present, as our beliefs and imaginations in the present are based on what is inherited, remembered, and celebrated.

Also, it is important to ask why did we not inherit that which we did not, what was forgotten and why, why did we choose to celebrate some and hate some? Clearly, history is not what exists and comes down to the present, but the choices we make in seeing that which we inherit and have amongst our presence.

### **The Architectural Object and its Interpretation**

The architectural object is the ideal object of history – it survives across time, unchanged or as ruins, and allows us to believe we have inherited a moment in time unchanged, or that which is visibly changed or lost. We have the confidence in both then – to measure the unchanged and save it for posterity, or pick up the traces and fathom the whole as lost to time. We believe in both with full confidence and an ability to measure time via the material reality of the architectural object. But can we map and measure the minds and

hands that designed and constructed it, or the eyes and bodies that received it and made that object a part of their own lived worlds?

We make these attempts, and in the last few decades important questions on how knowledge is produced and created, what we know and how we know, have been raised through interdisciplinary and comparative studies. Emergence of fields such as Object Studies and Object Histories, Visual Cultures and Cultural Studies, have opened up newer avenues of viewing objects, practices, and the histories they belong to, and they bring to us, or the histories we bring to these objects and practices. The architectural object or the architectural scenario is in a tryst with its own as well as borrowed history. We can drag it to a future which again is debating and searching for its own history, anyway!

The typical temple in what is broadly defined as Hindu and Jain traditions, with a Garbha Griha and Shikhara, a few mandapas and many columns, as drawn into an architectural plan makes you believe in an axial arrangement of spaces and devotees; however, a good and nuanced study of ritual practices, seeing the temple beyond the architectural obsession with space and ornament as decoration, turning ornamentation into a spatial realm, and the study of comparative ritual practices will tell you the temple is more about circularity than axiality. Akbar's Diwan-e-Khas in Fatehpur Sikri is difficult to explain as a pragmatic building from any perspective – its plan begs more questions than explains even half satisfyingly the idea of a world-emperor seated in the center addressing even a select audience – would he literally rotate in all directions? But we may not be allowing enough for the philosophical ability of design to think conceptually in the architectural scheme of this building, while admitting the limitations of technology and pragmatics of a 'usable' building. One could safely argue that the Diwan-e-khas is a symbolic and conceptual manifestation of an emperor and his cosmic place and role, where within the geometries of cosmic diagrams, a seat floats at its center – but the axis mundi also had to be established in a culture that saw solid pillars as centers of cosmic revolve and churning; the seat then makes sure its center is reinforced in the cardinal and diagonal arms extending out, to the peripheries of geometric space.

Culture or theology, philosophy or conceptual thinking, one will have to battle between these, with adequate research and theoretical studies and argumentative consistency to see how buildings sit within their time, but how they may also escape their own history. One will have to cultivate an ability in reading architecture to allow for creative impulses and conceptual leaps. Rather than mere indulgence in historical cause-and-effect or material pragmatism, creative working with historicity may allow us to understand architecture and what it represents better, without ever compromising research ethics, theoretical argumentative consistency, over ideological underpinnings.

## **Demands of Teaching History**

Teaching History can be conforming the prejudices of the present, or it can indeed investigate those prejudices, not to claim a 'correctness' or 'truth', but towards a more critical understanding of the present. In this context, a History of Architecture has more

demands from you, since we occupy times where a dome is read more through a religious ideology than the creative impulse of technology hold space much like the sky domes above the earth. We debate the circularity of the national parliament building in a culture where circular temples and structures have marked important counter-cultures, and circumambulatory paths defining engagement with the world and cosmos. In times when human interaction with the natural world is most under scrutiny in the wake of severe climate-change crisis, concepts of building and practices of building both come under review, and concepts maybe corrupted by practice, or it may be required to remind practice of its conceptual germination, and the journey between ideas and objects, and objects and history will be necessary to debate towards a more critical view of the present.

The architectural object is indeed an embodiment of ideas and philosophies of its makers and patrons, it is embedded knowledge that goes in a building in the form of techniques of construction and detailing, but it is also about how people have built relationships between architecture and their worlds of everyday living. This maybe a perennial question across historical time, of how a building is designed and for who, and how it may be received, but there may not be a universal answer – history may indeed indicate that cultures have responded to, or involved themselves with architecture, differently at different times – the comparative studies of differences maybe important here. Are differences about history, or cultural variations perchance occurrences, or are they embedded in the architectural typology or idea itself? The study of variations maybe more useful than the idea of shaping templates or formulas for either typologies or the idea of beauty. A critical reading of history and especially a nuanced reading of architectural histories may prepare us better to deal with a complex world and the creative complications it contains, rather than look for readymade symbols to satisfy myopic views of the world or indeed our identity.

### **Asking Good Questions**

Very often, in the first class of History of Architecture for a degree course student, we ask ‘Why study History?’ or ‘Why Study History of Architecture?’ and wish to generate a discussion to make the student realise the importance of the subject. No doubt, the merit of this approach will depend on how a teacher approaches the subject themselves – conservative or dialectical and critical, as I pointed out earlier in the essay. However, in asking this question for a discussion, we defeat the purpose of both – the subject and the particular session – we inherently accept that the question of History is not central and inherent to practice but a choice of good ethics. Teaching of History of Architecture should be designed to set the ground for debating design and architectural choices, for a student graduating to be an architect, through rounds of familiarizing with human mind and society’s experiments with truth! ■