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Foundations of Modern European Intellectual History

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If Walls Could Speak: Cases of architectural analysis in three works on intellectual history

Despite the growing enthusiasm in present-day academia for creative forms of interdisciplinarity, at least two groups have for the most part staunchly kept their distance: architectural historians and intellectual historians. Now, there is no obvious reason for why the two should exchange notes; throughout all of human history, architecture has almost never been considered a primarily intellectual endeavor, and there is no agreed-upon template for understanding how elements from that field might relate to those in intellectual history. For instance, even though we know that the famous modern architect Le Corbusier read some Nietzsche when he was young,¹ could this piece of information lead us to any substantive insights about his subsequent built works, and could an intellectual historian studying Nietzschean ideas stand to gain anything from such a tidbit? The answer to both of these queries is far from clear.² Even though borrowings from philosophy featured prominently in works of

¹Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 30.

² See Allen H. Brooks, *Le Corbusier's Formative Years: Charles-Edouard Jeanneret at La Chaux-de-Fonds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 174.

late twentieth-century architectural theory,³ their authors seemed much less interested in the secondary-source works by intellectual historians who traced, probed, and contextualized the development of these ideas. Likewise, intellectual historians have for the most part made little use of architectural writing and history, which is often steeped in specialized terminologies and insular disciplinary issues that easily appear irrelevant to their concerns. Architects are infamous for producing texts whose logic seems hard to follow and at times even specious to the eyes of people from other disciplines;⁴ moreover, they are equally well known for appropriating ideas from other fields before partially or completely mutilating these ideas in an attempt to support their own architectural arguments.⁵ Given these realities, in addition to all of the usual disciplinary barriers, the distance between architectural and intellectual historians seems quite understandable.

If more brave souls try to bridge this gap in the coming years, it will likely not be due to a diplomatic warming of relations between the two camps, but rather because certain backdoor pressures are beginning to impose themselves. Here I am particularly thinking of the work of cultural historians, who, in their eagerness to encompass all of the varied manifestations of a culture within the scope of their work, have pointed the way towards what a rapprochement between architectural and intellectual history might look like. Cultural history has particularly

³ A few notable examples amongst many others include *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* by Alberto Pérez-Gómez (MIT Press, 1983), *The Ethical Function of Architecture* by Karsten Harries (MIT Press, 1997), and *Architecture from the Outside* by Elizabeth Grosz (MIT Press, 2001).

⁴ As Peter Gay puts it, “[t]he language of architects is notorious for its imprecision, pretentiousness, and addiction to cliché ...” Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The outsider as insider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 101.

⁵ The most famous case of this constitutes the multitude of (more or less pseudo-) Deleuzian interpretations that arose in architecture during the past thirty years, even though this trend has by no means confined itself to the writings of Gilles Deleuze. With respect to him see, for example, Hélène Frichot and Stephen Loo, eds., *Deleuze and Architecture* (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

favored the engagement of non-textual elements as part of its investigations into cultural ideas, and as such has spawned many discussions of how the aesthetic practices of a given period relate to its more scholarly, written practices. Thus we obtained seminal books by authors such as Lynn Hunt, whose *Family Romance of the French Revolution* (2013), for instance, examines artistic works alongside philosophical and political writings during the time of Jacobinism to construct a larger understanding of the dynamics and patterns that permeated them all. Because cultural historians place a particular emphasis on incorporating not just “high-brow” forms of culture but also “low-brow” ones,⁶ they intimate at the possibility of establishing a dialogue between intellectual works and even self-taught, vernacular kinds of architecture. Books such as Hunt’s have paved the way for scholars to tackle the problem of how certain histories of architectural design might relate to certain histories of intellectual thought, even though the obstacles to undertaking such an endeavor remain plentiful.

In this paper I will review three cases, all of which date to within the last fifty years, wherein architectural topics were discussed as part of a work of intellectual history. These cases can be found in Peter Gay’s *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (1968), Steven Aschheim’s *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (1992), and John Toews’s *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (2004). All three books constitute classic works of intellectual history in the sense that each one unfolds the various influences and inner workings that spurred the development of a set of ideas within its historical context. Yet each of these books also pushes back against the standard template of intellectual history by incorporating within its purview certain kinds of social phenomena not

⁶ See Peter Gordon, “What is Intellectual History?” available at http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/history/files/what_is_intell_history_pgordon_mar2012.pdf.

normally considered in such works. While political issues are central to the arguments of all three books, these issues are common fodder for intellectual historians. Gay goes a step further by devoting many pages to poets and artists, while Aschheim's book examines avant-garde social groups, dancers, and even the cultural history of soldier life. Toews, for his part, incorporates juridical questions and musical composition. Most importantly for our purposes, all three authors also devote at least some attention to certain architects who they link, in one way or another, to the historical and intellectual subjects of their research.

As it turns out, the architects discussed in these otherwise quite different books are all German. Moreover, all of them are central characters in the story of modern architecture: Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841, discussed in Toews), Peter Behrens (1868-1940, in Aschheim), and Walter Gropius (1883-1969) as well as his Bauhaus school of design (in Gay). We encounter these mastodons of architectural history, however, in a scholarly context that is remarkably different from the one that architectural historians typically provide for them. Rather than being served up as links in a chain of architects—a master narrative aiming to retrace the development of modern architecture—or segregated and lionized in a definitive monograph that revolves only around them, the architects in question are now cast in a completely different light. We find them basking in the glow of contextual historian characters and movements that are often downplayed in—if not omitted altogether from—most architectural publications, surrounded by the messy entanglement of contemporaneous issues and pressures that some architectural historians had worked so hard to free them from, historiographically, all to better set them up on an imaginary pedestal as unperturbed figureheads for architecture and nothing else.

It is significant that I have chosen three works of intellectual history that address architectural history, rather than the other way around, for the result is that the architects discussed appear somewhat defamiliarized in this setting. The point I want to make here is that not only do intellectual historians have much to gain from incorporating architectural topics into their research, but so do architectural historians have much to learn from how the former treat the bread-and-butter of historical architectural research. As we will see, the various ways in which Gay, Aschheim, and Toews go about doing this task demonstrate that much remains to be said about even the most written-about designer, simply by altering the frame of reference that one uses to analyze his or her work. The efforts of these authors can also, we hope, usefully illustrate the terrain of risks and opportunities that litter the path towards linking architectural and intellectual histories.

Peter Gay's *Weimar Culture* comprises a telling snapshot of the Weimar Republic (which spanned from 1918-1933) in an attempt to distill the fundamental spirit of this period out of its creative works and ideas. Gay casts his net widely, from politics and intellectual production to the arts, composing rough portraits of the main figures of the Weimar years while also trying to convey a sense of the mentalities and trends that then were coursing throughout the educated German populace. Even though the crushing majority of the pages in this book speak of other things than architecture and design, the third sentence of the preface alerts us to the pivotal role of the few that do: "When we think of Weimar, we think of modernity in art, literature, and thought ... we think of *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Magic Mountain*, the *Bauhaus*, Marlene Dietrich." (xiii) Gay reiterates this point at the start of the fifth

chapter with a similar refrain: “*Caligari* continues to embody the Weimar spirit to posterity as palpably as Gropius’s buildings, Kandinsky’s abstractions, Grosz’s cartons, and Marlene Dietrich’s legs.” If we ignore the sexism of the last item, let us stress how prominently Gay places the architect Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus academy amidst the legacy of Weimar. Architecture may not constitute the main theme of the book or even fill a large number of its pages, but clearly Gay believes that it is central to understanding the Weimar years and what they have bequeathed to us.

The Bauhaus, for Gay, in a certain sense epitomized the story of the Weimar Republic: the exciting promise of a new, rational form of order, tinged with sobriety as well as a hint of gloomy foreboding, which soon thereafter underwent catastrophic downfall only to find refuge and final fulfillment in exile. In the fourth chapter, Gay retraces the story of the independent school of architecture and design that is the Bauhaus, describing its main protagonists. Just as the Weimar Republic was officially born in 1919, so was the Bauhaus. The program of the latter was fueled by a desire to unify the arts of the built environment—similar to how Weimarian poetic and intellectual culture strove to reconcile estranged human feelings with the lurching, abrasive, and yet promising power of modern industrialized civilization.⁷ A “modern and democratic philosophy” permeated the designs of buildings by Bauhaus architects, Gay says, much in the spirit of the ambitious initial political direction of the young republic.⁸ Like the nation itself during these years, the school was not free of internal tensions, yet it persisted with rugged determination through countless challenges.⁹

⁷ “... the new architecture sought for wholeness by seeking to satisfy both economic and aesthetic needs.” Gay, 100.

⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁹ Ibid., 100.

Just as the republic began to show signs of stumbling, “in 1932 politics and depression drove [the Bauhaus] to Berlin, for its final twilight existence,”¹⁰ and “[it] should surprise no one that the Bauhaus survived the Weimar Republic by only a half a year.”¹¹ The fact that most of the Bauhaus faculty sought exile from the Nazis in the Americas, where their teachings bloomed into some of the central tenets of international modern design, cannot only be explained by the events in Germany at that time but also, according to Gay, exemplifies the very spirit of Weimar itself, which also went into exile. As Gay sees it, the Weimar republic constituted a brief but intense moment of political, intellectual, and artistic activity, a flurry of work by “outsiders, propelled by history into the inside, for a short, dizzying, fragile moment,”¹² who then subsequently fled to other countries while carrying their experimental visions with them. Hope, feverish creativity, vulnerability, failure, and escape: for Gay this heady mixture constitutes a key part of the Weimarian essence, which also fueled one of its most emblematic products, the Bauhaus.

Unlike the other two authors we will discuss here, Gay does not analyze a single work of architecture; he does not even mention any specific building produced by a member of the Bauhaus. His interest lies more in the educational, intellectual, and collective spirit of this school as a micro-institution mainly constituted by its group of talented and idiosyncratic instructors. Gay does, however, quote the writings of several architects, including those of the Bauhaus director Gropius as well as some by Erich Mendelsohn, who was not part of the Bauhaus but designed the famed expressionist Einstein Tower (1921) known for its organic layout and plastic-

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 101.

¹² Ibid., xiv.

looking curves. Both Gropius and Mendelsohn, as Gay sees it, championed the conceptual “reconciliation” of opposites as a principle to light the way for their designs. “Reason and passion here must collaborate,” writes Gay, highlighting Mendelsohn’s appropriation of the Hegelian term “*aufheben*” in the latter’s call to use design as a way to fuse antithetical dualisms into greater, higher-level wholes.¹³ Gay also dwells at length on the pedagogical program of the Bauhaus, detailing the main lines of its anti-bourgeois, anti-Beaux Arts approach traced out in Gropius’s founding manifesto, as well as the innovative educational program experienced by its students. Clearly, as Gay saw it, the textual and conceptual production of this school and its founders comprises what mattered most in the context of a discussion on Weimarian culture.

To an architect, though, such emphasis on writings and pedagogical agenda over built works—or at least the act of quoting written material without confronting it with the actual designs produced by its authors—may seem like an anathema. In Gay’s mind it must have offered the best way of bringing this piece of architectural history into the fold of his work on intellectual and cultural history. As his pages about the Bauhaus remind us, architects are members of society too, not the isolated creative types we sometimes picture them to be. The Bauhaus provides an perfect example of how the ideas, politics, and social atmosphere that structure the life of designers, and which swirl immediately around them, constitute just as much a part of the architecture as the techniques and physical materials through which their designs are executed. Through his handling of the inner workings of the Bauhaus story, Gay presents us with a compelling model for how architectural matters can be incorporated into a study of intellectual history.

¹³ Ibid.

We are less convinced, though, by the way in which Gay positions the special case of the Bauhaus within its broader national context. According to Gay, the Bauhaus was just that: special. Even though its story echoes the important aspects of Weimar Germany, he curiously presents it like a somewhat isolated phenomenon: a beacon of hope radiating the very best of Weimar, which collapsed along with the republic but, unlike it, had sustained until the end the full integrity and righteousness of its vision. His discussion of the Bauhaus takes on the form of a strange interlude, incongruously placed not alongside descriptions of other aesthetic movements in Germany but rather tacked onto the end of chapter 4 (“The Hunger for Wholeness: Trials of Modernity”), which deals primarily with the dark and shrill world of Weimar political and historical writing. Although Gay claims that Bauhaus designers shared with their compatriots (even retrogressive ones) a longing for “connection and unity,”¹⁴ he depicts the Bauhaus on the whole as a unique counterexample to the more dangerous and retrograde ideological extremes of the period—a besieged holdout of reason and constructive optimism in a republic where both of these impulses found themselves increasingly overwhelmed. “What Gropius taught, and what most Germans did not want to learn, was the lesson of Bacon and Descartes and the Enlightenment: that one must confront the world and dominate it, that the cure for the ills of modernity is more and the right kind of modernity.”¹⁵ Ironically, even though the story of the Bauhaus as told by Gay tacks closely to the larger story of Weimar, the author also brands the school as fundamentally different and separate from the Weimarian context due to its supposedly uncompromised progressiveness. Thus the Bauhaus appears to constitute both a miniature of the

¹⁴ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵ Ibid., 101.

Weimarian reality but also, and significantly, an alternative version of that same story freed of its most sinister components.

There is no doubt that Gay reveals his true colors here; he strongly believes in the project of the Enlightenment and the supremacy of reason. For him, the Bauhaus stood only for these and thus remained uncontaminated by the less “rational” influences working in Weimarian Germany. Besides the fact that Gay’s black-and-white categorization is overly superficial, it also damages his efforts to contextualize the work of the Bauhaus by casting it on a fundamentally different plane than the one on which the other cultural activities of Weimar Germany were taking place, which he represented in a much more conflicted and nuanced light. Therefore the reader comes away from Gay’s description with the impression that the Bauhaus remained pure and untouched, partially severed from some of the broader conditions that characterized the Germanic nation at the time. Certainly we cannot expect that every social phenomenon moving through Germany had some influence on the Bauhaus, but it seems suspect that only the positive ones might have. Because Gay chose to portray the school in the simplistic terms of a temporary harbor for shining minds of rationalist hope, “outnumbered and not destined to succeed” in a country that ultimately ended up pointing the other way, he partially undermines his argument about how the Bauhaus was a quintessentially Weimarian product, entangled with the hopes and limits of this age. On the one hand, Gay has demonstrated for us a useful way for how to embed architectural history into a conversation about intellectual history, but on the other hand his overly-enthusiastic celebration of the Bauhaus as a categorically “good” bastion of positive rationality blunts the force of that example.

Like Gay's book, Steven Aschheim's *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany* addresses a number of different types of cultural phenomena. Unlike Gay, however, Aschheim chose to trace the multiple manifestations that arose from one intellectual body of work over the course of an entire century, rather than focusing on a circumscribed moment in German political history. As Aschheim argues, the task of describing the impact of Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas on all facets of Germanic life is a daunting one, in large part due to the sheer abundance of post-Nietzschean symptoms and the deep pervasiveness of his influence on German culture. Discussions of architecture and design in Aschheim's book are brief and relatively minor, but in this case the former serve to illustrate exactly how pervasive Nietzsche's influence was. Innovative forms of architecture are not singled out here in a quasi-stand-alone passage, like they were in Gay's book. Instead, Aschheim sprinkles references to architects throughout a chapter of his narrative, presenting them as small facets within a much larger landscape of diverse, shimmering, and second-hand glimmers of Nietzsche.

The basis of Aschheim's approach in fact constitutes a deliberate inclusiveness towards all such myriad permutations of Nietzschean influence. Rather than censoring a part of these phenomena by branding some of them as unfaithful to an allegedly "original" Nietzsche, Aschheim welcomes their plurality, claiming that it is in fact essential to understanding the impact of this renown philosopher on his home nation. Nietzsche's thought, according to Aschheim, already contained the paradoxes that went on to feed the numerous, conflicting, and diverse appropriations of it by different groups and communities. "Nietzsche's work," he writes, "cannot be reduced to an essence nor can it be said to possess a single and clear authoritative

meaning.”¹⁶ Thus the author sees the various and at times even contradictory cultural interpretations of Nietzsche’s philosophy not as a stigma, but rather as a something useful that helped fuel the extension and permeation of Nietzschean thought.¹⁷ “[I]t was precisely the fact that there was no uniformity of opinion or blinding authoritative organization that ensured Nietzscheanism’s long and varied life.”¹⁸ Per Aschheim, a celebration of such openness as well as the creativity necessary for each case of self-appropriation is entirely in keeping with the spirit of this philosopher’s work.

Yet how was it possible for Nietzschean ideas to be interpreted in such a variety of ways? The passages in which Aschheim touches on architecture and design serve to illustrate this range by contrasting the interpretation of Nietzsche by one architect with that of another. Indeed, Nietzschean influences cannot be said to have played a major role in shaping the aesthetic environment of Germany, but they can be credited with producing a spectrum of bold experiments. “Various circles—especially of architects and craftsmen,” writes Aschheim, “sought to give practical expression to his inspiration through the creation of real and imagined Nietzschean ‘life styles.’”¹⁹ No Nietzschean attitude in architecture prevailed over the others, imposing itself on all designers, and this only further substantiates Aschheim’s claim that the very essence of the Nietzschean legacy resides in the plurality of its manifestations.

The first architectural case that the author mentions is that of Peter Behrens’s work, which he labels as the most prominent example of Nietzschean inspiration in architecture. Noting

¹⁶ Aschheim, 3.

¹⁷ “It is the dynamic nature of Nietzsche’s influence, the complex diffusion and uses of his ideas, not their inherent truth, falsity, or even plausibility that must lie at the center of historical analysis.” *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

its “Zarathustrian” qualities, Aschheim points to the symbolic decorative motifs adorning Behrens’s house in Darmstadt (1901), “such as the eagle, Zarathustra’s diamond, and the *Edelstein* that radiated ‘the virtues of a world which is not yet here.’”²⁰ Moving on to a different project by Behrens—the German pavilion for the 1902 Turin Exposition—Aschheim now stresses not the symbolic realm but rather the theatrical and programmatic qualities of this design. It is here that the author (drawing on Francesco dal Co and Manfredo Tafuri) finds Behrens struggling with the problem of the “‘social applications’ of Nietzscheanism.” The “surreal cavern” that Behrens drew up for the pavilion was primarily engineered to make a statement about the political and industrial might of Germany, using the medium of architecture to speculate on how Nietzschean currents could function at the scale of the entire nation. However, such an interpretation came with a price; Aschheim quotes dal Co and Tafuri to emphasize how Behrens’s pavilion purposefully downplayed the Dionysian and exuberant aspect of Nietzsche’s writing, in a strange reversal of its central inclinations, to better apply it to the realm of political power and capitalist control. Perhaps Aschheim dwells a bit on this project in part because it buttresses his claim about the inherent tensions that characterized the reception of Nietzsche’s writings in non-philosophical fields. Most importantly for our purposes, though, we can see that the two designs by Behrens discussed in this book already present significantly different ways of envisioning the implications of the philosopher’s thoughts for architecture: the quiet symbolisms of the Darmstadt house, which unfolded its meticulously crafted imagery for the benefit of a private resident—presumably a learned aficionado of Nietzsche—clashes against

²⁰ Aschheim, 33. Here the author is quoting Tilmann Buddenseig’s analysis of the house. In a footnote, Aschheim credits the architectural historian Christiane Schutz “for drawing my attention to Behrens’s Nietzschean connections.” However several scholars have explored the topic in depth, including Stanford Anderson in the later *Peter Behrens and a New Architecture for the Twentieth Century* (MIT Press, 2002).

the loud, majestic public propaganda of the Expo pavilion, which was intended to project a progressive and forceful national identity to a mainstream crowd of visitors through spatial staging and illumination effects.

As a counter-point to Behrens, Aschheim proffers the example of the architect Bruno Taut, whose drawings and designs echoed the Nietzschean fascination for “the majesty of ice peaks.”²¹ Taut, says Aschheim, “was the most prominent exemplar of a wider cult of mountains closely associated with Nietzsche and Nietzschean imagery.” Taut’s self-professed “Alpine Architecture” therefore constitutes a case of Nietzscheanism which picked up some of the philosopher’s leanings to then elaborate a particular formal architectural language—comprised of crystalline, faceted surfaces—recurrently set in a wonderland context of towering mountain peaks, sublime gorges, and geometricized natural formations. This example demonstrates yet another kind of Nietzscheanism in architecture: neither the symbolism of recognizable imagery nor the manipulation of theatrical effects meant to fill visitors with respect for great power, but rather a conceptual metamorphosis that processed certain recurrent themes in the philosopher’s texts to produce a new formal order for architecture.

The 1903 redesign of Nietzsche’s archives, three years after the philosopher’s death, supplies Aschheim with still another example of how architects incorporated the former’s influence in wildly different ways. Henry van de Velde (a respected Belgian Art Nouveau designer) was responsible for this project, which according to Aschheim exudes “an optimistic, harmonious classicism.”²² Exhibiting the natural motifs and taut, curved lines typical of this

²¹ Ibid., 34.

²² Ibid., 48.

architect's work, the Nietzsche archives were nonetheless distinguished by a kind of compositional elitism and noble restraint that, for Aschheim, "reflected the earlier, more cosmopolitan group of Nietzscheans. Van de Velde's Nietzsche was essentially European, a champion of the higher redeeming values and of the regenerating powers of art and the spirit." In this particular case—unlike all of those we examined so far—the Nietzscheanism of the architecture can ostensibly be witnessed through what French architectural theorists of the eighteenth century once called *caractère*, defined as the expressive qualities of a building which intuitively communicate the attitude and social ranking of its inhabitants irrespective of its classical order and decorative program. Thus, as Aschheim sees it, van de Velde hit upon yet another way to inflect his architecture with an homage to the great German philosopher.

Even though architectural works are discussed only fleetingly in Aschheim's book, they provide a useful way for him to make his point about the highly varied nature of Nietzschean cultural expressions. As readers of this masterful survey, we can only be dissatisfied in the sense that, if anything, Aschheim embraces the pluralism to such a degree that he spends only a small amount of time with each instance of cultural Nietzscheanism. Though Aschheim is critical of dogmatic interpretations of Nietzsche, he ends up being dogmatic about his own approach; in his effort to question the primacy of any Nietzschean interpretation over any other, he is emphatic about attributing a roughly equal importance to each and every one of the various materials and media he discusses, moving briskly from one to the next.

However, the question that remains in our minds is this: could some of the material in Aschheim's book have deflected or pushed back against his broad, cataloguing impulse? In other words, could some historical cases have forced him deeper into the problematic about how

Nietzsche was received? My sense is that the graphic artworks and architecture of the early twentieth century might have constituted precisely such a catalyst, had Aschheim spent more time discussing them. Because many designs and artworks possess an explicitly instructive role of communication and dissemination, they might have provided a unique lens through which to see how and why Nietzsche's legacy took off so powerfully in such contrasting directions.

Perhaps Aschheim was burdened by the sheer quantity of material that he had to deal with, for Nietzsche's thought spawned such large quantities and such a wide range of undertakings. Nevertheless, the central weakness of his book (i.e. giving equal significance to each and every Nietzschean offshoot) also constitutes its main strength; from this sweeping and rolling terrain emerges a living, dynamic form of Nietzschean activity that is—dare we say it—perhaps more Nietzschean than even Nietzsche himself. In other words, Aschheim refrained from judging all of these manifestations against some allegedly “original” Nietzschean text in order to, rather surprisingly, recompose Nietzsche out of their massive, scintillating fragmentation—precisely thanks to its paradoxes, not despite them. This approach owes much to postmodern and post-structuralist literary interpretation, which Aschheim in a sense applied to this matter of cultural theory. The result is that he brings Nietzsche to life for us, demonstrating the continued, relentless propulsion of the philosopher's ideas via the combined effort of all those who variously tried to combat, trivialize, distort, prune, celebrate, parody, and cherry-pick them. In this book, Nietzsche ironically appears most alive and most influential the farther one moves away from him (both the man as well as the body of work). Having spread through every facet of Western society, Nietzsche's ideas—as Aschheim presents them—seem to possess a life of their

own, continuously spawning new reactions and movements even, and perhaps especially, once they travelled far beyond their so-called “original” source.

However, despite the conflicting interpretations of Nietzsche’s texts, these interpretations did have a source, and this source was characterized by certain features rather than others. One of the key features of Nietzsche’s oeuvre is in fact the significance it placed on notions of beauty and creativity, and this too suggests that aesthetic works whose authors grappled with his ideas merit close attention. Was there something specific about Nietzsche’s writings that, beyond their endemic reach, called for being interpreted via aesthetic and spatial creations in a way that other philosophical bodies of work did not? Aschheim neither formulates nor addresses this question. Instead, his book moves at a steady clip from one case to a completely different one.

The author is so radical in his inclusive attitude towards all Nietzsche para-phenomena that, if we were to extrapolate his reading, we might even see the entire world as the epitome of Nietzscheanism: a single massive explosion of human processes including art, war, entertainment, politics, industry, and everything in between. Yet even this impression brings us back to the realm of art and architecture, for Aschheim himself supplies us with the case of a historical project that illustrated precisely such a notion: Count Kessler’s 1911 plan to honor Nietzsche with a “gigantic festival area ... where art, dance, theater, and sports competition would be combined into a Nietzschean totality. For Kessler this was the literal translation of Nietzsche into mass activity.”²³ Here we find more proof that a special bond might link the realm of aesthetic or spatial design to Aschheim’s view of how Nietzsche’s ideas spread over time. Using spatial and programmatic terms, Count Kessler’s festival-grounds project actually

²³ Ibid., 49.

prefigured Aschheim's own approach to the subject matter by defining Nietzscheanism more as an open, communal, popular, heterogeneous, and dynamic profusion of cultural occurrences, rather than as a codified text or story meant to be preserved in some private, locked-away space reserved for specialists.

It is a pity that Aschheim did not comment on this partial confluence of viewpoints, which surprisingly posits a link between a past architectural project and his own more recent historiographic agenda, as a way to reflect back on the limits and subjectivity of this agenda. If we can criticize his otherwise tour-de-force of a book, it can only be for its author's unwillingness to step down, at least once in a while, from the perched viewpoint that allows him to survey so well the vast multitude of Nietzschean by-products. Aschheim's approach, after all, constitutes nothing but one more in a matrix of countless Nietzschean interpretations, and it belongs securely to the historical river of cultural repercussions he toils so tirelessly to describe. Acknowledging the subjectivity of his own particular approach, while probing its pitfalls, debts, and the unique circumstances of its historical position, would only have strengthened his book.

John Toews's *Becoming Historical* stands apart from the two other works examined here by its unprecedentedly deep engagement, for a book of intellectual history, with matters of architectural design. Toews dedicates an entire chapter of his book to Karl Friedrich Schinkel's architectural production under the reign of Frederick William III, king of Prussia from 1797 to 1840. The subject of the book revolves around the emergence of a particular set of ideas and how Frederick William IV, the successor to Frederick William III, attempted to apply those ideas in an explicit cultural project implemented by his monarchy. As the author describes, "the new king ...

fancied himself something of an intellectual and an artist,”²⁴ while at the same time having been greatly influenced by the political events and philosophical developments of the decades prior to his ascension to the throne. These events and developments notably include the period of intense national enthusiasm prompted by the German revolt against the Napoleonic invader, from 1807 to 1815, as well as the anti-Hegelian philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling.

According to Toews, both of these currents merged in the figure of the new king and his agenda, which strove to instill within his Prussian subjects a unique vision of their cultural identity rooted in the legacy that they shared with the crown and the church. This vision was notably based on what Toews calls “the historical principle” or the idea that “both German and Christian identifications would occur through the insertion of the individual self-experience into public narratives that appropriated traces of the past as present memory.”²⁵ Frederick William IV put together a sweeping political and cultural program based on this vision (which was born, lest we forget, during the years of his father’s reign), and its various manifestations can be found in fields as disparate as architecture, music, law, and historical writing.

Toews goes out of his way to emphasize that his chapters on architecture and music are not intended as minor excursions, whose function would be merely to describe how a set of ideas was taken up by these artistic fields. Instead, he believes that the ways in which the arts addressed the “historical principle” played an essential role in how this principle developed, was negotiated, and became applied in the context of Frederick William IV’s reign:

²⁴ John Toews, *Becoming Historical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xv.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

“I do not perceive the patterns of argument and representation that developed in architecture and music as simply a reflection of arguments and representations developed in the textually oriented academic disciplines of jurisprudence, history, and philology. Instead, I assume that spatial and tonal representations of what it means, personally and collectively, to be and to become historical entered into this ‘conversation’ among Prussian historicizers as independent interventions with their own messages to purvey.”²⁶

Thus we are presented with a fascinating case in which certain philosophical ideas, political actions, and artistic initiatives all worked together, in a sense, within the bounds of a common project and a shared field of beliefs (nonetheless debated) regarding what constituted the proper path forward for the Prussian nation.

Part of the reason why we have such an unusual intersection here between architectural history and intellectual history is due to the fact that Frederick William IV, the crown prince then monarch, merged these two within the contours of his own persona. As a young man, he already possessed a fascination for architectural works and spent a great deal of time drawing them, to the point of being chastised by one of his tutors:

Ancillon was especially disturbed by the prince’s tendency to use his aesthetic talents for the construction of imaginary medieval buildings, cities, and landscapes. ‘As the state is not a Gothic temple and a nation has never yet been governed by means of Romantic pictures, this eternal sketching is a true waste of time,’ Ancillon admonished his tutee in 1811 ...²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., xvi-xvii.

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

Yet Frederick William IV never gave up his passion for architecture. What is more, he apparently remained convinced that spatial designs were integral to his personal attitude towards political power, the German nation, and how to best rule over it. As Toews argues, “architecture and music played critical roles in [the] conceptions of historical identity [favored by the major political instigators of the Prussian program]. Frederick William IV actually preferred to think through and articulate his vision of cultural reform in architectural terms.”²⁸ The king applied this, for example, in his self-initiated design for a major Protestant basilica in Berlin, which he drew up and then had rendered by professional artists.²⁹

Toews wants us to understand that we are witnessing here more than a coincidental overlap of architecture with political and intellectual matters. In fact, there was something innate to this particular set of ideas that favored their blooming through the medium of aesthetic creation. “An important dimension of the friendship between Bunsen [the king’s closest advisor] and Frederick William [IV] was a shared conviction about the importance of architectural and musical forms in giving shape to a community as an historical community whose continuity through time was made continuously present in the commemorative and liturgical shaping of space and sound.”³⁰ In the king’s eyes, successful implementation of his belief that the German nation should structure itself principally on its common historical heritage inherently called for using works of architecture and music to forge an acceptance of that view amongst his subjects. The architectural buildings and musical compositions possessed the crucial ability, as he saw it, to reify the common historical bond linking the German people to one another and to their

²⁸ Ibid., xvii.

²⁹ Ibid., 58.

³⁰ Ibid., 114.

institutions, triggering via calculated aesthetics the enthusiastic identification of these people with that history.

The inclusion of Schinkel as part of this story comes with a caveat, however. Schinkel died a few months after Frederick William IV came to power, and thus the architect's work dates to the time of the previous reign. Toews nonetheless includes Schinkel in his book because, as we already noted, the concept of the "historical principle" emerged chiefly throughout the forty years or so preceding Frederick William IV's accession. Schinkel was closely involved with commissions from the royal family and the state administration throughout this period, during which he gained the trust and respect of the crown prince. Once Frederick William became king and Schinkel passed away, the former saw to it that the latter's most faithful disciples were tapped for important architectural projects and administrative posts.³¹ So even though we do not have a direct confrontation in the historical record between this architect's views on German cultural identity and those of Frederick William IV, Toews demonstrates that Schinkel was in fact deeply preoccupied with many of the same issues that captured the attention of the crown prince. Both shared a concern for how the German nation might come to see itself as one body through its historical heritage, and both believed that architecture was central to that effort—though they differed in their exact responses to this calling. "The work that Schinkel left behind," states the author, "certainly expressed a concerted attempt to construct spatial forms that would represent the unity of self and culture as above all an historical unity, but it also displayed the conflicted and problematic nature of that very project."³²

³¹ Ibid., 198-200.

³² Ibid., 117.

Toews's book wrestles with various phases of Schinkel's oeuvre, describing how each of these revealed a different attitude towards the problem of conceiving the German nation as a singular entity sailing through history. In the first part of his career, Schinkel embraced the Gothic style as what he believed to be an inherently Teutonic creation befitting the ongoing construction of a pan-German identity. Mining some of Schinkel's writings, Toews analyses how during this period the Gothic represented for Schinkel not only the "individual historical character of the Prussian and German peoples in their present historical situation," but also as "the aesthetic expression of spiritual autonomy"³³ appropriate for an enlightened country where individuals were carried by an inexorable current of progress towards "sacred" ideals.³⁴

It is important to note that Schinkel did not advocate producing literal copies of medieval architecture. He was adamant that the Gothic style should serve as the basis for a new and evolving national language resolutely pointed towards the future, i.e. one meant to change in tandem with present needs. Some of the best pages in Toews's book are dedicated to his meticulous reading of Schinkel's early neo-Gothic projects, which proposed substantial modifications to traditional Gothic features. As Toews demonstrates, the austere and monumental bases that Schinkel added to his cathedrals, their Romantic sites perched outside of the centers of towns, and their quasi-recursive piling of small vertical spires garnished with tentacular ornaments can all be harmoniously correlated with the architect's intellectual disposition towards the question of defining German cultural identity. We have here an illuminating example of how to bridge between a set of intellectual questions and the formal characteristics of architectural

³³ Ibid., 121-2.

³⁴ "Gothic cathedrals moved upward with a dynamic striving and an infinite reach that affirmed the subjective spirit's continuous struggle with the physical limitations of embodiment in space and time." Ibid, 123. "A Gothic cathedral was the idea of freedom built in space, made visible as art." Ibid., 125.

design. Based on Toews's reading, Schinkel's ideas about German history and identification were anything but superficially related to his design choices; those ideas guided his designs in specific ways, and the architectural issues that Schinkel encountered in turn pushed back against his set of philosophical and political beliefs.

Indeed, Toews traces Schinkel's progressive disillusionment with the Gothic style around 1820 and the corresponding shift that took place in both his designs as well as his written views on the creation of national identity. The German architect began to replace Gothic sources of inspiration with Greek ones, and at the same time his approach towards the issue of communal nation-building took "a significant secular turn."³⁵ This shift can be witnessed comprehensively in Schinkel's choice of materials, forms, and even the kinds of architectural programs that he proposed as part of his efforts to re-shape the ceremonial city center of Berlin. The question of the "civic" began to take precedence over that of the "ethnic;" Schinkel started to conceive of his task no longer in terms of articulating the fabric of a common German culture rooted in its shared past, but rather in terms of a programmatic effort to institutionalize the capital and educate its public. The most famous symptom of this shift—which, to our great benefit, Toews dwells on at length—comprises Schinkel's watershed design for the Altes Museum in Berlin (1830). Abandoning all traces of the Gothic, this museum harks to the Athenian polis and the classical architectural orders in an effort to present the artworks it contains as part of a pedagogical and quite worldly program. It was conceived as nothing less than a primer for visitors on the civilization-building, historical task that had been purportedly bestowed on the Prussian German people. As Toews points out, the highly original plan and urban positioning of

³⁵ Ibid., 144.

the building also emphasized this mission. Thanks to his reading of Schinkel's work after 1820, we understand how the latter began to envision the shaping of culture as an open-ended challenge intent on public education and willful domination over nature—thus abandoning his old definition of culture as a historical movement sweeping blindly through populations rooted in their local environs.

Toews succeeds so well at marrying Schinkel's designs with the political, philosophical, and anthropological claims in the architect's written output that, at times, we wonder whether the author is basing his statements more on one or the other. And this is somewhat suspicious, since architectural activity employs a significantly different medium than that of words. Toews appears so insistent on asserting that Schinkel's buildings perfectly correspond to the ideas coursing through his texts—in order to then place these in the context of a broader Prussian intellectual movement—that he fails to discuss the important distinctions between making a claim through design and making one with language. While architecture can undoubtedly be imbued with political and cultural ideas, the process of transforming these ideas into built form is never obvious or direct. Moreover, we cannot help but wonder whether Schinkel's designs might have, on certain occasions, pointed in an even slightly different direction than the one suggested in his writings. The fact of the matter is that Schinkel's plans and essays did not constitute one homogeneous body, but rather two streams flowing from the same source. If his designs did not always line up perfectly with his printed assertions (as they almost never do in the case of architects), this would not have constituted a fatal flaw for Toews's argument, but rather might

have provided another lens through which to examine the inherent tensions in the concept of the “historical principle.”³⁶

Nevertheless, let us not permit this criticism to excessively cloud the tableau of Toews’s achievement. The intellectual historian has concisely and masterfully done for Schinkel what architectural historians of the past thirty years have been attempting to do for every major architect of the modern era: to interrogate the links between the works of these designers and the major events, ideas and debates of their socio-historical context. Architectural historians should be delighted that a scholar in another field has addressed the previously glaring lack, with respect to Schinkel, of such an analysis. And although we just finished lamenting the absence of a more skeptical eye on the part of the author towards Schinkel’s architectural pronouncements, it is only with the sense that such a task is more appropriately tailored for an architectural expert than an intellectual historian such as Toews. Now it is up to architectural historians and critics to pick up where Toews left off, assuming that they are intrepid enough to wade through the mostly new (for them) waters of his book on intellectual history.

We have reviewed three quite different works, each of which exhibited a different approach to the question of how to integrate architectural topics with matters of intellectual history. Peter Gay looked at the intellectual and social body that constituted the educational institution of the Bauhaus, presenting its story as a figure through which to read the broader Weimar cultural environment. Steven Aschheim touched on architecture to illustrate some

³⁶ Curiously, Toews even brings up the lack of one-to-one parallels between buildings and ideas when discussing Schinkel’s view that “the fine arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting ... communicated in the language of perceptions rather than the language of concepts, and were thus closer to the language of nature than to culture of the spoken or written word [...]” Ibid., 160.

dimensions of how Nietzschean philosophy variably trickled down through the arts and popular culture of Germany. Finally, John Toews examined the singular historical case of how the architectural production of Karl Friedrich Schinkel found itself deeply entangled with the formulation of an intellectual, political, and cultural agenda bent on connecting the German people to their national identity. Each author handled architecture differently as part of his investigation, treating it variably as an institutional milieu, a cultural symptom, or a primary interlocutor and sound-board for ideas. Not only did the amount of importance accorded to architectural matters vary in each book, but, more importantly, so did the basic premise of how to connect them back to intellectual matters in the first place.

It would be facile to conclude that the wide breadth of responses we surveyed here accurately depicts the current lack of consensus regarding how to tackle this challenge. The act of simultaneously juggling intellectual histories with architectural histories can easily appear like a gratuitous one, around which there is no agreement because, in the eyes of some scholars, the two should “naturally” be kept apart. Such line of reflections appear to me like a white flag—a form of common knowledge that is ultimately erroneous in its assumption that architectural topics and intellectual topics can only be “unnaturally” wrested together, as if historically such elements had developed entirely separate of one another.

In all of the cases that we examined here, the truth of the matter is that designers such as Friedrich Schinkel, Peter Behrens, and Walter Gropius did not live in worlds where their architectural activity was neatly quarantined from the web of political, cultural, and intellectual influences criss-crossing their moment in history and daily lives. Intellectual matters may never have been the only factor at play in how a given architect pondered his or her designs, but in the

case of many architects—including the three German ones just mentioned—I believe that we can never discount them as a non-factor.

At the same time, there is also the alternate but related risk of declaring everyone here a winner: i.e., asserting that Gay, Aschheim, and Toews should all be commended solely for their effort to bring architecture and intellectual history together, as if merely the fact that they tried to do so could validate the various ways in which each author went about it. I do not believe that I need to expound much more on this point, since my readings of the three books should reveal clearly enough my assessments of the various merits and downfalls of their respective approaches, as well as where my affinities lie. Despite the strong interest that interdisciplinary historical research attracts these days, there is no guarantee that its results end up being more productive than those undertaken by scholars who remain strictly within the confines of their fields.

One of the problems with interdisciplinary work is that it runs the risk of placing a greater emphasis on the nature of its interdisciplinarity—particularly by dwelling on its methodological hurdles and promises—than on the subject being studied. Of course, historiographic questions are important for historians to consider and discuss. Yet the excitement (as well as suspicion) surrounding interdisciplinary endeavors can end up hampering such research when it strives to mandate fixed rules for how interdisciplinary historical research should be undertaken. The point I want to make here is that no methodology should be definitively “ruled out” or “ruled in” for such exploratory cases; instead, it is the distinctive characteristics of the topic at hand that should guide us. The goal should be neither to achieve

interdisciplinarity at all costs, or alternatively to avoid it with equal vehemence, but rather to carefully chart a course as historians based on the specific conditions we encounter.

If the three books that we examined in this essay have something to teach us, it is primarily that we should neither lament the presumed impossibility of discovering some allegedly certain, “scientific” way of bringing architectural history together with intellectual history, nor champion all and every instance of interdisciplinarity for its own sake. When confronted with a given historical material, even the best-laid historiographic plans and methodologies can be laid to waste. As the writings of Gay, Aschheim, and Toews all demonstrate, it is the unique properties of the historical material—the specific configuration of its messy, entangled realities—that should compel, each and every time, the historian to appraise anew how to treat architectural and intellectual topics as part of the same story.