

# Vincent Scully Detonates the Past

---

*Keywords*

– historiography of modern  
architecture; psychoanalytic  
theory; Vincent Scully; Carl Jung;  
architecture and time

*DOI*

– 10.14195/1647-8681\_13\_4

*The essay discusses the role which art historian Vincent Scully (1920-2017) played in revisioning modern architecture's relationship to time and history. The focus is on the psychoanalytical turn in his scholarship, which dictated that architecture was a product of collective memories rather than of historical processes. It makes a larger argument that art history, since Freud introduced the idea of "unconscious" architectural history, often became written from the perspective and for the benefit of the present.*

- 1 Yehuda Safran & Daniel Sherer, "An Interview with Vincent Scully," *Potlatch*, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 2. I thank Daniel Sherer for gifting me a copy of this journal.
- 2 Vincent Scully, "Profiles: What Seas What Shores," interviewed by James Stevenson, *The New Yorker* (February 18, 1980): 43.
- 3 Stevenson, "Profiles: What Seas What Shores," 57.
- 4 "Profile: Vincent Scully: An Artistic Showman," *Yale Daily News*, no. 43 (November 13, 1959): cover.

Known for his animated and animating lecturing style, architectural historian Vincent Scully (1920–2017) spent his career finding traces of the past in modern architecture. He was a "Yalie" – somebody committed to Yale University – through and through, having gained both his B.A. (1940) and PhD (1949) from that institution. He also aligned himself with art historical formalism, the school of thought associated with the Department of Art History, even while he never took courses with the formidable Henri Focillon. He summarized his intellectual affinity at the end of his teaching career as follows:

The iconologists of the period tended to trace forms to their original appearances, [while] for Focillon it all swept forward, and meaning changed as society changed, so the forms were alive, living their own life and creating a history of their own, sometimes shaping families across time. Anything was possible. I suppose I've been trying to be a *Focilloniste* all my life.<sup>1</sup>

He criticized those obsessed by "find[ing] a written record" on the grounds that "they are reductionists who insist upon finding a single meaning that diminishes the multiplicity."<sup>2</sup>

Scully's remarkable rhetorical skills made his lectures into blockbuster events, which culminated often in a standing ovation. One of his most popular lecture courses was "112a Modern Architecture," which, despite its title, covered material from prehistory to the present by forging connections across time and space, while shouting occasional orders to his teaching assistants operating four projectors – two for 35 mm and two for large-format lantern slides (figure 2). In his treatment, the tetrahedroid ceiling slab of Louis Kahn's Yale Art Gallery building resonated with an Aztec temple simply because of their shared formal trope: the triangle. Following Focillon's lead, Scully favoured poetic license over positivist factuality when tracing visual affinities. In his buoyant manner he exclaimed: "Everything in the past is always waiting, waiting to detonate."<sup>3</sup>

While such free-wheeling visual associations might seem both unconvincing and unscholarly to a contemporary scholar, they entailed a profound message: since the essence of architecture operated outside linear historical time, original intentions and meanings were therefore irrelevant. All things could be viewed on an equal footing, visually. Subsequently Scully gave a whole new generation of American architects a licence to discover history on their own terms. Among them was Philip Johnson, who in 1959 gleefully declared: "Hurray for history. Thank God for Hadrian, for Bernini, Le Corbusier and for Vincent Scully."<sup>4</sup> This essay takes a closer look at the intellectual roots of Scully's brand of formalism behind this historical turn.



- 5 Louis Kahn, Paul Weiss and Scully, "On the Responsibility of the Architect," *Perspecta*, vol. 2 (1953): 45.

### Making the Past Palpable

Scully remained uncharacteristically quiet during a roundtable discussion entitled "On the Responsibility of the Architect," which took place at the Department of Architecture in spring 1953 and was subsequently published in *Perspecta 2*. The introductory note lamented how "in the everyday hurry of our extroverted age we seldom have a chance to stop and reflect upon the basic things in life."<sup>5</sup> After listening to architects Pietro Beluschi, Philip Johnson and Louis Kahn talk about form-giving and space-making as an architect's main responsibility, philosopher Paul Weiss chimed in and asked: "What evidence is there, in architecture, of the great change which has recently occurred in the outlook of architects, philosophers, and scientists towards the idea of time? In what sense is architecture a temporal rather than a spatial art?" He continued the provocation by halting the notion that architects' primary function is to create something new by reminding their audience about the continuing presence and influence of the past architectures:

Architecture, particularly, is determined by the past. Almost more than any other enterprise it makes use of the past and tries to achieve a release from it. It seems to achieve a present in the face of and against the drag of the past. Architecture, more

fig. 1 Vincent Scully lecturing to students at Yale University, circa 1955.

fig. 2 Vincent Scully selecting images in the slide room at Street Hall (Yale University) in the 1950s.

6 Ibid., 51–52.

7 Ibid. 52.

8 Ibid., 53.

conspicuously perhaps than anything else, offers the present the very meaning of the past. It shows us the past as a finished fact. [...] To build a building you take first this brick and then that brick and so on. Each brick remains as part of the final result. But in music this is not true; there you have to take the note away to be able to enjoy the next. It must thus be said that music and poetry are more spiritual, more humanistic, but that architecture is more metaphysical, for it preserves the past in the object.<sup>6</sup>

Weiss stressed that architecture's function was to make the past palpable in the present as follows: "Your life in the present and architecture is the dimension of your present, a spatially defined present." Furthermore, unlike any other artform, architecture required careful planning and foresight and could thus also anticipate and influence future events. "Architecture, therefore, becomes most serious with respect to the future," he exclaims. Weiss blames art historians for dating buildings based on the time of their inception and reverses the equation: "architecture dates itself. ... it creates the date and influences what is going to be subsequently. The architect has, to begin with, the future which his predecessors left for him." By engaging all three dimensions of time – past, present, and future – "an architectural object [entails] the creation of a new world."<sup>7</sup> In his mind Yale's Gothic buildings were "inauthentic" because their architects failed to shape history by falling into hopeless nostalgia instead.

Scully chimed in when the discussion turned into the question of whether to dismiss H.H. Richardson's Romanesque architecture on the same grounds. In Scully's mind, Richardson's buildings could be credited for sponsoring the development of the skyscraper typology. The two agreed that at best architecture did not simply reflect history but shaped it as well on the grounds that the afterlife of buildings in the minds of future generations of architects was part of the equation. In Scully's mind architecture was, after all, "a question of time, of our relationship to these things in time."<sup>8</sup> The comment reflected Scully's conviction that the evolution and future trajectory of modern architecture could only be deciphered based on the meanings and associations buildings triggered in his mind rather than through contextual evidence.

A parallel can be drawn to his increasing interest in psychoanalytic theory. It had emerged as an alternative to traditional historical scholarship, which had proven inadequate in addressing the trauma caused by the two world wars. Understandably, providing information about historical events would not help console somebody affected by the horrors of those wars and the focus shifted to analysing the impact those events had on the victims' current lives. The noted American psychoanalysis Jacob A. Arlow explains the benefits of psychoanalysis in this regard as follows: "More than any other discipline it sheds light

- 9 Jacob A. Arlow, "Psychoanalysis and Time," *Journal of American Psychoanalytical Association* (June 1, 1986). Accessed online at <https://journals.sagepub.com>
- 10 The Mellons heard Jung talk at the Analytical Psychology Club in New York in 1937 and subsequently spent half a year studying with him in Switzerland. See William Hoffman, *Paul Mellon: Portrait of an Oil Baron* (Chicago: Follett Publishing, 1974), 106–107.
- 11 Andrew Causey, "Herbert Read and Contemporary Art," in David Goodway, ed. *Herbert Read Reassessed* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 141. For more on Jung's take on art, see Tjeu van den Berk, ed., *Jung on Art: The Autonomy of the Creative Drive* (New York: Psychology Press, 2012).
- 12 Herbert Read, Introduction to the catalogue *Forty Thousand Years of Modern Art: A Comparison of Primitive and Modern*. Quoted by Causey, "Herbert Read and Contemporary Art," 141.

on the coexistence of past, present, and future by unconscious fantasy thinking" as it conceives the self as "a time-bound concept."<sup>9</sup>

Carl Jung was particularly popular among the American educated elite in the decades following WWII, greatly due to the efforts of the Bollingen Foundation, which had been founded by the prominent Yale alumnus and donor Paul Mellon and his first wife Mary Conover Mellon in 1945, with the mission to publish the Swiss analyst's complete works in English.<sup>10</sup> The two subsequently hired the influential British art historian Herbert Read to edit the series. Engaging an art historian was not an accident: the creation and experience of art occupied a central role in Jung's writings. The idea that art entails traces, not only from the individual past, but also from the distant collective past had a profound impact on Read's philosophy of art after he began to attend Jung's annual conference, Eranos Tagung in 1946. According to the late British art historian Andrew Causey, exposure to Jung led Read to consider art as an essential component of human evolution and to emphasize its "enduring cross-cultural and transhistorical properties," while inhering Jung's idea that patterns of thinking that go into making art have persisted across ages, which meant that an individual artistic act had its roots in transhistorical humanity.<sup>11</sup>

It is hard to overestimate Read's role in steering discussions about the social role of art and architecture during the 1940s and 50s through his numerous publications and through the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) he helped found in 1946. His interest in prehistoric art culminated in the provocatively titled exhibition "Forty Thousand Years of Modern Art: A Comparison of Primitive and Modern Art," which he conceived with his likeminded friend Sigfried Giedion at the ICA between December 1949 and January 1950. The exhibition highlighted the "universality of art" and the "eternal recurrence of certain phenomena," while positing that a quintessentially modern artist like Picasso was not only influenced by primitive art but shared the same existential anguish with his distant artistic predecessors, whose art was thus equally "modern" as his.<sup>12</sup> Giedion delivered a lecture entitled "Art a Fundamental Experience" towards the end of the exhibition's run with the goal of restoring form and space to its original symbolic function of communicating complex human feelings and emotions; it was his first to address the significance of prehistorical art. Apart from Jung, both Giedion and Read were indebted to Susanne K. Langer, whose 1942 book *Philosophy in a New Key* saw in art and religion a key to the irreducible human condition and granted epistemological validity to feelings from which both sprung.

While Scully never cited Jung, Read, nor Langer in his writings, he clearly shared their conviction that art's primary function was to mediate the relationship between an individual and the world at large. He might have even attended some of their lectures at Yale. He was an undergraduate



- 13 "Four Art Lectures Will Be Presented by a British Writer: Herbert Read to Discuss Social Aspects of Art Next Week," *Yale Daily News* (15 March 1946): cover; Susanne K. Langer quoted in "Effect in Symbolism in Art Defined in Ryerson Lecture, *Yale Daily News* (7 May 1954): cover.
- 14 Scully, "Archetype and Order in Recent American Architecture," *Art in America* (December 1954): 254.

when Jung delivered the Tarrry lectures in 1937, during which the eminent Swiss psychoanalyst presented the idea that the unconscious operates like a volcano waiting to release traces of hidden mental processes through art. While a graduate student in 1946, Scully might have witnessed Read deliver four consecutive lectures under the rubric "Social Aspects of Art in an Industrial Age," which underlined the importance of intuitive artistic processes as a means of overcoming the overtly material and rational modern worldview and as a junior faculty member in 1954, he might have heard Langer deliver a lecture entitled "Art Symbol and Symbolism in Art," which advocated art's ability to communicate complex ideas and emotions rather than meanings.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, Scully developed his own highly idiosyncratic brand of art historical scholarship with the goal of helping mankind overcome present-day ills by reverting modern art and architecture back to this original function of reconnecting humans to life's transcendent purpose.

### Re-enacting the Past

Exposure to Jung's theories is evident in his 1954 essay "Archetype and Order in Recent American Architecture." The title sums up his thesis: architecture has evolved throughout the ages as a response to primeval human instincts, such as fear and longing, and original human spatial imagination, which, combined, had produced a series of recurring metaphors and archetypes in their wake. Their reappearance in "recent American architecture" proved that architects like Louis Kahn and Philip Johnson were "liberated from [...] from the psychological blocks concerning the 'past' which had been one of the legacies of Bauhaus, and consequently, from the expedients of fashionable change." Scully continues to disparage "the anti-historical attitude of the thirties," and celebrates that it has "given way to a more civilized awareness of the unity of all architecture, as of all human experience. Like Wright and Le Corbusier, and unlike the Bauhaus group, the present generation is prepared to learn from the architecture of all periods and places."<sup>14</sup> While his Bauhaus-caricature is somewhat surprising considering that he must have been well aware of the interest of his colleagues Josef and Anni Albers in Mesoamerican art and architecture, it was symptomatic of the wider vilification of European, particularly German early modernism during the decades following WWII, which in Scully's case went hand in hand with an effort to promote the new generation of American architects, among them Philip Johnson, Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and Eero Saarinen, who in his mind were "liberated" from the "psychological blocks" pertaining to historical memory.

Scully's words echo the basic tenet of psychoanalytical theory established by Freud at the beginning of the 20th century: since repression of the past signified pathology, history writing should help expose and eventually overcome this pathological state. His 1954 article reveals

the most salient feature of this psychoanalytical turn: writing history in reverse and working like an analyst by treating traces of the past in present architecture both as a symptom and as a cure. Opposed to standard historical inquiry, the psychoanalytic model dictated that the reaction (e.g. repetition of archetypes) determined the cause, not the other way around. In the words of one contemporary scholar, psychoanalysis proposes that "historical writing is undertaken in the name of futurity, rather than revisionism."<sup>15</sup>

Jungian themes and methodology help explain also the most anachronistic feature of Scully's historical scholarship: his obsession with the figure of the individual heroic male architect, whose creative processes are fuelled by a subliminal search for identity that culminated in the ability to enact on history rather than allow history to enact on themselves. In this construction, the creation of an architectural object was dependent on the individual's ability to re-enact and reinterpret a set of inherited spatial conceptions, again and again. He grants the honour of being the first architect to Emperor Hadrian, who in his Piazza d'Oro at Villa in Tivoli makes the recurrence of historical "archetypes" visible: an open rectangular portico or pavilion and a closed rounded cave. (figure 3) Scully celebrates how the architect

fig. 3 Spread depicting Piazza d'Oro at Hadrian's Villa (left) and Philip Johnson's Wiley House (1953) accompanying Vincent Scully's article "Archetype and Order in Recent American Architecture" in *Art in America* (December 1954): 252-253.

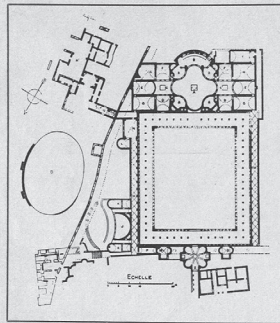


Fig. 1. Piazza d'Oro, Hadrian's Villa near Tivoli C. 117-138 A.D. Plan

emperor, yearned like ours for vanished simplicities and lost clarities. Like this generation, it consciously sought to employ ancient and basic forms in its creation of the new. Technically proficient in building, with concrete vaults and domes as well as stone trabeation available to it, the age produced probably its most memorable monuments in the Pantheon at Rome and in the Emperor's own villa near Tivoli. I should like to use a plan of the so-called Piazza d'Oro from that villa (Fig. 1), as a kind of prelude to the work of this generation of architects. Several elements in it will be referred to again as analogies to the modern work: the lobed, "melon" dome, with oculus, which creates a kind of vestibule and recalls, as Lehmann has shown, the windswept tent pavilions depicted on Etruscan mirrors; the columned rectangle of the court, which is both Greek stoa and peristyle; the terminal nymphaeum with its curvilinear colonnade carrying a continuous beam, perhaps domed, certainly with light coming from above and from the sides. These elements, taken as a directed experience in space, made a design full at once of invention and of memory. With precise differentiation of part from part, and with a decisive direction of tech-

nical possibilities toward spatial expression, the architect of the Piazza d'Oro, probably Hadrian himself, evoked Greek, Etruscan, and Roman archetypes in the service of his own longing. One may feel that basic archetypes of human experiences of the world are here as well, created by the metaphors of architecture. That is: the defined plain of the courtyard, the forest of the colonnade, the cave of the dome, the light that bursts through the cave, and the sound of water.

It is the primary characteristic of the architects of the present movement that they appear to express, with a similar sense of memory and of the uses of metaphor, the same clear archetypes of plain, pavilion and cave. Behind them all, in varying degrees, stands the work of one master: in this case, Mies Van der Rohe. Eight or ten years ago one might have felt that the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright would by the present time be exerting a more important influence upon creative architects than that of Mies. Such, however, has not generally been the case. It is true that Wright's work, certainly rich in archetypal metaphor, is now enjoying a considerable amount of popular success. The youngest generation of architects, with whose work we cannot as yet be adequately familiar, has also been brought during recent years into increasing contact with Wright's architecture and its principles — although these latter have often been obscured rather than clarified by the statements of Wright himself and of many of his admirers. Yet the generation with which we are concerned has turned for the time being from the richly interwoven, structurally complex, spatially fluid buildings of Wright toward the simpler, more static, precisely controlled and detailed work of Mies. Taking the productions of Wright's imitators as a sign, that only Wright himself can meaningfully control his kind of design, it has sought to base its own development upon something most desired in our time, something clear, integral, known, and capable of being fully, not partially, controlled.

Mies Van der Rohe's more recent buildings — the Illinois Institute of Technology, the Farnsworth house at Plano, Illinois, and the Lakeshore Apartments in Chicago — have had the most direct effect upon recent developments. His Bar-

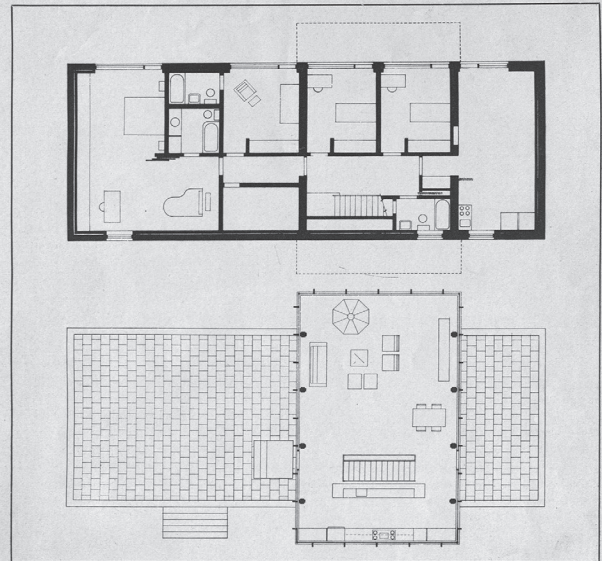


Fig. 2. Wiley House, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1953, by Philip Johnson. Plans

lona Pavilion, of 1929, with the flowing space which was influential in the 'thirties and 'forties, has been less of an influence in the contemporary movement than have his later, more precisely volumetric and structurally articulated buildings. These are put together with a craftsmanship in steel and brick which evokes the craftsmanship in stone of the Greek temple. Like the temple, they attempt only what they can fully accomplish: one clear volume of space, a few simple shapes, the clear integrity of part to part in proportion and detail. As unashamed works of art they break with the positivistic functionalism of the late Bauhaus

school, and they demonstrate, as does the work of Wright, that the basic function of architecture in any society is a spiritual one — not least in our own. They break also with the painting-inspired play of planes of earlier "International Style" architecture and insist again upon the direct rhythm of the structural skeleton. Frame and cladding are precisely differentiated, and each element is clear.

Contrary to what might normally have been expected, the effect of such buildings upon this generation of architects has not been a purely academic one. Eero Saarinen, whose work has



16 Scully, "Archetype and Order," 252.

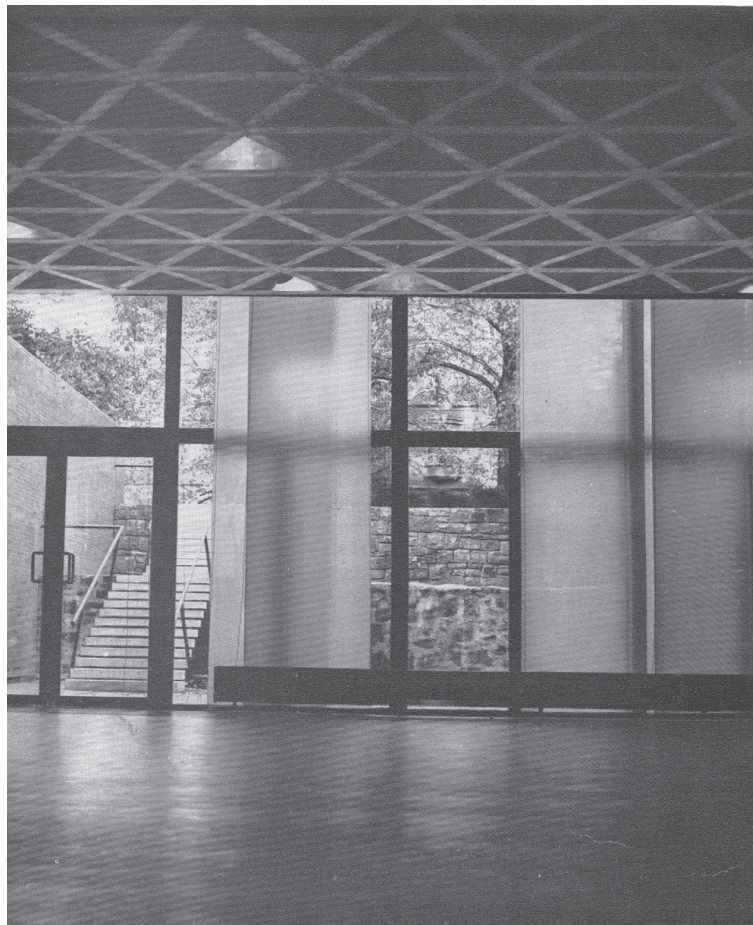
17 Ibid.

evoked Greek, Etruscan, and Roman archetypes in the service of his own longing. One may feel that basic archetypes of human experience of the world are here as well, created by the metaphors of architecture. That is: the defined plain of the courtyard, the forest of the colonnade, the cave of the dome, and the light that burst through the cave, and the sound of water."<sup>16</sup>

Scully detects their recurrence in Philip Johnson's recent Wiley House (1953), which is treated as proof that "it is the primary characteristic of the architects of the present movement that they appear to express, with a similar sense of memory and of the uses of metaphor, the same clear archetypes of plain, pavilion and cave."<sup>17</sup> Only those architects whose work entailed such archetypal forms and spatial motives made his list of noteworthy contemporary architects. However, copying forms was never enough; only those that were able to fully internalize the perennial existential battle that gave birth to them counted as the truly great ones.

A full-page photograph of the lobby of Louis Kahn's recently completed Art Gallery Annex opens the article. The image features a dark space below ground with a glimpse of sky above the garden patio in the

fig. 4 Louis I Kahn and Douglas Orr, Yale Art Gallery, view from lobby towards the Sculpture Garden. Published in Vincent Scully, "Archetype and Order in Recent American Architecture" in *Art in America* (December 1954): 250.





- 18 I adopted the concept “pre-architecture” from Spyros Papapetros’s article “Pre/post/erous Histories,” in which he discusses Sigfried Giedion’s historiographical apparatus. Accessed online via e-flux at <https://www.e-flux.com>
- 19 Scully, “Louis I. Kahn and the Human City,” 9–10. Unpublished manuscript (?), Vincent Joseph Scully Papers. Group No. 1872. Box No. 1 Folder no. 2.
- 20 Scully, “Archetype and Order,” 251.
- 21 Scully, “Modern Architecture: Toward a Redefinition of Style,” *Perspecta* no. 4 (1957): 7.

background, which render the primal elements of life – earth and sky, darkness and light – palpable. With the discovery of the Lascaux Cave in a not so distant past, Scully proposes that the architect had re-enacted the same archetypal psychological needs and spatial impulses that had over millennia given birth to a set of spatial archetypes; hence the revocation of dark, cave-like space and the outside world beyond.<sup>18</sup> Kahn’s tetrahedroid ceiling thus represented the most recent evolution of the space-spanning architectural elements that began with the cave. An unpublished manuscript entitled “Louis I. Kahn and the Human City” sums up the architect’s historical role in Scully’s mind: “Kahn’s architecture belongs to time; it is beyond all else permanent, and it tells us that there is a continuity of human striving which links the ages.”<sup>19</sup> The idea that his design “reveals the yearning of a complex age for direct and simple experience, deeply felt and presented as general truth, without rhetoric” captures the main premise of architecture’s psycho-analytical turn: architecture’s task is to translate our perennial existential anxieties into direct experience.<sup>20</sup> In this schema, a noteworthy architect was equipped with an innate formal and spatial imagination, which allowed him to draw from a series of *ur*-forms and spatial tropes stored in the collective conscious through a process of subliminal recall. For Scully, architecture resonated with big existential questions and since continuity between past, present, and future was the defining aspect of human experience, an ability to spatialize the experience of time was a key characteristic of all great architects.

Frank Lloyd Wright exemplified the most quintessential architect in this regard, one who was able to follow his own subliminal urges while processing transhistorical themes:

[Wright was] driven by the compulsion towards movement. Only the complete continuities of the circle can answer his need, and his poetic imagery remains close to the great nineteenth-century symbols of the road, the sea, and the river. The human observer is pulled inexorably into a current. This sweeps him under water into a cave which opens up into a pool.<sup>21</sup>

Wright’s creativity corresponded to what Jung called “individuation,” that is, a process whereby the self emerges out of the amorphous cosmic subliminal unconscious to reach a state of individuated conscious activity. Scully capitalizes on what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “chronotopes” or spatio-temporal tropes of 19th century literature, such as “the road, the sea, and the river” to underline that Wright’s architecture operated like a *Bildungsroman* and culminates in individual self-discovery and atonement. It is worth noting that Scully had studied literature as an undergraduate at Yale and had a habit of lacing his lectures and writings with references to great American novels, like Moby Dick and Tom Sawyer.

- 22 Scully, "Toward a Redefinition of Style," 10.  
23 Ibid.  
24 Scully, "Bibliographical Note," in *Modern Architecture* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), 136.

The idea that architects of all time were governed by shared subliminal urges led him to redefine one of the key concepts of art historical inquiry, namely style, as follows: "True definition [of architectural style], for any period can only come when the nature and objectives of the self – with its present, its hopes, and its memory – are truly identified and humanly defined. Out of such definition arises that sense of identity which is style."<sup>22</sup> Style was an outcome of the battle for a "sense of identity" rather than as a product of a particular historical constraints. For example, although Hadrian's Villa d'Oro and Philip Johnson's Wiley House were built more than two millennia apart, they could be considered the same style because they expressed similar emotional states through timeless formal and spatial tropes. Tellingly, Scully capitalized the psychoanalytical method and historizes modern architecture against a new temporal construct – the past, which was conceived as an amorphous totality rather than a linear sequence. Whereas historical knowledge could be accessed through documents and books, excavating the past entailed a hermeneutic process that granted agency to the interpreter.

### Overcoming Chronophobia

Scully's 1955 lecture entitled "Four Kinds of Time in Contemporary Architecture" proposed that "[a]t the present there is a very vast attempt to mingle the sense of intensity of the present with the openness of the past" and identifies "four kinds of time in contemporary architecture" as follows: "recollection, the willed primitive, that of willed continuity, and that of action and memory."<sup>23</sup> His effort to invest modern architecture with a historical echo chamber culminated in the 1961 book *Modern Architecture*, which concludes as follows:

the meaning of modern architecture can be properly understood only in the light of all the architecture ever conceived by man, and that it can hardly be written about without reference to one or another of those architectures. ...the most creative architects since the late eighteenth century, with the whole past open to them, have consciously dealt with the problems of existence, and thus of expression, through their view of history and their consequent sense of personal mission as modern man. Indeed, the greatest of them, such as Wright and Le Corbusier, have been doubly conscious of the layer upon layer of meaning implicit in their sources of inspiration, and of the timeless implications of their large, few, and simple themes.<sup>24</sup>

Human experience of time had come to dominate intellectual conversations by then. George Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Orig. 1927; English translation in 1962) and Hannah Arendt's *Between Past and Present* (1961) were some of the landmark books of the era. Heidegger insists that one

- 25 "Dr. Arendt Compares History With Sciences in Address," *Yale Daily News* (January 14, 1955), 1.
- 26 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 6.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd edition (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 16.
- 29 Idem., "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture. Selections from a Forthcoming Book," *Perspecta*, no. 9/10 (1965): 18.

needs to hark back to the origins to understand the meaning of various human endeavours and provided a method of exposing accumulated layers of meanings through close reading, while Arendt, following in her former teacher's footsteps, posits humanity as a product of accumulated human actions. She captured the key tenet of her historical philosophy in her 1955 Yale lecture entitled "Origins of History" by positing that unlike science, which could be studied as a distinct body of knowledge, the study of history was to be conceived as a mode of collective self-reflection and inquiry into "the origins of things that owe their existence to man."<sup>25</sup> Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (orig. 1958; English translation in 1964) and Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* (1966) considered respectively how individual and "collective memory" – a term originally coined by Maurice Halbwachs in his 1925 book *The Social Frameworks of Memory* – determine how people relate to their environments and were widely read among architects. Siegfried Kracauer's *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (1969) captured the dominant tenet of post-wwii historical thought with a provocation we have already encountered almost verbatim through Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's 1961 article, namely, that that the future is always "the future of the past – history."<sup>26</sup>

Around the same time, art historians George Kubler and Clement Greenberg had begun to supplement the dominant art historiographical model that places emphasis on how art reflects historical change with the idea that art was a product of and gained its meaning through a system of images and objects. As art historian Hal Foster has noted, the emphasis on visuality in the post-wwii era shifted the focus from problems like stylistic change to "the consistency of the discourse."<sup>27</sup> In this new art historical schema, an artist was defined by inherited patterns and modes of thinking rather than on the historical conditions the subject found itself.

*Perspecta* 9/10 (1965) registered the interest in studying and analysing past architectures in a manner that yielded design tools, that is, by focusing on formal motives and conceptual themes. The issue was edited by the then third-year architecture student Robert A.M. Stern and began with an extract from Robert Venturi's forthcoming 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), which made it clear that the young up-and-coming architect was more intent on defining their discursive stance through past objects than solving present-day social or functional problems. Yet, while intently ahistorical in his approach to form-giving, the essay and the subsequent book made a historical argument by positing that the dominant "less is more" approach to architecture attributed to Mies van der Rohe and his followers did not appropriately reflect the "richness and ambiguity of modern experience."<sup>28</sup> Complex society called for "complex and contradictory" architecture, albeit one that "consider[ed] the richness of experience within the limitations of the medium."<sup>29</sup> Referring to the work of Yale

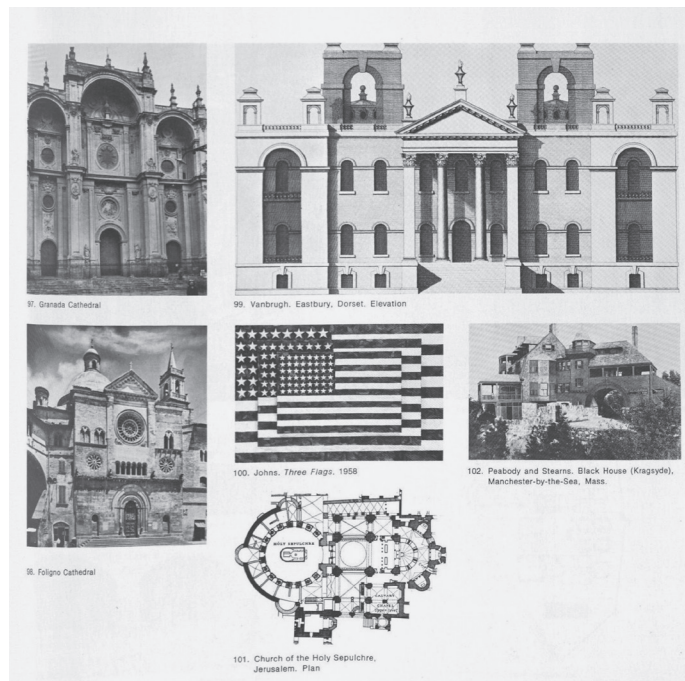


fig. 5 Page from Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 59.

30 The layout appears on page 63 of Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.

English professor Cleanth Brooks, Venturi saw that the task of architecture was to make perennial psychological themes manifest through formal “ambiguity,” “complexity” and “contradiction.” Venturi worked as Paul Rudolph’s studio assistant while writing the book and had probably become interested in New Criticism during his frequent visits to New Haven. As his book attests, dates were deemed irrelevant, since the task of architecture was to mine such transhistorical themes. One spread of the books invites the reader to draw parallels between building facades by Michelangelo, Sullivan, and Lutyens, for example.<sup>30</sup>

Predictably, the issue included essays by the two prominent formalist art historians, George Kubler and Vincent Scully, who deserve credit for sparking students’ interest in history in the first place. Scully began his contribution entitled “Doldrums in the Suburbs” by noting that modern architects were beginning to open to history after decades of self-initiated blindness and credits his fellow art historian Rudolph Wittkower for inspiring a new generation of architects in this regard with his 1949 book *The Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. He ramps up his explosive rhetoric against historical amnesia of the previous generation by exclaiming that nothing less than the “expansion of our faculties of perception and comprehension” was at stake:



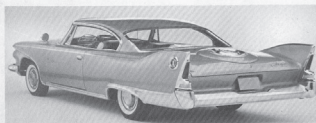
- 31 Scully, "Doldrums in the Suburbs," *Perspecta*, no. 9/10 (1965): 290.
- 32 Idem., *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 215.

In the '40s our minds were small, our perceptions limited by iconoclastic dogma, our comprehension shrivelled thereby. None of that is any good. Instead, we are obliged to open eyes and minds in all our fields. Chandigarh, Ronchamp, and the Greek temple came to us together, as did Rome, Tuscany, Mies, and Kahn. Beyond the individual building, the true scale of architecture, which is that of all structures in relations to each other and to the land, is opening now before us.<sup>31</sup>

Following in the of his dissertation adviser Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Scully had by that time become convinced that the art historian's role was to shape architectural discourse and that only historical knowledge could rescue modern architecture from succumbing to economic and technocratic forces. Furthermore, following Focillon, he believed that every relevant piece of architecture could be placed within a historical chain of buildings with similar formal and spatial traits. "It is impossible to look at the [Richard Medical Laboratories] without thinking of [FLW's] Larkin Building [or the Italian hill town] San Gimignano" he exclaims.<sup>32</sup> Instead of being haunted by reoccurring archetypes, architecture became imbedded in an archive of objects. His assumption was that architects relied on historians to validate their creations by revealing these formal affinities.



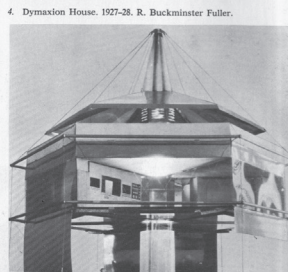
1. Horse trappings, Plains Indians.



2. Plymouth automobile.



It should be no surprise that such is the case. There is surely a *daimon* that dwells in places—not least, as D. H. Lawrence claimed long ago, on this grand and ruined continent, disquieting to inhabit, small enough to spoil, too large to own. It moves through its people like a vengeful ghost, giving them their dreams of space and journeys, of Europe on one side, war drums on the other, calling them on. It can be no accident that twice in its history a good percentage of its population has enthusiastically given up everything tending toward sedentary, civilized life in order to exploit a new means of transportation, a new vehicle of transcendence and escape: first the horse, then the automobile. The high-pompeled saddle trappings of the Plains Indians (Fig. 1) and the fins of the 1950's (Fig. 2) are not so far apart in effect and intention; nor are the wind-adjusted flapped tepee of the plains and Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House rotating on its mast: mobile both, unified to the ground (Figs. 3, 4). And in 1967, one-fifth of the houses constructed were trailers themselves, mobile homes, huge in size, some of them expandable, opening out in all directions (Fig. 5). Colonies of them, generally geriatric in program, sprawl in the desert (Fig. 6).



4. Dymaxion House. 1927-28. R. Buckminster Fuller.

3. Fort Dodge, Kansas. Arapaho camp. Photograph taken ca. 1861-74.

fig. 6 Page from Vincent Scully's *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 14.

- 33 George Kubler, "What can Historians do for Architects?" *Perspecta*, no. 9/10 (1965): 300.  
34 Ibid.  
35 Ibid., 302.

George Kubler went even further in his essay "What Can Historians Do for Architects?" by arguing that architects needed art historians to rescue their discipline from what was amounting to self-destruction. He did not mince words when blaming the previous generation of architects, Walter Gropius being also for him the main culprit, for detaching architecture from history and thus from its disciplinarity:

The self-evident truth, as we now see it, is that all good architects have been saturated with the history of their profession: only the Puritans and the second-rate designers and the peripheral people ever can afford the self-mutilation of ignoring the history of architecture.<sup>33</sup>

And like Scully, Kubler posits that nothing less than expanding the perceptual faculties of practising architects was at stake: "By rejecting history, the purist denies the fullness of things when he restricts the traffic at the gates of perception. He denies the reality of duration, while the historian affirms it."<sup>34</sup> Historians deserved a share of the blame for explaining art and architecture through empty stylistic categories and concepts. "There is nothing new to learn from squeezing the terms themselves," he concludes.<sup>35</sup> Historians' task was to impart an expanded historical vision and educate a new type of viewer-subject capable of navigating an archive of past works.

### **"The Historian's Revenge"**

While Kubler and Scully shared a conviction that art historians played an important role in deepening the temporal horizon of practising architects, there was a crucial difference in their approaches to the question of how past works impact the creative process of an individual artist. In Kubler's cybernetic model, an individual artist was bombarded with images to the point that his or her only role was simply to relay them further without being even aware of their influence. In contrast, in Scully's psychoanalytical model an individual artist was always fighting to maintain his or her individuality and stake his or her historical role. Tellingly, Kubler's scholarship focused often on anonymous Iberian and Mesoamerican art, while Scully's writings, even those including examples of vernacular or prehistoric architecture, were centred mostly on heroic male architects.

After reading Harold Bloom's 1973 book *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Scully took on the perennial art historical question of artistic influence. Bloom was a professor of English at Yale and a good friend, who, following a long legacy of literary formalism, insisted that all great works are part of a self-referential aesthetic system. The combination of words "anxiety" and "influence" alludes to the psychoanalytic

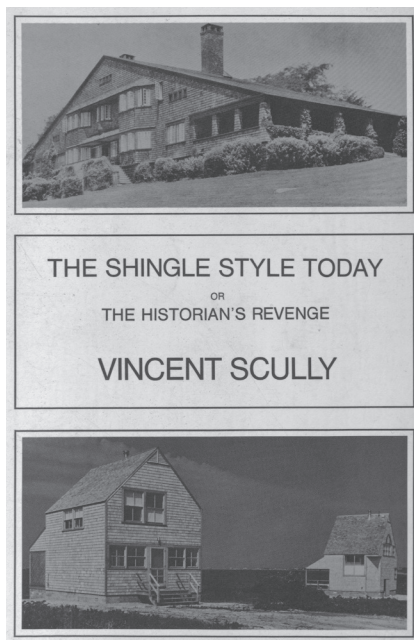
underpinnings of his thesis: being aware and under the influence of towering predecessors was an anxiety-causing activity. The book proposes that only the strongest of minds have been able to process the contribution of previous giants like Shakespeare and Milton, because meeting the standard set by them required both formidable talent and astute intelligence. Bloom settled for a Freudian reading where a truly creative act was one that was conducted with an iconoclastic force and where an artist freed him or herself by “killing the father.”

Scully's 1974 book *The Shingle Style Today: Or, The Historian's Revenge* was based on the Bloomian idea that only those architects who are able to wrestle with influence are worth discussing. Scully saw this ability to battle influence and come into one's own as a quintessential American trait and it thus comes perhaps as no surprise that he chose to discuss buildings which were all located in New England, a home to Emersonian “self-reliance.” The cover conveys the formal resemblance between Charles McKim's Low House in Rhode Island and Venturi Scott Brown's Trubeck and Wislocki Houses in Nantucket, built respectively in 1887 and 1972 and marked by their shared wide frontal roof gables. (figure 7). The title suggests that up-and-coming American architects like Venturi were continuing or re-enacting on the footsteps of the turn-of-the-century architects, who had produced large houses covered in wood shingles that were built on the East Coast from Rhode Island to Maine by the wealthy class at the turn of the 20th century, which constituted what Scully had in his dissertation labelled as “shingle style.” He returns to the Jungian idea that every architect was motivated by a transhistorical urge and referred to the roofline of the Low House forming a “crescendo of diagonal lines of force” as a “fundamental act” and “archetypal.” Furthermore, he assumed that architecture with a big A was produced by mythic male characters re-enacting mythic “acts.” The list included a whole host of Scully's former students who had begun their careers by designing small houses in New England under Venturi's influence.

Bloom's emphasis on the Western, primarily British literary canon made him a lightning rod of the 1960s culture-wars. Scully did not suffer the same fate even though he acknowledged that he chose to focus on single-family houses in order to avoid “politics, planning, mass programs and pressures which create the man-made environment” and focus on psychological process involving artistic influence instead. In his words

single-family houses most openly mirror the character and feelings of their architects and so most directly reflect the influence of those architects upon each other. In them, history can be seen being made at individual heat, where new architects wrestle with their precursors in order to find a way to begin and room to operate for themselves.<sup>36</sup>

fig. 7 Vincent Scully, *The Shingle Style Today: Or, The Historian's Revenge* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), cover.



37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 3.

39 Ibid.

40 James S. Ackerman, *Origins, Imitation, Conventions: Representation in Visual Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 136.

41 Harold Bloom, "Freud, the Greatest Modern Writer," *The New York Times* (March 23, 1986). Accessed online <https://www.nytimes.com>

Following Bloom, Scully focused on the "lonely individual responsibility" at the heart of the creative act, which entailed the artist's ability to "misread" and "swerve" away from artistic precedents enough in order to "create a new field of action for his own design."<sup>37</sup> The strongest ones were those "who seem to have sought out the most forceful of the precursor-architects to emulate and to outdo."<sup>38</sup> And like Bloom, Scully distinguished between "influence" that is an outcome of a "conscious" act and "tradition" that entailed "influences which are so pervasive in any historical situation that the human beings who are involved in them are not consciously aware of them at all."<sup>39</sup>

The subtitle of the book – "the historian's revenge" – suggests that he, as an art historian, no longer resorted to simply imparting historical knowledge, but was involved in his own mythic battle of identifying individuals and buildings he deemed were up to the task of charting architecture's future course. Determining the historical significance of architectural objects was based on the educated, yet highly interpretative act of determining and analysing lines of influence. The assumption was that most architects were unaware of their influences. As James Ackerman has noted, compared to the more conscious application of historical antecedents within the Beaux-Arts tradition, in this new equation "interest in influence begins *after* a work has been completed and made accessible."<sup>40</sup>

This brings us back to Scully's brand of history writing, based on the idea that historians' task is to shape the future course of the discipline. To meet this goal, his writings often disregard scholarly conventions, like footnoting, in favour of a more literary style, based in part on the realization that, to serve this purpose, history writing had to transcend expert knowledge and be accessible to wider public. As a result, his rhetorical skills and ability to trigger historical imagination often trump his historical acumen. While Bloom never referred to Scully's writings or expressed what he thought of Scully as a scholar, he could well have been writing about Scully when he stated that "All of Freud's copious writing is intensely metaphorical, very little of it is verifiable, and much of it is devoted to what cannot be described. [...] [He] was certainly the most suggestive myth maker of the last century." Like Freud's, Scully's "work [might] be more important as literature than as history."<sup>41</sup>