Historicizing Pedagogy: A Critique of Kostof's *A History of Architecture"

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This paper is concerned with the practical problem of shaping a "History of Architecture" in a way that expands the dominant canon while acknowledging the complex and difficult realities of articulating difference. Through a critical analysis of Spiro Kostof's *A History of Architecture* and an exposition of the shortcomings of Kostof's attempts to discuss "alternative" histories, this paper investigates how architectural history textbooks could play an important role in initiating a broader, critical teaching of history.

In architecture, the textbook is a relatively new phenomenon, being largely the consequence of the recent expansion of undergraduate programs. But at the same time that textbooks became more and more inevitable, canonical versions of history were being challenged in almost every discipline of the humanities. In the process, the textbook's authority was undermined to such an extent that many scholars questioned any attempt to write a "history of architecture." Yet, as the local and the particular are being increasingly acknowledged as crucial in forming our perspectives on history, it is important not to preclude the possibility for larger historical reflection.

The architectural history textbook offers a case by which to explore how to sustain communication among different branches of knowledge and to allow the possibility of larger historical reflection. It is in this spirit that this paper will analyze the contributions of Spiro Kostof's textbook *A History of Architecture* (1985) while reflecting on the historiographic questions it left open. Kostof's textbook is a particularly fruitful basis for rethinking the production of architectural history, because it represents a paradigm shift from the traditional Eurocentric texts. In fact, most reviews of Kostof's book hailed it as the first serious challenger to the work of Bannister Fletcher.1 Often quoting Kostof's own claims word by word, critics accepted and celebrated Kostof's efforts to "reconcile the traditional grand canon of monuments with a broader, more embracing vision... by making no strict distinctions between architecture and urbanism, between high cultures and low."2 Reviewers praised Kostof as a "pioneer" in rejecting periodization; in breaking away from old-fashioned stylistic classifications of architectural forms; in devoting more attention to nonwestern architecture; and in attributing value to vernacular architecture.3 It is indeed true that through the complicated and difficult undertaking of writing a textbook, which few historians take up, Kostof managed to challenge the boundaries of the history of architecture and to insert new perspectives that expand historical understanding. "Nonmonumental" and nonwestern architecture enjoyed a high status in this book, and perhaps also in the numerous survey courses in architecture schools that follow it.

Through its conscious attempt to expand the dominant canon, *A History of Architecture* extended the historiographic debate beyond the political questions of why vernacular or "nonwestern" architecture were neglected in textbooks, and it uncovered the epistemological problem of how these histories could be included. Even though Kostof acknowledged that "we have always been bound up with other lands" and that we can gain new understandings by assessing our history in the light of others, his attempts to speak of "other lands" have significant shortcomings. This paper will discuss the conceptual frameworks that confined Kostof's study of alternative histories. I will ask, for example, did not the promise to consider the interaction of the West with "other cultures" assume a clear frontier between "us" and "them"? How much effort was made to acknowledge the complexities of such frontiers? Diverging from the reviews of Kostof's textbook, which focused their criticism on the omissions in his book, this paper will emphasize questions that have more to do with how Kostof's book conceptualized diverse material across historical periods and across geographical locales.4 This paper will also investigate the methods which Kostof devised to "expand the range of the historian's inquiry" by questioning the extent to which his conceptual frameworks were emancipated from traditional historiographic preconceptions.

"Measuring Up" with Other Cultures

"In our general scheme of things, [nonwestern] traditions have always held a secondary place. This is natural given the preoccupation of each culture with itself. But it becomes reprehensible if the relative inattentiveness to nonwestern achievement is justified in general worthiness—the mentality that says: If it is not well known, it is because it does not deserve to be."5

Although Kostof attempts to transcend traditional distinctions by declaring that the history of "other cultures" is important to understanding the history of "our" architecture, what escapes him is that the distinctions between other architectural traditions and ours may not be as "natural" as he thinks. Kostof's theory should not deflect attention from the methods of his historical practice, which are in essence synchronic cross-cultural comparisons.

"Our esteem for Chartres Cathedral will be more balanced if we were made aware that this masterpiece of medieval Christianity..."
Rose during the same decades in which Indochina saw the specter of the great temple complex at Angkor Wat, the empire of Islam undertook the mosque and mausoleum of Sultan Qala'un in Cairo, and the great Seljuk caravanserais of Anatolia.66

These comparisons begin as early as page four in the introductory chapter; there Kostof presents a picture of a covered bazaar in Syria, with oculus-like openings that bring dramatic light into the space; directly below this image, he includes an interior view of the Pantheon (Figure 1). In these two illustrations, "the dappled, swarming tunnels of Muslim suqs" are juxtaposed with "the single-minded sublimity of the Pantheon in Rome."67 This juxtaposition presents the spatial qualities of the Roman masterpiece as comparable to the spatial qualities of a type of architecture that is both nonmonumental and nonwestern. But while the caption next to the Pantheon situates the building historically ("AD 118–26") the picture of the Syrian bazaar is explained as "suq, or covered market," presenting it as simply a timeless sample of Islamic architecture.

The problems that such asymmetries raise are more pronounced in the part entitled "Measuring Up," which attempts cross-cultural comparisons. The most extensive comparisons are made in the chapter devoted to Istanbul and Venice. The chapter first describes the Ottoman architecture of Istanbul, focusing, mostly, on the works of Sinan; Kostof’s analysis is certainly appealing, and statements such as "a casual visit [to the Mosque of Selim] will delight and amaze," "the originality of this near-contemporary of Michaelangelo and Palladio... will come through" clearly seek to praise the qualities of Ottoman architecture.68 Occasionally, Kostof hints at the possibility that the two Mediterranean cities had some form of contact; for example, "Italian artists were invited to the Ottoman court," or, "Mehmet II spoke their language... and there is a beautiful portrait of him painted by the Venetian Gentile Bellini."69 Kostof emphasizes the possibility of such contacts through his extensive references to the formal qualities of Ottoman architecture and their Renaissance character. The illustration of Brunelleschi’s Foundling Hospital in Florence (1419) directly below that of Bayazid’s kulliye in Edirne (1484–88), for example, attempts to exemplify how Bayazid’s kulliye "has a Brunelleschian purity."70 (Figure 2).

Such formal comparisons may give stature to Ottoman architecture by showing its similarities with Renaissance architecture; but
they do not challenge the tendency to use Renaissance architecture as a yardstick for architectural quality. Furthermore, these comparisons brush aside the complexities surrounding Ottoman architectural production, for while the discussion of Venice gives attention to its social and political context, the discussion on Istanbul does not. The discussion on Istanbul focuses, instead, on the morphology of the city, the location and appearance of mosques and palaces, the configuration of the complex that surrounds them, the minarets and domes. By addressing only the formal attributes of Ottoman architecture, Kostof has no choice but to restrict the possible comparisons between Ottoman and Renaissance architecture to formal issues. For example:

The conqueror’s own kulliye in Istanbul, a little more than a half-century after Bayezid I’s in Bursa, has a grand composition with strict bilateral symmetry... the immense terrace on vaulted substructures that level the hilly site, the marshaling of large cellular structures on either side... the confident proportions of the principal units that suggest a broad module, the country axis that runs through the mosque sequences beginning at the main entrance of the complex—all this has the authority of ancient Rome.  

Kostof’s analysis offers no opportunity to situate the “Ottoman achievements” into the sociopolitical context of Istanbul and the complex administrative networks of the Ottoman Empire.

The textbook’s focus on formal comparisons is even more striking when one considers that the conceptual framework on which the book claims to be based puts emphasis on “contextual interpretations and analyses,” and on “settings and rituals” as important in establishing a larger context for understanding architecture. By failing to consider religious beliefs, social hierarchies, political conflicts, family structures—all of which could constitute potentially important contexts in which to place the architectural culture of Istanbul—and by choosing to discuss only those aspects of Ottoman architecture that can be directly “measured up” against western practices of the sixteenth century (i.e., the formal attributes), Kostof conceals those cultural differences that are incommensurable and overlooks their significance. His discussion of Istanbul in terms of an inherently western aesthetic may invoke appreciation for an unfamiliar architecture, but it consumes the crucial ontologies of “the other,” presenting it as a monolithic, entirely apparent, and incontrovertible reality.

Another cross-cultural comparison Kostof makes is that between Cairo and Florence. Here he claims “to set side by side sketches of the two famous cities... both of Roman origin and with long eventful lives.” In this case, Kostof’s discussion of Cairo does address the social processes that influenced its urban formation through the thirteenth century: He describes learning processes in the mosques, the role of the Madrasa, and the housing conditions in the city. He then invites us to compare the plan of the built-up area of Cairo with the plans of medieval European cities, explaining that the scarcity of public space in Cairo was a result of the social system: "In the military feudalism that governed the cities of Islam, there was little room for a municipal organization that would regulate and safeguard the public domain... [The] law allowed that owners had preferential access to an easement around their building plots, as well as the air rights over the street. It is unlikely that a rational system of public ways could remain inviolate against such odds.”

Kostof compares the laws in Cairo to those in Florence, arguing that the latter made a conscious effort to regain control of the open public space and fight those who attempted to infringe on it. Kostof’s analysis helps illustrate the relationship between the social structure of each city and its physical development, but this argument does not recognize the differences in the conception of public space in Islam. In medieval Cairo, it is the mosque—rather than the street of European medieval towns—that would become the center of public space and influence the evolution of the city’s plan.

Even though Kostof does not attempt the kind of direct juxtapositions he made between Istanbul and Venice, he does look for visual connections between the architecture of Cairo and that of Europe. He points to the Mausoleum of Sultan Qala’un (1285) and argues:

There is in fact a definite visual affinity... between the architecture of Cairo and the Gothic, not the metropolitan Gothic of Europe but the simplified, toned-down version transported eastward by the crusaders. The two share the use of the pointed arch, attenuated proportions, and a skeletal elegance in the design of facades. The similarity ends in Cairene interiors; they are without the vertical continuities of Gothic, and in place of rib vaults they favor domes and flat ceilings.

The discussion of possible influences by the crusaders attempts to draw parallels between Cairene monuments and Gothic structures, but it would be equally important to point to those influences that do not have an “eastward” directionality—namely, the architectural tradition of tomb towers from Iran and Central Asia, which, like the Mausoleum Kostof examines, combine “attenuated proportions” with domes. Kostof’s effort to "bring to light some
of the salient points of variance between East and West” is confined to a bipolar comparison, without acknowledging the multiplicity (and the multiple directions) of cultural influences.

The tendency to consider only those aspects of the history that are directly comparable can also explain why the two main comparative analyses (Istanbul and Venice, Cairo and Florence) refer to Mediterranean cultures, while discussions on the architecture of China or India are much more cursory. The architecture of China is covered in less than three pages in the section “The Other Ancient World” in the chapter “The World at Large: Roman Confluences,” without much attention to specific historical developments and architectural changes in ancient China. Kostof did pay some attention to the rituals tied with the Chinese house, perhaps to serve the larger goal of the book to show how rituals endure more than physical structure. There are a few references scattered in the book that mention in passing “ideas” coming from China to the West, e.g., “her ancient philosophy was now [in the eighteenth century] looked upon as a source of inspiration.” Similarly, ancient Indian architecture is mentioned only in the discussion of Buddhist sanctuaries (“The Other Ancient World”) and there Kostof points to the similarities between rock-cut sanctuaries in India and other practices of “scooping out an environment in the given forms of nature” to show that such practices that are observed in India are in fact universal. Then Hindu temples are referred to in the chapter “edges of medievalism,” where some formal similarities (“kinship of sorts”) are cursorily pointed to between the temples and Gothic buildings.

These desultory references to India and China uncover another layer of the problem with Kostof’s comparative models. His notion of interaction as a structure of historical organization, does not allow Kostof to accommodate the history of India or China, except when he discusses the “Silk Road,” which establishes a direct interaction between these countries and the West. It is fair to ask, however, does the lack of “interaction” between the Chinese or the Indian context and the West render the centuries-old architecture of these countries irrelevant to our understanding of architectural history?

Unambiguous Explanations of “The Other”

Not all references to “other lands” come packaged in the form of a cross-cultural comparisons. In the case of Nepal, for example, Kostof keeps the discussion focused on its cultural particularity. But his praise for how the Nepalese village lies “in its natural setting” ends up essentializing the village as pure and authentic and allows for few alternative interpretations to cloud the beauty of the picture. Equally essentializing is one of Kostof’s comments about medieval Cairo: “The old town was frightfully congested, as Cairo is to this day.” The illustration with which this assertion is accompanied is David Roberts’s 1849 lithograph, “The Bazaar of the Silk Merchants” (Figure 3). By using a nineteenth-century orientalist representation to illustrate a thirteenth-century situation, and by asserting, furthermore, that this situation continues to today, the textbook renders Cairo’s urban congestion with an abstract and timeless character.

Consider, furthermore, Kostof’s presentation of Islam in general: When he introduces Islam, he offers a good discussion of how it emerged as a religion and what its basic belief system was. He covers some of the religious rituals in Islam and he also discusses ceremonial functions in the palaces in different dynasties. (See Chapter 12, “The Mediterranean in the Early Middle Ages.”) In Chapter 15, he describes the development of the Madrasa and its urban signifi-
cance. But when he discusses Ottoman Istanbul in Chapter 19 (or, for that matter, when he mentions Nasrid Spain in Chapter 16, “The Edges of Medievalism”), Kostof refers to “Muslim” and “Islam” as if they represented the same culture as that of thirteenth-century Cairo. By not acknowledging the different developments in different Islamic cultures through time, he perhaps inadvertently essentializes “Islam” as a single static culture. Important questions are not answered, such as whether the rituals in Ottoman palaces remained the same as those in Umayyad or Abbasid palaces, or how the Ottoman culture was different from that of the Umayyads or of the Abbasids.

These questions demonstrate the bind in which Kostof puts himself once he claims that the history of marginalized cultures is an important part of his attempt to transcend parochial prejudices. The apparent generosity of Kostof’s pursuit, and the eclectic strategies that lie behind it, echo the principles of eighteenth-century Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. As Thomas Schlereth writes, “In the ideal, the ‘cosmopolite,’ or ‘citizen of the world,’ sought to be identified by an interest in, a familiarity with, or appreciation of many parts and peoples of the world; he wished to be distinguished by a readiness to borrow from other lands or civilizations in the formation of his intellectual, cultural, and artistic patterns.” Yet this interest, as generous as it is, was always bound by a tendency to de-emphasize idiosyncratic, irrational, or particularistic traditions and practices (such as religion, politics, and family structures) when these did not fit into a Procrustean bed. And this holds true for Kostof because he too de-emphasized these aspects of the “other” culture that are incommensurable. By avoiding the complexities and tensions lying beneath its apparent breadth of coverage, Kostof’s textbook did little more than celebrate the diversity of cultures, and it compressed cultural differences onto normative modes of interpretation.

Even though he may have thus “broadened the scope” of architectural history by offering some knowledge about the impact of Islam or the qualities of Nepalese villages, Kostof’s integrationist tendency tends to perpetuate, rather than challenge, the canonical view of history as having a unified or unitary relationship to itself. Kostof’s idealization of rituals as a common “human” institution that makes civilizing contributions to society, and his avoidance of antagonisms among different rituals or beliefs resembles the tactics of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, which “sought to grasp the unity of mankind, without however attempting to solve the relations of the part to the whole.” The “western achievement,” as Kostof calls it, may not appear entirely “insulated,” but it still appears to have a pretty “logical progression,” and the history of ancient Mesopotamian cities, Cairo or Istanbul, simply comes to feed into this progression, only to disappear again in later centuries, when they are rendered irrelevant.

Kostof’s cosmopolitanism can explain not only why the “other lands” are never mentioned in Kostof’s discussion of modern architecture, but also why colonial and postcolonial realities are so conspicuously absent. Was the modern history of the West independent from any interaction with other cultures? Were the colonial undertakings of Europe (to state only one obvious form of interaction) independent from the experience of the West and the development of modern architecture? This critical problem with the text is symptomatic of a tendency, described by Edward Said, to assume that the developments in Europe are independent of the colonial processes, even though the history of colonized territories is always considered to have been tremendously influenced by the imperial intervention. I am not arguing that a textbook should employ Kostof’s historiographic model of synchronic parallel comparisons between 20th-century cities. The uneven technological, social, and economic developments between a western metropolis and nonwestern cities in the modern period would make such a comparison extremely abstract and ultimately meaningless. Yet the fact that developments in different cultures cannot be compared directly does not deny their interdependence. On the contrary, the modern period makes this interdependence even more intense. By ignoring this interdependence altogether, Kostof channels his cross-cultural historical explorations into very limited sets of conclusions.

Unlike what Kostof seems to assume, cross-cultural interaction as a historiographic tool does not automatically facilitate a “broader coverage.” On the contrary, Kostof’s comparative analyses of cross-cultural interaction offer little challenge to the foundations of traditional historiographic enterprises because the theme of cross-cultural interaction has often been used. Sir Bannister Fletcher, for example, acknowledges that the “non-historical styles” of Chinese, Indian, “Saracenic” architecture had some interaction with the western styles (all styles feed from the same roots) even if the Western tradition represents a dynamic, historical evolution while lesser styles die out. Similarly, the Trachtenberg and Hyman’s textbook, Architecture (1986), discusses “interactions” between Islam and the West, although it only refers to historically decontextualized examples of stereotyped masterpieces from the Islamic world.

If Kostof’s study of cross-cultural influences aspired to be emancipated from these received modes of interpretation, it should have inserted much greater sophistication into the study and conceptualization of cultural interaction. The field of World His-
tory—which has referred to cross-cultural interaction as a primary historiographic enterprise that aims to identify "connections among things that have been studied in relative isolation" and from which Kostof may have drawn the model of comparative synchronic analysis—has already begun to question the tendency to talk about cultural "boundaries" and "interactions" across them.30 Such tendencies, contemporary world historians point out, have traditionally assumed that cultures exist as identifiable social units.31 Patrick Manning, for example, questions whether we can continue to assume that interactions across cultural boundaries are different from those within cultural limits. Would not the study of "interaction" be more productive, he asks, if it moves not only across but within cultural lines?32 To this end, the study of cross-cultural interaction should investigate multiple channels of cultural exchange and should include a more complex picture of elements of material and expressive culture like pictorial, archaeological, and written records.33

These reflections among world historians help us picture alternatives to Kostof's book in which the "East-West contacts" treat cultures as single, self-contained entities. Even at the level of a textbook, one should look into the social richness and religious diversity of the Ottoman culture and present different voices that could form its histories. Sinan's Istanbul was not simply an Islamic city, but a multicultural center, accommodating diverse religions and social groups. Even though Kostof mentions this cosmopolitan character of Istanbul, he does not explore how this character might have affected the architecture of the Ottoman city.34 How did diverse groups operate within the city? In what directions did they expand their contacts? Consider, for example, the case of the Çiniili Kiosk (877/1473) in the outer garden of the Topkapı palace in Istanbul, which, as the historian of Ottoman architecture Gülru Necipoğlu points out, "is typically Timurid in its cruciform layout, its system of construction, its elevation, materials, and its decoration. It may have been built by an architectural workshop from Karaman, a region ruled by a Turkoman dynasty that maintained close cultural ties with the Timurid world."35 How could these "interactions" with Timur ultimately inform the comparison between Istanbul and Venice? Similarly, how could the influences of the architectural traditions of Iran and Central Asia (which are quite apparent in Cairene medieval monuments) enrich the comparison between Cairo and Florence?

I am not suggesting turning the textbook into a composite of detailed research on specialized topics, and of course, I am not arguing that textbook-writers should face the impossible task of becoming experts in all subjects covered in their textbook. Rather, the reevaluation I argue for pertains to the methods of synthesis. For example, in the comparison between Istanbul and Venice, it may not have been possible for Kostof to give a symmetrical treatment to the two cities because the existing research on Ottoman architecture is not as extensive as that on Renaissance Italy. There is an admittedly much larger body of scholarship on the history of Venice than there is on Istanbul (in fact, only a fraction of the Ottoman archives has been studied up to this point), but in making comparative analyses, the historian should familiarize the reader with the unequal realities of existing scholarship and even possibly make them part of the inquiry. The textbook should acknowledge, for instance, that the multiple histories of Istanbul are largely unexplored, just as it could mention that the discussion of the social structure of Venice fails to cover the role of women or of the poor classes in the Renaissance. By glossing over the limitations of existing scholarship as if they do not exist, Kostof's textbook consumes important ontologies, and it normalizes the political inequalities that produced these asymmetries in scholarship to begin with. Even though Kostof's textbook may offer students some exposure or even invoke appreciation for Ottoman architecture, it also conceals the need for further exploration of "the other's" history.

Settings, Rituals, and "Some Human Purpose"

The ambiguity toward scholarship that pervades the book can be partially explained by Kostof's implicit phenomenological leanings, which are captured by chapter titles such as "A Place on Earth"; "The Cave and the Sky: Stone Age Europe"; "The Search for Self"; and also by his assertion in the introduction that "Architecture is nothing more or less than the gift of making places for some human purpose" [my emphasis]. To the extent that they challenge historiographic approaches that focused on aesthetics and style alone, Kostof's descriptions are useful in emphasizing the importance of the social and cultural context of architecture. Yet these descriptions anthropologize architecture in a way that fails to problematize the distinctions between architecture and other domains of knowledge and interpretation. These sensual poetic descriptions are consistent with Kostof's emphasis on architecture as memory, inspiration, and "human purpose," and they attempt to ascribe to architecture an essential, timeless, and fundamentally "human" validity. For example, the title "A Place on Earth" (Part One) is charged with universal connotations, even though the corresponding chapter limits its coverage to those developments that are traditionally outlined the "genealogy of the West"—i.e., it discusses the Stone Age in Europe, ancient
Mesopotamia and Egypt, then Greece, and Rome. Similarly, "The Search for Self" (Part Three) covers the experience of modernity in Europe and the United States only, even though it implies a search for a "human," universal self. And, "The American Experience" (Chapter 24) refers only to the experience of European settlers in America, not to mention that it only refers to the United States.

Even if these dazzling titles naturalize Kostof's preferences as "universal" and impartial, they are certainly effective in capturing the textbook's audience of architectural design students. But while it is indeed important for the historian to engage this audience, it is also important to introduce a level of criticality into the material presented. The student is not simply to read and admire historical buildings and ideas; he/she needs to engage with the ways in which history itself is constructed. How did the histories of Mesopotamia and Egypt come to be selected as the initial elements of the genealogy of the West, and why are they not part of this genealogy anywhere in later history? Are there other ancient civilizations that significantly contributed to this "place on earth," and why does not the existing scholarship provide adequate references to discuss them? Even though a textbook should not be expected to cover all variables and complexities of historical developments, a textbook like Kostof's could pose such questions to make transparent the limitations of the historian. Otherwise, Kostof's definitions appear as universally indisputable facts, dehistorized habits of perception, and fail to provide students or teachers with the tools to negotiate different interpretations.

And so we come to the question of sources and the obligations of the historian to introduce them, not as the footnotes of the discourse, but as part of the epistemic problem that lies at the heart of things historical. Kostof's tendency to conceal the relativity of his judgments is compounded by his tendency to avoid revealing his references and the historicity of the ideas he presents. His argument for the importance of vernacular architecture, for example, is presented as follows:

> We have lately all become increasingly attracted to a wide range of vernacular idioms, what has come to be known as "architecture without architects." Its appeal proves how unwarranted it is to claim that even the humblest of structures is untouched by aesthetic concern or devoid of aesthetic appeal. To be sure, this is an innocent sort of visual order. There is no conscious theory behind it, no intellectualized system of form. But it demonstrates that delight is an elusive thing that may apply as readily to the random and unstudied as it does to the calculated designs of the professional.37

Far from being grounded on a timeless truth, Kostof's description of "vernacular architecture" derives from particular positions at a specific moment in history: Vernacular idioms did not come to be known as "architecture without architects" until the late modern period, through the work of Bernard Rudofsky; and these idioms not only have an aesthetic appeal, but they also have been appropriated to social and political ends. But the notion that the visual order of vernacular architecture is "innocent" ignores the repeated uses of the vernacular to serve doctrines of nationalism. Just as it does with the history of Islamic architecture, Kostof's textbook fails to explore the complex and antagonistic meanings vernacular architecture has taken on; it compounds this problem by concealing the partiality of its definition. While Kostof could not cover all interpretations of "this wide range of vernacular idioms," he could have acknowledged how he formed his definition of the vernacular, which research studies he embraced, and which ones he is critical of, not simply to allow further research by the textbook's readers, but also to show the historical specificity and contestability of his historical constructions.38 By dismissing the limitations of his single vantage point, Kostof perpetuates the legacy of historical scholarship in which historians assumed an omniscient point of view "as if they are privileged with a superior observational position."39 The absence of footnotes or any other forms of qualification, along with the apparent clarity in Kostof's narration allow his assertions to go unquestioned, especially if these are presented to students unfamiliar with the subjectivity of history writing.

Although textbooks have assumed a license to condense material and simplify issues, their impact is too great to allow their uncritical assertions to be explained away by an appeal to simplicity and accessibility. Even if an argument could be made that a textbook needs to remain easily accessible to undergraduate students (although one could question the very tendency to screen complexity out of undergraduate history courses), it is also important to acknowledge that simplicity in its various forms (condensation of ideas and concepts; mater-of-fact descriptions; evasion of footnotes) is not simply a benign method of facilitating comprehension but it also renders ever more opaque the structure of knowledge and learning. In other words, what is problematic about Kostof's approach has less to do with the amount of knowledge he presents than with his naturalized interpretations of history. Kostof's title, A History of Architecture, may have attempted to acknowledge the incompleteness and partiality of the historian's project; but despite the title, the textbook's mater-of-fact descriptions do not problematize the incompleteness and the contestability of the task of interpretation.
Conclusion

There is a conceptual contradiction that runs through the book, that becomes evident when Kostof's conceptual references are exposed. Consider his introductory statement that "all past buildings, regardless of size, status or consequence, deserve to be studied." As he argues:

Modest structures in the periphery of monuments are not simply of intrinsic value; they are also essential to the correct interpretation of the monuments themselves. . . . Our appeal, therefore, is for a more inclusive definition of architecture and, consequently, a more democratic view of architectural history. The aim is to put aside the invidious distinctions between architecture and building, architecture and engineering, architecture and speculative development. . . .

Kostof's promise that A History of Architecture would include those concepts and artifacts that have not participated in an ongoing history as it was defined, is part of his attempt to break away from the "aristocratic," as he calls it, tradition of equating the history of architecture with a history of monuments. His book attempts to reconcile two opposing views of architecture that emerged in the later modern period: On the one hand, Kostof gives credence to polemics on the vernacular, while, on the other hand, he subscribes to the importance of monuments. An assemblage of both monumental and vernacular architecture would constitute, Kostof argues, a more "complete" textbook. But while Kostof argues for an all-embracing history, the textbook's discussions resonate with specific conceptions of what is and is not architecture. He clearly favors urban contexts, and the overwhelming proportion of the buildings he covers are canonical monuments. On the other hand, the coverage of "modest structures" is radically limited: Nowhere in the entire book is there any discussion of a specific type of vernacular architecture, or of the influential role the vernacular played in modern professional practice.

Kostof never acknowledges that his selective coverage is contradictory to his claim that any form of human creation in the realm of building could have been included. This conceptual contradiction is doubly problematic: On the one hand, Kostof's insistence on privileging monumental architecture in most of his book shows how little his approach is emancipated from traditional historiographic nodes. On the other hand, his pledge that "all buildings are worthy of study" encompasses the fundamental predicament of absolute and limitless pluralism, namely, that it creates a symmetrical world, oblivious to crucial differences among buildings. Publishing this book in 1985, Kostof must have been influenced by the proliferation of critiques of modernist historiography that irreversibly shook faith in history's rational, teleological process. In this climate, Kostof embraced pluralism as the alternative to a singular history. As he states at the very end of the book: "Pluralism is not our problem. All periods of architectural history have been pluralist; it is we who have invented the notion of monolithic visual orders that have anointed styles allegedly appropriate to the prevailing Zeitgeist." Yet the opposition Kostof created between a singular history and pluralism is a false one, because pluralism and the idea "all past buildings, regardless of size, status or consequence, deserve to be studied" does not automatically produce "a more democratic view of architectural history." On the contrary, the assertion that all buildings are worthy of study assumes a priori an equality among all buildings, and as such, it is disengaged knowledge claim "from above" that is as dogmatic as the totalizing claims to objectivity. The pluralism Kostof argues for amounts to valorizing difference in and of itself and eliminates the possibility for critical negotiation among contested histories.

Kostof has made a great contribution to exposing the need to rethink the scope of architectural history, yet his approach of embellishing, almost, the central, canonical core of history with samples of "otherness" maintains the fundamental schism between the dominant history and marginalized histories. We cannot dismiss the need to reflect on the limitations of Kostof's A History of Architecture by appealing to an argument that 'we have to start somewhere.' This argument implies that a textbook's task is simply to teach "the basics," and that a student can later expand upon the information one has received. This argument—which has also been used to reconcile polemical revisionist views of history with attempts to conserve the admirable body of knowledge that the canonical historical tradition developed—constructs a false dichotomy between existing knowledge and new knowledge. Suppressed, or alternative histories do not represent new knowledge that can simply be added onto the existing. Suppressed histories have the potential to revise our understanding history at large, and this is precisely why the expansion of the scope of history requires a radical rethinking of the fundamental structure of history. Mr. "Whisky" Siiodia from The Satanic Verses made exactly this point: "The trouble with the English is that their hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means."
Bibliography


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Notes


3. Even when we compare Kostof’s textbook with other that are contemporary to it (Trachtenberg and Hyman’s *Architecture, Ceremonial and Power* and Watkin’s *The Rise of Architectural History*), it is evident that Kostof made a significantly greater effort to present "nonwestern" architecture as an important factor in our understanding of western architecture.

4. See, for example, Aaron Betsky’s review, which points to a number of instances in which Kostof offers nothing but a cursory treatment of important historical developments. Betsky argues, for example, that Kostof dismisses "20 centuries of Chinese Architecture ... with such sentence(s) as: “线性与叙事——这是这些原则的中国设计”’; or, Betsky criticizes Kostof for devoting only one paragraph to Gwendolyn Wright’s study of the class- and sex-based suppression of architecturally impulsive American architecture. See Aaron Betsky, "Kostof’s History," *Progressive Architecture* 66 (Sept. 1985): 235–236.


7. Ibid., p. 3.

8. Ibid., p. 461.


10. Ibid., p. 459.

11. Ibid., p. 459.


15. Kostof could also have discussed the similarities between the dome of the mausoleum and the octagonal plan of the Dome of the Rock. I am grateful to Nauser Rabat and Lara Tohe for their help in understanding the cultural context of medieval Cairo and the possible cultural influences from Central Asia.


17. Ibid., p. 549.
18. Ibid., p. 398.
19. As Homi Bhabha suggested, the valorization of cultural particularity, ("folk tradition," "peoples," and so forth) is based on ideas that are as mythical as those that support universalism, because they, too, are naturalized unifying discourses and do not explore the hybridity of culture. Homi Bhabha, "Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate." October 61 (summer 1992): 47.

21. One cannot help but be reminded of the books by orientalist Stanley Lane Poole, The Story of Cairo in the Medieval Towns, published in 1960, which used Robert Hay's illustrations of Cairo (drawn in 1844) as illustrations of medieval Cairo. Poole's justification for this was that "the East changes slowly and the soul of the eastern not at all."


23. Schlereth makes this argument about the cosmopolitan in The Cosmopolitan Ideal, p. 127.

24. Schlereth, The Cosmopolitan Ideal, p. xii. Furthermore, even though Kostof emphasizes rituals as being important to architecture, he does not investigate the drama of particular rituals, how they survive through the ages, or how a building's meaning is transformed when a ritual is attached to it.

25. Here, I refer to Kostof's claim in the introduction, that he would "resist presenting the western achievement as if it were an insulterd and wholly logical progression." Kostof, A History of Architecture, p. 16.

26. Kostof only mentions Japanese wood construction in reference to the development of shingle style in America, and he makes cursory references to buildings such as Kahn's Dacca project.


30. The authors make generalizing assertions and offer only visual descriptions. Their concluding remarks in the chapter "Islam and the West" capture most vividly the split they perceive between the western architecture, which is based on "principles" and non-western architecture, which is (simply) "impressive" or "unique" (but not founded on rational, progressive principles like western architecture). Referring to the Taj Mahal, they assert: "If, in fact, there is any moment in the history of architecture when the unique forms of a non-Western building tradition and the principles of congruity and poise, symmetry and nobility on which Western Classicism was founded, come together in harmony, it is in this example of the last phase of ten centuries of the Islamic architectural miracle, realized in India, one of the farthest reaches of its enormous empire" (Trachtenberg and Hyman, Architecture, p. 223).


32. Eric Wolf raised similar concerns earlier, when he warned that the tendency to treat named entities such as Iroquois, Greece, Persia as having "a stable internal architecture and external boundaries interferes with our ability to understand their mutual encounter and confrontation. As Wolf pointed out, "by endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls. Thus, it becomes easy to sort the world into differently colored balls, to declare that East is East and West is West..." Eric Wolf, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982), p. 9.


34. Ibid., p. 777.


36. I borrow the term from Eric Wolf, who argues: "many of us even grew up believing that this West has a genealogy, according to which ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution." Wolf, Europe and the People Without History, p. 5.


41. Ibid., p. 16.

42. Ibid., p. 14.

43. There are only a few cursory references to vernacular architecture, such as: "typical in Fascist buildings is a style that derives partly from a generalized Mediterranean Vernacular..." (Kostof, 718), or, "Houses in the English colonies... were based on the late medieval vernacular of the homeland" (Kostof, 609); but these references are not followed by any elaboration at all on what the "Mediterranean Vernacular" means or on how the "late medieval vernacular" was transformed.


45. Ibid., pp. 12, 15.

46. See Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," p. 188.

47. Consider, for instance, current debates in universities about "Great Books" courses, in which some argue that their coverage can stay as it is because they offer the basics and that knowledge about other great books can be gained later. Similar debates also emerged around the recent publication of The Dictionary of World Culture, edited by H.L. Garas and K.A. Appiah. See The New York Review of Books, vol. XLIV, no. 2 (Feb. 6, 1997): 30–32.