

How to Believe in Architecture becoming an Author of History



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Abstract

Architecture and writing, two of the longest-standing expressions of human civilization, have been intertwined since their inception. Writing has touched upon, promoted, covered, commented, responded to, and reviewed architecture. It has also explored architecture's assumed essentials, putting them in theories and manifestos. Many writers have challenged architecture and inspired its practice. Some have even reached such levels of authority as to begin guiding architecture, and determine its most important legacy. At a critical point, the passive and reactive stance of writing—waiting for physical reality to manifest itself first—turns into a leading role of defining destinies, mandates, and agendas. This essay reflects on this cultural history, exemplifying it through the personal experience of the author across decades of writing, editing, designing, and curating. It ends with a call to participate, in an effort to eventually merge writing and architecture into a new cultural practice.

Keywords

Architecture, writing, integration, culture, civilization, history, new directions.

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1. Introduction

This special issue of *Architecture Asia*, devoted to the theme of writing and literature, comes at a special time. Writing, as evidenced by the recent launch of the many varieties of new artificial intelligence applications, is no longer what it used to be: the exclusive domain of a strong mind capable of grasping a thought, articulating it, and putting it into an argument. These foundations of writing are at now stake, now that the computer needs only “prompts” to produce seemingly coherent pieces, drawing from the infinite amount of “content” available in the data ocean. In the age of ChatGPT, that which until recently passed for plagiarism—the copying of another’s thoughts and formulations without citing sources—is no longer a mortal sin. However, letting the computer combine infinite thoughts and formulations also heralds a whole new chapter in the history of writing, and with the expected improvements of these chatbots, it will probably come to a level where even “prompts” are no longer necessary, which will most likely be the end of historiography itself. For it is not just text production that is changing. It is primarily the outsourcing of text interpretation that will cause the inner drive and motivation to write to disappear, giving way to reasons like needing to make a deadline or generate and income, or wanting to establish a reputation be the purpose¹ for using AI applications like ChatGPT.

Unless... just maybe, it turns out that the will to write something outstanding and something that no one else has thought of yet, and above all, something that becomes authentic and convincing because of the personal urge of the writer, will turn out to be stronger than laziness, and even stronger than the fervent desire—known to every writer—to escape the struggle to complete a good text.

2. Writing for Writing’s Sake

(Everything that follows in this essay assumes this possibility of “unless.”)

Let’s assume that it still makes sense to ponder the power of writing and explore what it still can do. However, even if that idea is the starting point, we are far from finished, given the inclination to convenience, which has always manifested itself amply in writing.

Slightly less recent than an intelligent chatbot, but already amply defined by time constraints, impulse behavior, vanity, and algorithmic triggers, is the writing culture of ultra-short pieces on social media. Many have made a habit of “posting”—be it opinions or otherwise—as a daily routine. To all these people who fight for a prime spot on other people’s social media “timelines,” a variety of platforms, formats, and marketing techniques are available, which blur the line between what is said and what is “posted.” The demand for high frequency, or perhaps the addiction to it, is causing a steady erosion of stylistic ability in even the most prominent writers. A bad book will gnaw at you for a lifetime, whereas a lame Tweet can happen to anyone. Ironically, that bad Tweet will probably be of better service in the quest for name recognition; even more so than an excellent book might. Now, who can resist that perverse logic?

3. Writing about Architecture

Leaving the dynamics of authorship, as such, to steer the discussion more precisely toward the topic of architecture, one

notes that there, too, the metastasis of non-committal text manifests itself—but it is interesting to see how it relates to the importance and urgency of architecture as a social necessity. And how this importance is reflected in the written word.

While there is a genre titled “architecture”—which seems to be about architecture—it can sometimes be hard to grasp why, for countless are the books and articles that add little to architecture, being merely casuistic descriptions, articulations, specifications, or at best, commentaries. It seems like an arbitrary topic choice; stuff which would never have been published without something that happened prior to the writing—merely writing as a response to the physical reality that precedes it.

Often, it seems like it might as well be another reality which the writer is responding to. This type of writing may help the professional conversation about architecture and the dialog between architects; it remains a way to remain updated, but for culture, or even society as a whole, this type of passive writing is hardly significant. For real substance, you need a certain degree of abstraction that arises from or contributes to a bird’s-eye view. Additionally, you need an intellectual drive.

4. Writing on Architecture

Which writing has that?

There is a type of writing that puts architecture itself—its status, its mandate, its crises, and its glory—at the center. This brings us to a number of famous writers who had the courage and ability to speak out about quality in architecture; who dared to use common denominators, and who were able to transcend the empirics to formulate a vision. These authors include Sir Banister Flight Fletcher,² Sir Nikolaus Pevsner,³ and Bruno Zevi.⁴ On a more recent timeline is the work of Kenneth Frampton,⁵ whose survey work, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, taught generations of architecture students their first general professional awareness. Another example is Charles Jencks, who in his famous diagrams gave all kinds of movements, trends, and oeuvres a place in an apparently knowable historical reality.⁶ The Belgian architecture critic Geert Bekaert devoted a lifetime cultivating “the conversation about architecture,”⁷ always seeking the connection between an architectural project and historical and cultural themes. He also ran journals and operated an architecture bookstore. Bekaert’s intellectual legacy continues through students such as Hilde Heynen⁸ and Christophe van Gerrewey,⁹ representing perhaps the most architecture-discursive nation in the world—that of the Flemings.

Practicing architects, often too close to projects to be able to muster the necessary detachment for a historical overview, have also sometimes compiled their overarching insights into the meaning of architecture into tractate-like publications. Adolf Loos, in *Ins Leere Gesprochen*¹⁰ analyzed the fate of architecture (and other expressions of culture) and connected them with cultural criticism. One hundred years later, this tradition is represented by architects like Herman Hertzberger,¹¹ Peter Zumthor¹² and Yung Ho Chang,¹³ who try to put their personal experiences and insights into lessons others can learn from.

With them should also be mentioned Rem Koolhaas, probably the most prolific architect/author of the last half of the century, whose position has always been between writing and designing, and whose fame depends in no small measure on his ability to analyze and put into words the fate of architecture itself.

5. Writing to Set a Standard

All these authors have reached a level where writing is no longer a derivative of a so-called built reality. Their texts have an independent persuasive power that makes sense even without building, or which precede building and may become a source of inspiration for it. Loos even wrote a text that reads like a crucial rhetorical choice: *Ornament and Crime*.¹⁴ This is a writing that begins with fundamental reflection and only after, then asks how architecture can respond to it; this form in its intellectual clarity makes a compelling case for design to account for, so as to become sharper and better. Here, writing becomes a form of intellectual leadership within the entire discipline. It is no longer about architecture, but for architecture.

One writes as an expression of a spatial ideal, to which architecture becomes the vehicle. One writes to raise an agenda proposal for all culture.

This kind of writing about architecture takes architecture much further than building alone ever can. The meaning, mandate, and power—in short, the value of architecture—is established by writers. Intellectual authority, as well as historical relevance, sometimes even receive great recognition by practitioners. They, too, eventually recognize that the milestones of their profession—which they share and recognize as their canon—are books, reversing the famous quote from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*: "*Ceci inspirera cela*" (This will inspire that).

Now, we come to the yardsticks of architectural history: *The Ten Books on Architecture* by Vitruvius,¹⁵ *Yingzao Fashi: Treatise on Architectural Methods or State Building Standards* (营造法式) by Li Jie,¹⁶ *De Re Aedificatoria* by Alberti,¹⁷ and *Towards an Architecture* by Le Corbusier.¹⁸ They are manifestos on the essence of good architecture that are not intended to explain one's own work, but to set a standard for many.

6. Writing to Set an Agenda

There is another genre of texts about architecture, which leads it away from the center of the argument. These texts are about the world and the core values of society, with necessarily enormous architectural consequences. Architecture in these sources is no longer a subject, but a dimension to express something in.

The Bible has many architectural moments and demonstrates an intense architectural sense of structure, construction, suspense, punch line, spatial control, and dramatic site selection. Or how could Johann Sebastian Bach's famous oratorio, *St. Matthew Passion*, exist without architecture, both in the story itself and the manner in which it sets out the chapters of the Gospel of Matthew to music?

Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* brings an awareness of architecture—both as a means of production and its outcome—and thus of the power relations that determine what architecture looks like and who owns space, land, materials, and even time. The current United Nations-led Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports are contemporary variants of these universal texts, with inescapable consequences for architecture. These texts can be seen as messages to humanity. Architecture as the physical manifestation of our civilization can't ignore the call for purpose and must reflect on its future. Where do we profess faith, and how do we shape that environment? Where is the place for community, and do we create added value for public? How do we provide a generative environment that will no longer

be based on the extraction of our planetary resources. Hence, these publications that are meant for everyone are also meant for architects. And they (architects)—because of their specific responsibilities and ability—can do much more with them.

7. Architecture to Structure Writing

And so, we now come to where writing on, for, and at the service of architecture turns into architecture as an inevitable consequence of writing, or architecture becoming an alternative form of writing.

The works of Laozi, Plato, St. Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Descartes, and Freud had immeasurable impact on people's minds, and hence on the spaces around them. Sometimes, the architectural dimension was expressed in their book titles.¹⁹

There are a few examples of architects who translated the books of these great minds directly into their work, but often, a translation into architectural theory was first needed. It is not difficult to locate the monuments from the general cultural history in the history of architecture, and often, architectural theorists have helped make this relationship even more evident. From analyses of the deeper cultural significance of spatial effects, such as light play, enclosing, routing, scale, proportion and so on, to sometimes even complete blueprints of a new utopian world.

8. Architecture Becomes the Writing of History

Thus, the relationship between writing and design continues to expand and also overlap more and more. The further intertwining of the two are conceivable, each of which rises above writing as a specific activity, such that it arrives at a metaphorical level in which both writing about and designing architecture become a way of speaking about creating a meaningful life.

First, is the handful of architects in history who no longer saw their work as the spatial organization of a program, but as a vehicle for writing history itself. This is (acceptably) a dubious genre, in which hubris lurks. Most architects who practice this genre are satisfied with the paper version of history. Think of Étienne-Louis Boullée's cenotaph for Isaac Newton, or Bruno Taut's *Die Stadtkrone* or El Lissitzky's *Prounenraum*—architectural ideals that anticipate future perfection that will never come; it's architecture as an alternative manifesto.

Second, is how a linguistic relationship between text and architecture can be established. Not only at the level of plots and structures in stories and tracts, but even at the level of sentences and words architecture is recognizable. One can think of the use of the preposition to express meaning by structuring text through spatial units. But in Chinese, for example, the characters for these prepositions can themselves be read as architecture. Slowly but surely, the two aspects—writing and architecture—of this essay lose their own distinctiveness and merge with each other.

9. Belief in Discourse

Now that this essay has gone into such detail about the intense, even symbiotic, relationship between architecture and writing, it has come time for me to hold myself personally accountable. This essay was not written as the result of an arbitrary neutral investigation. On the contrary, it is based on my own experiences throughout my career—often full of harm to myself; sometimes also providing great pleasure.

I have written several books in my life, and a multitude of essays, reviews, editorials, and other forms of reflection. Most of the content in these writings is about architecture, in all degrees of substance, and certainly architecture in the broadest sense of the word. Yet, not so broad that they lose their subject matter and focus. All these pieces—spanning decades—touch on, encircle, and present/frame architecture in such a way as to imply that we have some idea of what it is. I have used many definitions of it, old and new, known and unknown: “The Mother of the Arts,” “The most generalist and comprehensive human activity,” “The most expensive art,” and “The organization of space.” Counting the word “architecture” in just the titles of my publication would yield a respectable number. Apparently, all along, I believed in the importance of writing about architecture.

But I didn't just write myself. I also, as an editor of magazines, compiler of collections, organizer of lectures and conferences, asked others to write and organize thoughts, perhaps almost a thousand times over. So apparently, I also believed in the role of debate and discourse. And now, as I commit these words to the page, I am once again demonstrating that. At least, that is what you, the reader, no doubt assume.

10. From Discourse to Action

Yet in the development of that belief in the power of words, much has happened over time. Of course, there is the development from student to teacher, and thus a movement from study to the sharing of knowledge. But there is also a development from writing as a secondary reaction to a reality that presents itself, to writing as an attempt to generate a new reality and propose new opportunities. From reaction to proposition, from journalism to agenda setting. That may sound very progressive and courageous, but often, both yield equally dramatic results in terms of public impact: from the journalist who tries to be there as early as possible (without ever creating themselves) to the guide who proposes a path to a destination that hardly anyone is interested in (yet). Behold, the fate of the writer on architecture, as I know them all too well: he or she is either too late, or too early. Can writing ever be exactly on time?

I retraced this path a few years ago by launching a digital archive of all important publications, re-presented as arguments in a topical discourse about our current state in the world.²⁰ The material is organized in such a way that a mandate of architecture emerges: not architecture as an end in itself, but as a means of understanding the world, giving it form and direction, and even the decisiveness to actually realize that form and direction. The whole reflects two qualities of architecture that I have always valued the most. First, that of the diagnosis of our time and second, as the most complete medium for following up on the diagnosis with the appropriate treatment. That this also gives you a roof over your head is a nice fringe benefit.

11. From Diagnosis to Therapy

This dual potential role of architecture is again reflected in two articles recently added to this archive, each highlighting one side of the issue.

The diagnosis part is phrased in bleak terms; it does not look good.

*The Solipsism of Architecture*²¹:

“(…) Irrespective of a growing existential awareness of the need for system change on the periphery of architecture and beyond, there is one thing that does not appear to succumb to any historical imperative whatsoever: the tendency to begin by interpreting everything that happens in the world in terms of architecture. Whatever the crisis, there will be no action before due consideration has been given to what the situation means for architecture. And ‘for the role of the architect.’ In other words, what prevails is the egocentric question of ‘what’s in it for me?’ The entire system can topple, ecology can collapse, the world can founder, but architecture’s first concern will always be about what will happen to itself. First find out ‘what design can do.’ First report back to the professional community. First evaluate the consequences for the ‘curriculum,’ or the ‘title,’ or the definition of architecture. And if it all gets too complicated, there’ll be statements that ‘not too much should be expected’ of design, that social crises fall outside the curriculum, or do not fall within the definition of architecture. Group protection is always infinitely stronger than species protection. What remains are the reflections of the do-gooder. Interesting questions, subtle considerations, a residuum of self-doubt. But when the time comes for deeds, they look a hell of a lot like the deeds of old.

Over 20 years since the Kyoto Protocol, over 10 years since the Global Financial Crisis, and in the first year after the global Coronavirus pandemic, there has been no real change in the architecture of architecture itself. That will only happen when it stops connecting everything with itself, stops beginning with itself. When it admits the revolution into its own citadel.”

A treatment proposal, however, is phrased in hopeful words.

*Architecture as a Medium of Change*²²:

“Let’s reconceive Africa... to a land still to be invented. A land that embodies and exemplifies the system change that the whole world needs. A continent that can be regenerating itself, without the carbon emissions, plastic pollutions, unsustainable extractions, and human caused species extinctions as we know it. A continent that brims with ideas to leapfrog from being victimized to the interest of others, to its own enlightened leadership.

As Lesley Lokko says (presenting the chief curatorial concept for the Venice Biennale 2023 that positions ‘Africa as laboratory of the future’), ‘Architects historically are key players in translating images into reality.’

I think architecture can do much more. Rather than starting with images, with rhetoric and noble intentions, it can be a medium of change itself, relevant for the many, not the few. Rather than translating, it’s about creating a new kind of discipline beyond the scale of small individual projects, individual signatures, and reputations. Good design provides direction, can lead us on the road toward a highly necessary alternative spatial fix, which is both good for the African people and for humanity.

Let’s bring the power of architecture to the stage that counts, and let architecture show its great strengths to be part of Africa’s progress.”

Diagnosis and therapy—this two-sided approach to architecture has defined my work for a long time. From one speaks the words of Antonio Gramsci: a “pessimism of the mind.” From the other, an “optimism of the will.” Given the plight of our existential situation, architecture could play a key role through a unified exploration, and then application, of an entirely different spatial organization of life on our planet. However, it essentially plays a role in its demise now. Use of



Figure 1
Tracing a new Silk Road of
Architecture from Europe to
Asia

non-renewable resources, spatial fixations by which we increase climate risks for decades to come, and waste of talent and absolute subservience to those who manage our planet very badly largely determine our contemporary architectural production.

The warning and the proposal—culturally, both schools of thought are important, against pride and procrastination; pro faith in our true potential. But I believe we may also note that both avenues of future action are currently largely ignored by the field. For myself, at least, this denial had major personal consequences.

12. Exile as a Consequence

This is not the place to go into detail about these personal consequences. For the sake of my argument, let one example suffice.

In 2009, as director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute, I published a book, together with several collaborators, entitled *Architecture of Consequence*, calling on architecture to focus on the major issues of our time.²³ These are issues that have only become more urgent since then: climate, energy, food supply, public health, social cohesion, and the waste of our most important life resources: space, and time.

The book also contained a collection of examples of an alternative architecture that responded to those issues. The book was thus a diagnosis and resolution at the same time and became for myself, the explicit guide for my directorate. Exhibitions, conferences, incubation projects and international collaborative projects followed. Even the building of the Institute was

transformed to upgrade it to higher standards of ecological and social sustainability. *Architecture of Consequence*

16 became the framework for a structural move from warnings

to solutions, as a comprehensive value proposition to the entire professional community.

To my surprise, that same community went on a counter-offensive. The national government and funding agency did not like this activation of public money to non-artistic motives and eventually moved to dissolve the Architecture Institute as part of a large institutional overhaul. Schools, professional organizations, and prominent figures allowed it to happen in silence. And I myself became criticized for not only expecting far too much from architecture, but for implicitly accusing the design world of complicity in the untenable status quo. The result was extreme defensiveness. These experiences, taken together, brought an end to my activities at home and the beginning of an ongoing exile, to this day, to Asia, particularly China, where from day one, I experienced a great curiosity about new roles for architecture and design, and the ensuing social benefits it may have.

I went, in other words, on a journey. One could say that the provisional terminus of this personal development is the invitation to write this essay in *Architecture Asia*. But what next?

Although the profession's getting cold feet having realized its own role in an age of crisis and the following numbing of its mandate had profound implications for myself, the mechanism is far from new. Architectural history has numerous examples of rejection of radical reflection on its risks and dangers. Construction, traditionally based on practical ingenuity, craft and technical know-how, and relying largely on the goodwill of capital, has a long anti-intellectual tradition. Architectural critics have known the feeling of being wanted, only if they serve as respectable marketers of architects who set the agenda. If they are critical, or even agenda makers themselves, other mechanisms

come into play. Usually, they are parked in academia and can pass their knowledge to students who have no reputation to lose yet. If they are not satisfied with that and want to participate in the public debate, condescension, opposition, and marginalization may follow.

You will have to motivate yourself as a writer to continue in a more sovereign way than by hoping for recognition. And this may be found in something more than just writing. Can it be found completely outside the comfort zone of professional dogmas, codes, and conventions? Is it possible to create a whole new framework for architectural intelligence? To be beyond or not be, that's the question.

13. Journey

So here comes my proposal for *Architecture Asia* readers: since you predominantly live and work across the Eurasian continent, can we write a song line together, that follows the permutations of landmass, nations, and cultural borderlines? Can we discover a Silk Road of Architecture together, that connects the most creative communities? Can we design a journey which meanders like, so to speak, a promenade *continentale*?

As this journey goes way beyond the boundaries of any architecture as we know it, with clients and budgets and construction sites, it may manifest itself in borders to cross, doors to open, details to be seen, and much more. And by revealing all these intricacies of cultures, languages, value systems, tastes, and countless other subjectivities, an architecture may come to the fore to connect like no architecture ever did before. An extended architecture that will be discovered, rather than imposed; with elements that will be hunted and gathered rather than extracted and produced. If this may succeed, writing will provide the score of the melody, the choreography of the dance, and the script of the movement. It is such a journey that will intertwine architecture and writing as mediums for explorations and exchanges (Figure 1, page 16).

Let me know if you are interested. And if successful, I promise to rewrite this essay in the reverse direction.

Acknowledgment

This essay is built on the shoulders of many other writers, whose relentless pursuit of clarity I'm greatly indebted to. With some of them, I had the privilege to discuss the relationship between writing and architecture explicitly and relentlessly, most notably Arjen Oosterman, my colleague at *Archis* magazine for many years.

Notes

1. For a now somewhat comical exploration of the consequences, see <https://architect.com/news/article/150344649/architect-appoints-chatgpt-as-its-new-editor-in-chief>.
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20. The digital archive can be referred to www.olebouman.agency.
21. Ole Bouman, "The Solipsism of Architecture," <https://www.olebouman.agency/post/the-solipsism-of-architecture>.
22. Ole Bouman, "Architecture as a Medium of Change," <https://www.olebouman.agency/post/architecture-as-a-medium-of-change>.
23. Ole Bouman, *Architecture of Consequence* (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: NAI/010 Publishers, 2010).

Figure Credits

Figure 1: Tracing a new Silk Road of Architecture from Europe to Asia (author's diagram).