The Essay as Form

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ABSTRACT
This essay explores German sociologist Theodor Adorno's 1958 text "The Essay as Form," through the writings of a quintet of English post-war architectural historians: John Summerson, Colin Rowe, Alan Colquhoun, Reyner Banham and Robin Evans. It argues that each of these historians' commitment to the essay form has gone largely unnoticed among any kind of appreciation of their work, and more generally that the essay, as a very particular way of communicating learned ideas in a populist way, should be resurrected as an important and accessible model for all academic writing.

"The academic guild", bemoaned the German critic and sociologist Theodor Adorno in 1958, "only has patience for philosophy that dresses itself up with the nobility of the universal, the everlasting and the primal" (trans. 1984, p. 151). As a result, he argued, universities and professors not only ignore the smaller-scale value of what he termed the "cultural artefact", but that they stubbornly present their ideas in texts characterised by the supposed immutability and objectivity of their labours. For Adorno, the solution lay in the embrace of an alternative intellectual tradition, refuting academicism and instead championing German Enlightenment thinking that extended from Leibniz through to his more immediate contemporaries, Simmel, Kassner and Benjamin. What linked these philosophers and critics was not only the way they thought, but more importantly the way they wrote – specifically, that they all presented their ideas not through grandiose tomes and treatises but through more idiosyncratic, even artful, essays. A faith in this mode of writing gave Adorno the title to his text – "The Essay as Form" ("form" being the most desirable state of being for any aspiring intellectual in Weimar Germany) – and which still reads today, as it must have done over half a century ago, as a plea for a more compelling, more nuanced way of committing words to paper: "Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically – he went on to write – the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as creatio ex nihilo*." (trans. 1984, p. 152)*

Adorno was not the first to be seduced by the romance of this "childlike freedom", and in many ways his text is a sequel to an earlier homily by György Lukács, whose own "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" was published in 1910 as the introduction to his book Soul and Form. *One of the peculiarities of Lukács' text, however, is that when you read it you discover that it is neither an essay nor an introduction, but in fact a letter to his friend, the Hungarian artist and critic Leo Popper, in which he alludes to the essay not only as the perfect form but as its own independent art form. But these ambiguities are perhaps understandable, not least because it was in Germany more than anywhere else that an opposing academic position canonising science not art was really enshrined. In particular, you can see this in all those universities set up in the early nineteenth century – notably Wilhelm von Humboldt's University of Berlin – in which arts faculties started to insist upon an identifiable body of what they termed "research" for all of their graduate degrees. Affluent American grand tourists, passing through Berlin on the last leg of their travels through Europe, then exported this model into their own nascent universities back home (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, etc.), and with this absorption, a way of writing mired in pseudo-science, enthroned in the PhD thesis and far removed from the enlightened essay model really took hold.*

In architecture, or more specifically architectural history, this moment and place in time also happened to coincide with the elucidation of the discipline by successive generations of largely German historians – from Semper, Burckhardt, Fiedler and Riegl, through to Wölfflin, Giedion, Wittkower and Pevsner. All of them explored their subjects with a meticulous, almost scientific sense of rigour (resulting in a body of work that definitively maps an incredibly complex history of ideas), but none of them recognised the need to write this history in anything but the driest and most turgid of prose.

An essay, almost by definition, has to engage with its reader from its very first line, but a glimpse at the opening sentences of any number of the canonic works of architectural history reveals the extent of their ponderousness. For example, this is how Gottfried Semper - confusing importance with interestedness - begins his study, The Four Elements of Architecture*: "The famous book on the Olympian Jupiter by Quatremère de Quincy was one of the most important events in the literatures of art and a triumph of our century" (1st ed., 1851). Equally uninspiring, Sigfried Giedion's* Space, Time and Architecture *opens with the rambling observation: "With no clear perception of the relation in which it stands to the past or of the route by which it must advance into the future, the life of any period will be lived on an aimless, day-to-day basis" (1st ed., 1941). Even Reyner Banham, who was the first English inheritor to this tradition as Nikolaus Pevsner's PhD student at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, begins his doctoral thesis (and then book),* Theory and Design in the First Machine Age, *with a sentence of unparalleled banality:*

> *"While a series of revolutionary gestures around 1910, largely connected with the cubist and futurist movements, were the main point of departure for the development of modern architecture, there were also a number of particular predisposing causes that helped to guide the mainstream of development into the channels through which it flowed in the 1920s." (1960)*

But then what makes Banham so loveable is that the last two lines of the book are utterly wonderful:

> *"The architect who proposes to run with technology knows now that he will be in fast company, and that, in order to keep up, he may have to emulate the futurists and discard his whole cultural load, including the professional garments by which he is recognised as an architect. If, on the other hand, he decides not to do this, he may find that a technological culture has decided to go on without him."*

Consistent with Adorno's claim that it is the form not the content of writing that is important, what Theory and Design *seems to illustrate, therefore, is not so much an architectural survey history but an author teaching himself how to write. And in finding his voice, Banham was casting off 200 years of academicism and embracing an alternative tradition, this time not the enlightened German philosophers lauded by Adorno but an equivalent cast of English intellectuals, dilettantes and connoisseurs – Bacon, Milton, Johnson, Hazlitt, Lamb, Ruskin, de Quincy, Pater, Chesterton, Strachey, Woolf, Huxley and Orwell – all of whose criticism was written not as treatises, tomes or papers but only and ever as essays.*

But what exactly is an essay, and how does it differ from an academic text? Perhaps the best answer can be found in its etymology, for the word derives from the French essayer, *meaning to try, or to attempt. And so in contrast to the assuredness and confidence of the paper or treatise, an essay revels in its self-doubt, or at least in an essay what structures the narrative is the meditative questioning of a set of ideas rather than a paper which provides only declarative answers. An essay is also relatively short, stripped to the exposition of a single idea, and is never broken down into sub-sections or chapters. Its title should typically provide some sense of reference, or at least humour, and never feature a colon and subtitle, and again counter to the academic text, a true essay should never really have footnotes. To borrow Truman Capote's distinction, as a piece of writing, not typing, an essay must also have ambitions towards a certain lyricism – essays are writerly, mellifluous and free-flowing, and sell their ideas as much through the compelling choice of words as through what is actually being said. Ultimately, though, the only true rule of essay writing is a commitment not to observe any rules – an inbuilt sense of mischief that characterises most definitions of the essay form, and certainly that of Aldous Huxley: "the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything" (1959, preface).*

The sad thing about almost all architectural writing today is that no one writes in the essay form. For a brief moment in the 1990s there was Sanford Kwinter and Robert Somol, delivering short and punchy texts in New York's ANY *magazine, and before them, Michael Sorkin, as architectural critic for* The Village Voice, *got closer still to the irreverent standards of a good essayist in publishing numerous funny little vitriolic blasts against American architecture. But today, the best thinkers and writers about architecture – people like Vidler, Forty, Picon, Coen, Bergdoll,*

Colomina, Hays and Frampton – never write essays, only books.

And yet, if we go back half a century to the moment when Adorno first published "The Essay as Form", what is immediately apparent is that in 1960 the very best writing on architecture was by a collective of English historians whose key works were only ever anthologies of essays. Despite their shared nationality and mode of writing, what is additionally distinctive about these thinkers is that each of them presented a different facet of the good essayist. For the first of them, John Summerson, and in particular his collection of essays Heavenly Mansions, *it was in the clarity, accessibility and didacticism of his writing and the clear identification of all those "cultural artefacts" whose loss Adorno had mourned. His successor, chronologically, if not intellectually, Colin Rowe, was also at his best in the essay form, but his are defined by their first-person narrative – Rowe writes as he speaks (*As I Was Saying *is the apposite title of his three-volume collected works), and it is a kind of speech made more compelling by its indiscretion, innuendo and iconoclasm. Just one year younger than Rowe was Alan Colquhoun, an incredibly rigorous and precise scholar, but one who never thought of presenting his ideas through the philosophising treatise, but only the razor-sharp essay (his collection,* Essays in Architectural Criticism *being the best of them). A further year younger than Colquhoun was Banham himself, who after his sense of self-discovery at the end of* Theory and Design *detonated as an essayist – to read any one of the hundreds of short texts in his posthumous anthology of writings,* A Critic Writes, *is to appreciate a historian fully in command of both his popularism and expertise. The last of this collective was Robin Evans, more than 20 years Banham's junior, but who died tragically young, and who wrote as he thought – figuring things out as he went along. Evans also has perhaps the single best opening line of any architectural essay: "Ordinary things contain the deepest mysteries", from "Figures, Doors and Passages" in* Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays *(1997).*

Sermoniser, raconteur, scholar, populist, autodidact, this, then, is a quintet of historians who have collectively defined not only the way we think about architecture, but the form through which these thoughts appear to us. And yet despite the enduring resonances of their legacy, each of them were strangely bashful about their contribution, or at least about the unifying form in which they all presented their work. So, whereas Adorno proselytised on the essay towards the end of his life, and with similar bombasticism, Lukács lauded its possibilities at the outset of his career, none of these five English architectural historians – so fluent on all subjects – have ever published anything on their allegiance to the essay. Perhaps to do so would have been undignified, or simply to state the obvious. Among all of them, when it comes to the essay, the only tiny fragment of self-analysis can be found in the unpublished correspondences of Alan Colquhoun, who on 15 June 2011, just a year before his death aged 91, wrote to his friend and fellow architectural historian Jacques Gubler a letter headlined "Some Thoughts on the 'Essay'". To read it is to finally be able to peer behind the curtain and see the inner-workings of a methodology.

"The essay is not merely a quirky Anglo-Saxon genre, puzzling to all continental Europe. It is an important agent of the Enlightenment (...) combining 'learned' ideas with popular expression (...) But also – more remotely – the essay can be seen as a small part of the history of rhetoric, dating from the Renaissance, which moved knowledge (both reason and understanding) from the hands of specialists to the hands of 'all educated people'."

Perhaps this, in the end, is why the form of the essay is so important. Just as Adorno began his own essay on the essay with an epigraph from Goethe's Pandora *– "Destined, to see the illuminated, no the light" – we now all see a little clearer through the essay, and feel a lot more enlightened.* m

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