

# Reference and Contemporaneity

## Introduction

---

*Dietrich Erben and Carsten Ruhl*

### Contemporary Relevance and Historiological Framework

Contemporaneity is once again in high demand. Together with its dialectical counterpart—reference to the past—it has moved to the center of debates that concern both politics and society, as well as historiological theory. Since February 2022, the history of Russian expansion has become a prominent case study in how ideology shapes historical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Following the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's expanded invasion of Ukraine in winter 2022, several prominent Eastern European historians and political scientists have called for a fundamental reassessment of Russian history. They trace today's imperialism back to the Moscow Tsarist Empire in the mid-sixteenth century and even further to the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This extensive historical framework, they claim, enables us to explain Russia's "special path" of development. The present thus serves as an impulse for reevaluating the past. In opposition to this historical reinterpretation is a perspective strictly focused on contemporary factors. Advocates of this view argue that when analyzing the Russian invasion, a historical timeframe of merely two to three decades—roughly one generation—is sufficient. They maintain that Putin's imperial practices are retroactively justified through historical rhetoric that ultimately has a fictional relationship to the past, while being entirely oriented toward present

---

1 On the debate see Gerd Koenen, "Anmerkungen zu Putin", in *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 16, no. 4 (2022), 67–82.

concerns. They caution against rewriting history without new source materials to support such revisions.

The history of colonialism and the systems of slavery entwined with it is another area where debates about contemporaneity and historical reference have intensified in recent years. These discussions extend beyond how we understand the past to more complex questions: Do the descendants of those who were colonized and enslaved—people who have been or continue to be subjugated—have a privileged position in historical discourse today? Furthermore, can these individuals—as people who remain actively or structurally oppressed—access and articulate historical truths that uninvolved contemporaries cannot?

There are many examples of such discussions, which concern fundamental issues and can naturally be applied to architectural history as well.<sup>2</sup> The core question is twofold: On the one hand, should history primarily serve as a commemorative political force for identity formation among various social groups? Under this view, historical research and criticism should align the past with the normative expectations of the present. On the other hand, an alternative perspective insists that history, as an enlightening force, should primarily illuminate historical contingencies and discontinuities. In this case, history should emphasize strangeness and alterity as distinct from the present and thereby evade the imperative of relating the past to present-day identity politics.

Historian Lynn Hunt has articulated the fundamental question of the relationship between normativity rooted in contemporary standards and interpretation of the past based on historical distance in these terms: “[P]resentism besets us in two different ways: (1) the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms; and (2) the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past.”<sup>3</sup> Both approaches involve the opposition of “strangeness” and “sameness”: Does his-

2 François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2003); Martin Sabrow, *Zeitenwenden in der Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2023), especially 78–87.

3 Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” in *Perspectives On History* 1 (2002), <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism>. See also the further discussion by James H. Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present,” in *Perspectives On History* 17 (2022), <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on->

torical analysis still attempt to identify what distinguishes the past from our present, allowing the past to retain its foreignness? Or do we appropriate the past by aligning it with current normative standards, not only considering present-day normative values and ways of thinking in our analysis, but actually making them the primary focus of historical understanding? To use the terminology developed in this volume: Are we engaged in an incessant critical delegitimization of present-day identity politics through history when dealing with systems of historical reference? Or are we conducting an equally critical examination of the past that is largely committed to contemporary norms, but which risks contributing to a presentist erasure of history? Put differently, is it possible to make distanced reference to history, or is the past only available in the form of a contemporary culture of remembrance?

The essays in this volume demonstrate that, while we cannot escape the opposition between reference and contemporaneity, we need not stop at merely identifying it. One productive approach lies in making referential relationships historically concrete and naming them precisely—or acknowledging the futility of avoiding them. This process always involves interpreting entanglements between different media. Film and photo historian Siegfried Kracauer, who was also an important critic of architecture, discusses an early and remarkably complex example in his final book, *History: The Last Things Before The Last*,<sup>4</sup> published posthumously in 1969. There, he explores the possible connections between the invention of photography in the 1830s and the simultaneous emergence of the ideal of objectivity in the historical sciences. The comparison between photography and historiography is only possible because both involve media. Moreover, Kracauer assigns historiography a decidedly “photographic” task: “The universe of the historian consists of the same stuff as our everyday world.” History is about life in the sense of every-day experience: “the life that lies on the path of our everyday experience.” Kracauer reports that many historians of the mid and late nineteenth century were aware of the parallels and differences between their work and

---

history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present.

- 4 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before The Last* (1969; repr., Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995); the following quotations and paraphrases are from pages 45–48. On Kracauer as an architecture critic, see Carsten Ruhl, *Kracauer's Architecture: The Ornamental Nature of the New Capitalist Order* (Weimar: M Books, 2022).

that of photographers. Heinrich Heine already referred to his Paris reports, published in 1854 under the title *Lutezia*, as a “history book like a daguerreotype, in which each day captures its own image.” It was a commonly expressed idea that both photography and historiography were concerned with capturing reality, be it contemporary reality or a distant past no longer directly observable but only imaginable through visual or written sources. Historians, however, saw differences between their methods of representation and those of photography. Johann Gustav Droysen dismissed the notion of turning historians into “cameramen”; rather, he saw them as narrators of the past. Lewis Namier saw the historian not as a photographer, but as a painter: it was important to compose and emphasize what was significant, not “to reproduce everything that the eye captures.”

The comparison between historiography and photography—which has been familiar since the middle of the nineteenth century and to which Kracauer draws attention—once again poses the question of reference and contemporaneity. For one thing, the then-modern medium of photography became a media reference that reshaped the prevailing understanding of the tradition-laden discipline of historiography. Moreover, the objects of the past that were referenced were themselves modernized within that contemporary context by being subjected to new scientific standards of objectivity and reality.

## Methodical Considerations Concerning Reference and Contemporaneity in Architecture

As we can see, the relationship between reference and contemporaneity is inherently challenging. This applies to history in general and consequently to the history of architecture as well. The concept for this volume and the conference on which it is based<sup>5</sup> thus begins with a working hypothesis: there exists a fundamental tension between these two concepts in the production of architecture.

---

5 “Referenz und Zeitgenossenschaft / Reference and Contemporaneity,” conference in Frankfurt am Main, Goethe Universität, 11–13.05.2023. Organized by Dietrich Erben (TU München) und Carsten Ruhl (Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main).

Just as thinking in general relies on “varieties of reference,”<sup>6</sup> architectural reflection depends on a variety of referential constructions: references are, we might say, a cognitive inevitability in both domains. The concept of similarity, which has been discussed across various disciplines in recent years,<sup>7</sup> offers a particular way of understanding reference. Seen from a contemporary political perspective, this discussion stems partly from the search for a compromise-oriented path through today’s intensifying identity politics. The concept of similarity responds to the relentless confrontational emphasis on differences, the mutual boundary-drawing between identity groups, and action within strictly binary frameworks by offering a “both-and” alternative: “The focus on similarity and its associated concepts of cohesion and contiguity attempts to account for instances of interconnection, overlap, and gradation in cultural contexts. Similarity is an intentionally imprecise concept, a relational concept.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the references established through similarity are not necessarily historical, but can equally signal strong connections to the present and what is currently relevant.

Following this paradigm, architectural references can only be understood through relationships of similarity. References do not stand in a relationship of identity with their models, but one of resemblance. Unlike copies, quotations, and mimetic adaptations of source material, references are not true to detail; rather, they modernize their source material and adapt it to contemporary contexts. Sociologist Gabriel Tarde recognized this as early as 1890 in *Les lois de l'imitation*, identifying similarity relationships as a logical principle of cultural evolution. For Tarde, the reference frame of his era was,

---

6 Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

7 On the approach see Gerald Funk, Gert Mattenklott, Michael Pauen, eds., *Symbole und Signaturen. Charakteristik und Geschichte des Ähnlichkeitsdenkens, Ästhetik des Ähnlichen. Zur Poetik und Kunstphilosophie der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), as well as the research report for a Konstanz project and the publications of the project participants: Anil Bhatti, Dorothee Kimmich, Albrecht Koschorke, Rudolf Schlögl, Jürgen Wertheimer, eds., “Ähnlichkeit. Ein kulturtheoretisches Paradigma,” in *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 36 (2011), 233–47, <https://doi.org/10.1515/iasl.2011.018>; Anil Bhatti and Dorothee Kimmich, eds., *Ähnlichkeit. Ein theoretisches Paradigma* (Konstanz, 2015); Dorothee Kimmich, *Ins Ungefähre. Ähnlichkeit und Moderne* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2017).

8 Bhatti et al., “Ähnlichkeit,” 245.

of course, historicism, which continuously invoked various historical styles. Yet even within historicism, he claimed, evolution occurred not through repetition but through variation: “We do not demand the expression of fleeting impressions from architecture or music, impressions that are borrowed from foreign or from dead and artificially restored civilisations; we demand from them a vivid expression and reproduction of the impressions that are wrought into our life.”<sup>9</sup> Tarde distinguishes between “fashion” and “custom”: while fashion displays little formal variation because it relies on established, proven functional solutions, custom exhibits continual variation and accelerates formal change. Even fashions, however, involve reference-making and create similarities. According to Tarde, the Renaissance was a special form of “re-birth”: “Greek and Latin antiquity was strongly Italianised. Besides, this innovation was only a fashion following, like any other, in the tail of certain discoveries, namely, the archaeological discoveries resulting from the diggings in the sacred soil of antique Rome or in the libraries of the monasteries.”<sup>10</sup>

The concept of reference—understood broadly as ways of invoking other things—proves robust and readily applicable. The contributions collected here examine a broad spectrum of intermedial, interdisciplinary, and intercultural references, confirming both the cognitive necessity of references and referencing’s status as a ubiquitous cultural technique.<sup>11</sup> The reference system of language generally operates through a triad of word-object-meaning: a word refers to other words, establishes a relationship to an object it denotes, and ultimately points to a concept it represents. The word “house” denotes the physical reality of a house and conveys its meaning as a place of human habitation. Beyond this, references as cognitive phenomena can be categorized as temporal, spatial, object-based, or event-based. Possible ref-

---

9 Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation. Etude sociologique* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1890); Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation* (1903; repr., Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962), 354.

10 Tarde, *The Laws*, 363.

11 From the interdisciplinary (and therefore difficult to survey) literature, see, from a linguistic perspective, Mark Textor, ed., *Neue Theorien der Referenz* (Paderborn: Brill, 2004) and, more generally, Philipp Wolf, entry on “Referenz” in *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie: Ansätze – Personen – Grundbegriffe* (1998), ed. Ansgar Nünning, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013), 642–43, which includes a further bibliography.

erence objects can also include mental models, conceptual images, or theories. These classifications require further specification in particular contexts. For instance, when discussing the “Gothic cathedral in France,” time, place, object, and model are invoked in equal measure. Similarly, characterizing a building as “functional” often references scientific ideals such as objectivity, rationality, and progress. The linguistic reference system becomes particularly complex with metaphors. It is even possible for a specific meaning to be obscured or undermined by the linguistic term used to express it, as studies of metaphor have demonstrated.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, however, metaphors—like references in general—can serve to legitimize concepts and confer authority.

Unlike the concept of reference, the concept of contemporaneity, as far as we can see, has yet to be methodologically clarified. We will therefore outline some considerations regarding its theoretical scope based on individual examples. Firstly, contemporaneity should be distinguished from the concepts of modernity and actuality (*Aktualität*—which can be understood as relevance in the immediate present). According to its conceptual history, which reaches back to antiquity, modernity refers to the relationship between old and modern (*antiquus/modernus*). This distinction continued for centuries until “modern” itself finally became an attribute of the modern epoch.<sup>13</sup> Actuality, by contrast, refers to the relevance of a phenomenon primarily in its temporal dimension. In art history, the concept has been viewed ambivalently. From the perspective of the philosophy of art, George Kubler observes: “Yet the instant of actuality is all we ever can know directly. The rest of time emerges only in signals relayed to us at this instant by innumerable stages and by unexpected bearers.”<sup>14</sup> Carl Einstein, on the other hand, commenting

---

12 Petra Gehring, “Erkenntnis durch Metaphern? Methodische Bemerkungen zur Metaphernforschung,” in *Metaphern in Wissenskulturen*, ed. Matthias Junge (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2009), 203–20, and more generally Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, commentary by Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013). See also: Ruhl 2022, chapter “Metaphors and Territories,” 45–55, and Sarah Borree et al., *Metaphorical Practices in Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2023).

13 Cornelia Klinger, “Modern/Moderne/Modernismus,” in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Studienausgabe*, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al., vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010), 121–67.

14 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 17.

in the context of his materialistic and socially committed art historiography, views actuality as a problem of entangled interests: “It is understandable that the modernists do not represent actuality broadly; for such an undertaking would in itself have limited & refuted their unrestrained individualism. – *Actuality is collaboration*; for the present consists of manifold elements and forces.”<sup>15</sup>

The question of positioning oneself within one’s own present also relates to the concept of contemporaneity. The word initially refers to the simple fact that contemporaries, as members of a specific group, live at the same time. They share a common biographical horizon of years they experience together.<sup>16</sup> This biographical connection allows a contemporary to declare about certain historical events, “and you can say you were there”—as Goethe famously put it in the context of the Franco–German wars during the Cannonade of Valmy on September 20, 1792.<sup>17</sup> Like the concept of *Zeitgeist*, the German terms *Zeitgenosse/Zeitgenossenschaft* (contemporary/contemporaneity) also trace back to the transitional period of the Enlightenment and the historical acceleration following the revolutionary era after 1789. Heinrich Heine, for example, used the term “poetic contemporaneity” (*poetische Zeitgenossenschaft*) in the early nineteenth century to characterize the literary ambition of combining poetry with political commitment and an explicit address to a contemporary audience.<sup>18</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, critique of the present had established itself as the primary goal of art. This applied equally to realism and historicism. The phrase “il faut être de son temps” originated in French romanticism, but

15 Carl Einstein, *Werke*. Berliner Ausgabe, vol. 4: *Texte aus dem Nachlass* vol. 1, ed. Hermann Haarmann and Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin: Fannei and Walz, 1998), 243. See also the commentary by Olga Martynova, “Über die Dummheit der Stunde,” in *Über die Dummheit der Stunde*. Essays (Berlin: Fischer, 2018), 108–14, and the discussion in Wolfgang Knöbl, “Beobachtungen zum Begriff der Moderne,” in *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 37 (2012): 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.1515/iasl-2012-0004>.

16 The catchy title of Peter Rühmkorf’s autobiography captures this sense: “The years you know.” See *Die Jahre die Ihr kennt. Anfälle und Erinnerungen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1972).

17 On this connection see Lucian Hölscher, *In Zeitgärten. Zeitfiguren in der Geschichte der Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020), 224–29.

18 Renate Stauf, *Poetische Zeitgenossenschaft. Heine-Studien* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015).

it was only during realism that it became a demand.<sup>19</sup> The graphic artist and caricaturist Honoré Daumier used the formula as his artistic motto. For the philosopher, historian, and art critic Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, the demand for contemporaneity was already tautological, as he considered it both inevitable and self-evident. In his *Philosophie de l'art*, published 1865–1869, he viewed the development of art through his milieu theory as determined by both historical and contemporary conditions. For Taine, a work of art becomes more meaningful the more fully it embodies the character of the era in which it was created.<sup>20</sup>

Within the history and theory of architecture, the *Revue générale d'architecture et des travaux publics*, published between 1840 and 1888 and edited by the architect César Daly, exemplifies this “realistic” agenda. The monthly journal’s objectives are explained by its editor in the first issue.<sup>21</sup> At the very beginning of the introduction, architecture is defined as a “construction” that serves to accommodate people in dwellings, animals in stables, and plants in greenhouses; architects and engineers are further responsible for erecting factories and manufacturing buildings and planning infrastructure for cities and the countryside. For Daly, architecture is always situated in the tension between tradition and innovation; on the one hand, it is always based on the “expérience des choses faites,” while on the other, its aim is the “possibilité d’applications nouvelles.” In terms of the journal’s content, its structure includes “Histoire” as well as “Théorie” and “Pratique,” and it is aimed squarely at the country’s administrative and property-owning elites:

C’est donc une Revue que nous voulons fonder, une Revue générale de l’Architecture et des Travaux Publics, qui s’adressera, par son objet, à la

---

19 George Boas is still a bedrock of this conceptual history: see “Il faut être de son temps,” in *Journal of Aesthetics* 1 (1941), 52–65. See also Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (1971; London: Penguin, 1990), especially 103–4, and for the broader context Michael Brix and Monika Steinhäuser, eds., *Geschichte allein ist zeitgemäß. Historismus in Deutschland* (Gießen: Anabas, 1978), as well as Helmut Pfeiffer, Hans Robert Jauß, and Françoise Gaillard, eds., *Art social und art industriel. Funktionen der Kunst im Zeitalter des Industrialismus* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1987).

20 Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, *Philosophie de l'art*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1865–69), new ed.: *Philosophie de l'Art*, ed. Jean-François Revel (Paris: Hachette, 2009).

21 For what follows, see César Daly, “Introduction,” in *Revue générale d'architecture et des travaux publics* 1 (1840), cols. 1–7.

fois aux ARCHITECTES, aux INGÉNIEURS, aux ARCHÉOLOGUES, aux INDUSTRIELS, aux PROPRIÉTAIRES, et enfin aux GOUVERNEMENTS, dont l'intérêt et le devoir sont de veiller en même temps sur la prospérité, le bien-être et la gloire des pays qu'ils administrent.

The *Revue générale d'architecture et des travaux publics* is dedicated to the needs and interests of the present. If at the same time it remains linked to historical references, this is due to its instrumental relationship to history as a repository of experiences useful for the present. Here, at the early historical hour of the mid-nineteenth century, we see both a departure from idealistic aesthetics and a turning toward a “realistic” understanding of architecture. Both of these tendencies would later be further developed and radicalized in the modernist movements under the auspices of functionalism.

Looking back at what was likely the decisive formation of the idea of contemporaneity during the nineteenth century, it becomes clear that the term does not merely—and certainly not primarily—denote belonging to one's own time and observing it. Rather, it signifies active participation in the present and interest-driven involvement. Understood in this way, contemporaneity is not just a biographical state, but an agenda. This point is also explicitly addressed by the contributions presented here.

## Architecture's Reference System: The Subject and Theses of this Volume

Following these methodological considerations, architecture can be described as a reference system based on allusions and similarities. This applies both to the fundamental concept of architecture itself and to its media (including the actual buildings constructed), as well as to the conception of the architectural subject in modernism.<sup>22</sup>

22 Here we take the liberty of referring to texts by the editors of this volume: Dietrich Erben and Tobias Zervosen, eds., *Das eigene Leben als Ästhetische Fiktion. Autobiographie und Professionsgeschichte* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018); Carsten Ruhl, “The Art of the Deal. Architektur im Zeitalter neoliberaler Selbstentwürfe,” in *Selbstentwurf. Das Architektenhaus von der Renaissance bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Dietrich Boschung and Julian Jachmann (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2018), 235–63; Ruhl, *Kracauer's Architecture* (2022), 11–19.

Architecture is generally conceived under conditions that are not its own and presupposes references to things outside itself.<sup>23</sup> These include basic external purposes like usability, construction, cost effectiveness, and aesthetics. More specifically, as discussed above, buildings double as references to places, objects, epochs, or events. These can be classes of structural elements (e.g. wall, roof, door, window), building typologies (e.g. office building, point tower), cultural topographies (e.g. Roman palace), architectural styles (e.g. the Gothic cathedral, New Objectivity). The symptoms of a conflict between style and form can be seen as early as the nineteenth century in the expression “stylistic shell and core” (Joseph Bayer, 1886), which, in distinguishing between formal appearance and construction, also identifies the difference between contemporary formal adaptations and physical building constraints.<sup>24</sup> Later, these symptoms manifested in the increasingly emphasized opposition between ornamental façades with relational qualities and the non-relational construction methods of mass production, as well as the functionalist programming of spaces.<sup>25</sup> Special buildings are almost always placed in a conscious relation to other buildings—for example, being particularly exposed in the competitive mechanism of “building and counter-building.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, fundamental concepts of architectural theory (planning, function, design, order, etc.), which have gradually been imported into architectural terminology from other cultural techniques, have by no means lost their original meanings, and have in some cases been re-imported back into other disciplines as metaphors. This occurs in politics, for example, when people talk about the “European security architecture” or the “Com-

23 Umberto Eco, *La struttura assente* (Milan: La nave di Teseo editore, 1968) (German: *Einführung in die Semiotik*, 7th ed. [Munich: Hanser, 1991]). The work appears not to have been translated into English.

24 Werner Oechslin, *Stilhülse und Kern*. Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos und der evolutionäre Weg zur modernen Architektur (Zurich: gta Verlag, 1994).

25 Anna-Marie Sankovitch, “Structure/Ornament and the Modern Figuration of Architecture,” in *The Art Bulletin* 80 (1998), 687–717; David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi, *Surface Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Antoine Picon, *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity*, *AD Primer* (2013).

26 Martin Warnke, “Bau und Gegenbau,” in *Architektur als politische Kultur*. *Philosophia practica*, ed. Hermann Hipp and Ernst Seidel (Berlin: Reimer, 1996), 11–18; on referential “counter-concepts” see also Reinhart Koselleck and Carl Schmitt, *Der Briefwechsel 1953–1983 und weitere Materialien*, ed. Jan Eike Dunkhase (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019), 268–69.

mon European Home.” Last but not least, buildings that have been destroyed or modified can continue to exist as references if the meaning offered by the earlier building is deliberately rejected through the “acts of negation accomplished by demolition or conversion.”<sup>27</sup>

When we speak of the “production” of architecture, we don’t mean merely the material construction of buildings, but also dominant historiographical, discursive, disciplinary, habitual, and institutional narratives. In a comprehensive sense, architectural production also encompasses the cultural post-production of architecture both in its use and criticism. It cannot exist without the two dimensions of reference and contemporaneity—and their dialectical relationship. How, then, do references—whether functioning as determinants or as opportunities for free choice—relate to contemporary demands for originality and innovation? Methodologically, reference and contemporaneity are introduced as two normative, contrasting concepts that can be related to each other from a critical distance: references only become problematic when they are orientated toward contemporary relevance, while contemporaneity comes into conflict with references that necessarily draw upon conventions and canonized knowledge. These concepts often evade a true dialectic in favor of radical opposition: while reference largely points to relationships with the past, contemporaneity primarily aims at the present and future values of originality, actuality, innovation, and problem-solving. Both concepts are embedded in justificatory frameworks with different rationales of narrative and legitimation. Referentiality, for example, offers the possibility of deriving design solutions from normative models, autobiographical references, or analysis of the *genius loci*. Contemporaneity, on the other hand, often serves to legitimize aesthetic preferences that themselves have no concrete function by appealing to non-referential, scientific, or purposefully rational objectivity. The French philosopher, literary theorist, and critic Roland Barthes explored this connection vividly in his essay on the Eiffel Tower. For Barthes, this spectacular building was the quintessential

---

27 Joachim Fischer, “Die Bedeutung der Philosophischen Anthropologie für die Architektursoziologie,” in *Soziale Ungleichheit, kulturelle Unterschiede: Verhandlungen des 32. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in München*, ed. Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2006), 3417–28, here 3425; cf. Dietrich Erben, “Architektur in Transformationsgesellschaften. Überlegungen zur Theorie des Umbaus,” in *arch+*, special issue: “Umbau. Ansätze der Transformation,” no. 254 (2024), 10–19.

example of a uselessness that had been rationally justified: “These uses are doubtless incontestable, but they seem quite ridiculous alongside the overwhelming myth of the Tower, of the human meaning which it has assumed throughout the world. This is because here the utilitarian excuses, however ennobled they may be by the myth of Science, are nothing in comparison to the great imaginary function which enables men to be strictly human. Yet, as always, the gratuitous meaning of the work is never avowed directly: it is rationalized under the rubric of use.”<sup>28</sup>

When discussing this dialectic in the present volume, we must ask whether we recognize in it a fundamental theoretical paradox, an ultimately unavoidable tension, or even a desirable compromise in a conflict of norms. A central starting point in thinking about this problem is the question of how references are selected based on interest—and thus ideologically constructed—to meet contemporary social demands on architecture. In architectural theory, we might consider modernism’s referential relationship between buildings and machines as an example. For architectural history, we should examine the role of canon formation, historiographical narratives, “regimes of truth,”<sup>29</sup> archives, museums, and exhibitions. For the history of architectural theory, it can be shown that every text refers to a specific typology of genres (treatise, manifesto, essay, exhibition catalog, etc.)—an institutionalized form of textual communication.<sup>30</sup>

The inevitability of reference, however, seems to be a blind spot in architectural discourse. To put it more precisely: although references are frequently mentioned in practice, their systematic significance in the design process has not yet been described in detail. While in other cultural practices the idea of authorship has long been questioned and ideologically scrutinized, with discourse around intertextuality now commonplace, both architects’ self-perception and their public image, as well as the mode of architectural

---

28 Roland Barthes, “The Eiffel Tower,” in *The Eiffel Tower, and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 3–17, here 6. The French original was first published in 1964 with photographs by André Martin: *Roland Barthes, La Tour Eiffel* (Paris, 1964).

29 Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” in *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 87–109.

30 Dietrich Erben, *Architekturtheorie. Eine Geschichte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2017); Erben, ed., *Das Buch als Entwurf. Textgattungen in der Geschichte der Architekturtheorie. Ein Handbuch* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019).

historiography, largely assume that a design is the achievement of an individual. The jargon term “design approach” (*Haltung*)—which appears on the homepages of numerous firms as a form of self-promotion—perhaps most clearly expresses this gesture of asserting the isolated, individual, or even ingenious achievement of architects.<sup>31</sup> Rehearsals for this role begin as early as an architect’s student days.<sup>32</sup>

Current architectural discourse even plays with the possibility of “non-referential architecture.”<sup>33</sup> However, it is possible that the alternative—the referential use of models—not only calls into question the idea of authorial design, but in fact reinforces it. This occurs when authorship is glorified through rhetorical references to canonized sources such as the ancient architectural theorist Vitruvius<sup>34</sup> or Andrea Palladio.

Throughout the history of architecture, different weightings and evaluations have been given to the dialectic of allusions to tradition and the outside world (reference) and innovative achievements supposedly unencumbered by such allusions (contemporaneity). Even Renaissance culture exhibited an imperative of innovation that, somewhat paradoxically and with considerable tension, derived from another imperative of continuity primarily oriented toward antiquity.<sup>35</sup> Explicit references to style carried this dialectic forward through the Renaissance, classicism, and historicism—and it apparently became questionable only when modernism asserted an equally explicit autonomy of style. Beginning with modernism, the relationship between continuity and innovation has been radicalized into a contradiction between past and present, with autonomy, self-referentiality, and contem-

---

31 Dietrich Erben, “Haltung: Zu Karriere und Kritik eines Begriffs in der Architektursprache” (2014), in *Humanität und gebaute Umwelt: Essays und Studien zur Architekturgeschichte* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2023), 127–39.

32 See Christina Schumacher and Marie Antoinette Glaser, “Kreativität in der Architekturausbildung: Erkundungen zu einem disziplinären Mythos,” in *ZfK Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaft*, no. 1 (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008), 13–30.

33 Valerio Olgiati and Markus Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture* (Zurich: Park Books, 2018). See also the contribution by Ole W. Fischer in the present volume.

34 André Tavares, *Vitruvius Without Text: The Biography of a Book* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2022).

35 Odo Marquard, “Innovationskultur als Kontinuitätskultur. Überlegungen zur Renaissance” (1996), in *Skepsis in der Moderne. Philosophische Studien* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007), 83–92.

poraneity being the key concepts. Since then, different modes of temporal consciousness have stood in conflict in architectural production: a historicist consciousness centered on reference, and a modern consciousness that understands itself as a logic of problem-solving and design that is active in the present.

For architecture, this relationship of conflict can be concretized on various levels. At the *theoretical* level, it concerns the understanding of “contemporary architecture” and of “contemporary” in contrast to other cultural techniques like the visual arts.<sup>36</sup> At the level of *ethics*, it involves the social responsibility of architects with regard to current problems and courses of action for the future.<sup>37</sup> At the level of *aesthetics*, the focus is on concepts of architecture that are decidedly non-historicizing and aesthetically autonomous.

Such a discussion of referentiality, developed from its conceptual antithesis of contemporaneity, should make it possible to examine architectural practices grounded in these two concepts more precisely than was previously feasible across the various fields of architectural theory, history, criticism, education, and design. In all these areas—and this is the basic idea of this volume—the dialectic of reference operates both as a system for creating models and as a claim to contemporaneity in the sense of engagement with the present. The aim of the volume is to discuss this issue by integrating aspects of theory, history, and architectural practice. First of all, the project takes a critical distance from existing texts on explicitly referential theories of design. These legitimize referencing as a design technique while simultaneously leaving the procedure entirely obscure in terms of its aesthetic design intentions, the mechanisms by which mostly canonical references are selected, and, in particular, the interests involved in positioning

---

36 Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2013); Frédéric Döhl et al., eds., *Zitieren, appropriieren, sampeln. Referenzielle Verfahren in den Gegenwartskünsten* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013); Juliane Rebentisch, “The Contemporaneity of Contemporary Art,” in *New German Critique* 42, no. 124 (February 2015), 223–37; Annika Haas et al., eds., *How to relate. Wissen, Künste, Praktiken* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021).

37 Jens Balzer, *Die Ethik der Appropriation* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2022).

architectural projects in the market.<sup>38</sup> While recent research has provided relatively general information about the concepts of contemporaneity<sup>39</sup> and imitation-based referentiality, a systematic and critically distanced engagement with these concepts is still lacking for architecture. Referentiality in architecture seems to have been discussed as a necessary preliminary in numerous studies on historicism, modernity, and, more recently, the basis of mimetic design processes<sup>40</sup>—primarily in a variety of individual observations regarding the question of “models” and “influences.”<sup>41</sup> However, such a methodical emphasis on references to the past is opposed by the factual primacy of contemporaneity, which aims functionally at the relevance of the built environment, aesthetically at the self-referentiality of architecture, and socially at the habitus of architects. This manifests in a concept of autonomy that encompasses the design as well as the creativity of authorship, the claim to innovation in the built environment, and the idea of direct participation in the present.

Starting from the fundamental premise that references are essential for all cultural techniques, including architecture, this volume advances three key theses: First, architecture’s distinctive character lies in the particularly ambivalent tension between reference and contemporaneity that emerges from its resource-intensive and innovation-driven mode of production. Second, this previously unexamined ambivalence plays a guiding role in both architectural production and discourse. Third, the issues surrounding contemporaneity do not pertain to a condition, but to an agenda—one where references are selected according to interests and adapted to present needs. This perspective enriches existing conceptions of references as tools of de-

---

38 For example, Astrid Staufer et al., eds., *Ikonen. Methodische Experimente im Umgang mit architektonischen Referenzen* (Zurich: Park Books, 2018); Andreas Hild and Barbara Brinkmann, *Vom Suchen und Wiederfinden. Die Mechanik des Entwerfens. On Seeking and Rediscovering. The Mechanics of Architectural Design* (Berlin: Reimer, 2021). See also the contribution by Dietrich Erben in the present volume.

39 Verena Krieger, ed., *Kunstgeschichte und Gegenwartskunst. Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Zeitgenossenschaft* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008), and the literature cited in note 36.

40 Eva von Engelberg-Dočkal et al., eds., *Mimetische Praktiken in der neueren Architektur. Prozesse und Formen der Ähnlichkeitserzeugung* (Cologne: arthistoricum.net, 2017).

41 For a recent critical view of the method, see Ulrich Pfisterer and Christine Tauber, eds., *Einfluss, Strömung, Quelle. Aquatische Metaphern in der Kunstgeschichte* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

sign economy, imitation, and historicization by tying them far more explicitly to contemporary agendas than has been done before.

Finally, we should note several topics that could not be explicitly addressed, primarily owing to the scope of this volume and difficulties in finding suitable contributors. References to natural-material realities relevant to both past and present are a key issue for architecture, as recently explored within “geo-sociology” (encompassing earth territories, flora and fauna, atmospheric, geological, and hydrological systems, etc.).<sup>42</sup> Other important areas include references to general conceptions of space (universal space, systemic space, ecological space, lifeworld space, etc.)<sup>43</sup> and references to the currently resurgent category of the vernacular.<sup>44</sup>

---

42 Markus Schroer, *Geosozologie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022).

43 Katrin Klingan and Christoph Rosol, eds., *Technosphäre* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019).

44 See Anita Aigner, ed., *Vernakulare Moderne. Grenzüberschreitungen in der Architektur um 1900. Das Bauernhaus und seine Aneignung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011).

