

'As I get older, I've also gained the confidence to make more general statements'

Thomas Hines believes architecture is a component of a larger cultural history.

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At the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Professor Thomas Hines holds a joint appointment with History and the Department of Architecture & Urban Design. Hence the results of his multidisciplinary interests – books with the head of architecture propped on the shoulders of culture and context. A good example is *William Faulkner and the Tangible Past: The Architecture of Yoknapatawpha* (1996), in which Hines takes an architectural visit to Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County, with pointed detours into history, society, reality. Hines’s other subjects include musician John Cage, Irving Gill, and his pet interest, Richard Neutra – Hines authored an exhaustive study entitled *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture* (1982). In fact, Hines lives in a Neutra, in the Kelton Apartments, just off of UCLA’s frat row. That’s where we meet, in this balconied oasis, surrounded by light and greenery. ‘I’m a fairly orthodox modernist, but I consider this modernism as well,’ Hines says of his early-1900s’ furnishings, an eclectic modern assortment collected in his grad-school days from the thrift shops of Madison, Wisconsin. And on the walls, next to framed Neutra studies, hang no less valuable works by Hines’s young grandchildren. His libraries teem with collectibles and rare prints. ‘Being conscious of history is the way I make a living,’ says Hines, before setting off unprompted on the histories and anecdotes of the Kelton.

[We step out on the main balcony.]

Thomas Hines: This building was completed in 1942 for Neutra’s wife’s parents, the Niedermanns. They were from Zurich, but they lived all over Europe, since Niedermann was a civil engineer. In 1934 they were getting ready to retire and were concerned about what was happening in Germany. So they moved to Los Angeles, bought this land and built this building as a kind of retirement home.

By the time I moved out here in 1968 and started looking into Neutra’s apartments, I learned that the manager of the properties was a woman named Regula, Neutra’s sister-in-law. Having met her, I told her I hoped to meet the great man himself someday. One Sunday afternoon, when I was recovering from over-active partying the night before, there was a knock on the door: it was Regula, with two

Thomas Hines’ favourite books

Don Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*, 1996

Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, 1946

Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940’s*, 1986

people behind her – her sister, Dione [Neutra’s wife], and Richard Neutra. They stayed for about two hours, had a glass of sherry, and I’m so glad they did, because Neutra died only two months later. He was interested in knowing what I made of modern architecture: Mies, Gropius and, of course, Neutra. I think I got a B+ on that exam, but it was enough to make him say that as soon as he got back from his upcoming trip to Europe, he wanted to do a systematic tour of all his buildings, and if I would drive I could go with him and ask many questions. I couldn’t believe my good fortune. We planned the tour for June of that year [1970], but Neutra died in April in Wuppertal, Germany. People die. The questions you want to ask them live on.

What kinds of questions?

Well, perhaps the biggest and cruellest questions in historical research are: What is the issue? Why is it important? Why should we care? For me, the answers are about architecture as a component of a larger cultural history. You know Philip Johnson’s famous quote, ‘We cannot not know history’? Well, I’m a true believer in that

Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, 1979

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1939

Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, Politics and Culture*, 1980

Alexandra Richie, *Faust’s Metropolis: A History of Berlin*, 1998

Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, 1982

philosophy. But not all students and not all architecture schools agree. They think the idea is to train architects to get out there and build. Of course, that’s part of it; we don’t just want ivory-tower eggheads coming out of architecture schools. But we need architects that understand culture, society and economy – the realities of life, which need architectural interventions – not just individual buildings.

I would think the people coming into your classroom now are fairly in tune with culture and how it connects to architecture. Isn’t such knowledge inescapable in a time of procrastination-by-internet?

On the one hand, yes. Architecture students are no longer isolated monks in a cell studying

‘Architecture students are no longer isolated monks in a cell studying something very particular’

something very particular and insular. They’re more aware of what is around them; they’re a part of the big world. This wasn’t necessarily the case when I first started out after graduate school. In the late ‘60s, architecture had not yet become a subject for social and cultural historians; people were more interested in formalist treatments of architecture.

On the other hand, while today’s students still read a lot, they don’t read *in depth* as much. Obviously, students who come to a place like UCLA are very smart and can pass entrance exams, but not all of them have had the kind of deep, liberal-arts education that includes reading Faulkner and knowing the history of the world – especially the modern world. That’s something I lament. Visually, today’s architecture students are very attuned to things, because they grew up playing video games and watching television – activities that heightened their visual acuity. But in some ways they may have deadened their analytic power.

What do these changes mean for the culture of architecture in general?

I’m afraid it means that the architects who graduate from these programmes run the risk of being single-minded and lacking a broader view. I have nothing against the internet: what would we do without Google? And maybe it leads to skills in math and the sciences that my generation didn’t have enough of. But it does not contribute to the depth of learning and understanding that I think is essential.

That said, what is on the reading list for your students?

The list includes Don Waldie’s *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*, about the creation of the Los Angeles suburb of Lakewood, California;

Carey McWilliams’ *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, which is chiefly about Southern California in the 1920s and ‘30s; Otto Friedrich’s *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940’s*; my book on Neutra, and various others. By the way, I’ve assigned Waldie’s book every year since it came out. One of the students who took my course and read that book was the actor, James Franco, who happens to be a Faulkner fan, like me. James loved *Holy Land* so much he’s planning to do a documentary film on it. That’s what an impact Waldie has had.

What are some of your personal favourites?

There are many books I wish I had written; we’ll start with that. One of my favourites is Alan Trachtenberg’s brilliant *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, which takes a single object as microcosm of much larger things: architecture in its social, cultural, political framework. I also love *Let Us*▷

Now Praise Famous Men by James Agee and Walker Evans, documenting sharecropper families in the South in the late '30s. I always quote from the chapter called 'Shelter' at the first lecture of my architecture courses. It's an absolutely incredible take on a sharecropper's house.

I like books about cities: city biographies. I'm very fond of Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, which deals with Austrian architect and urban planner Otto Wagner and the Ringstrasse. Another wonderful book is *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin* by Alexandra Richie. I also like

years. Have you found yourself changing the way you speak and teach about architecture and history, as well?

I think I've developed a greater ability and willingness to generalize. I can answer the 'Why should we care?' question more easily now. I can say, 'Because of this, this, this and maybe this.' Of course, there's a lot of specificity that is necessary to write books like the ones I write, and you have to have an eye, an ear and a curiosity about the details that add up to your arguments, but I think as I get older and read more, do more,

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the book by Marshall Berman called *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. The first chapter is on Goethe's Faust. Faust as developer. Faust as modernist. Negative and positive. The second chapter is on Karl Marx as modernist. Something like this had never really been done before. Then, after those two general and theoretical chapters, he moves to three case studies: Paris, St Petersburg and New York City. Paris covers Baudelaire and Haussmann, the mid-19th century, when the great boulevards were established and the city was both opened and closed off. The chapter on St Petersburg, called the 'Modernism of Underdevelopment', takes Peter the Great's vision and carries it through the 19th and into the 20th century. The focus is on Nevsky Prospekt, which is treated as the great symbol of modern St Petersburg. The last chapter is on Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses: New York. As you can see, architecture is a part of all these books, but it is only that: a part.

You said that this kind of regard for architecture as part of a greater context has developed significantly in the last 50



talk to more people, teach more and travel more, I've also gained the confidence to make more general statements.

Having read your books, I feel as though you would like the definition of 'modernism' to be open to more generalization.

Yes, especially in [my latest book] *Architecture of the Sun* (2010) and in my lectures, I have tried to argue that modernism is not just one thing – or to remind people of that fact, anyway. Modernism was not just an international style. It was not just the rationalism of Mies, Gropius, Bauhaus, Neutra, Case Study and so on. It was all of those things, of course, which interests me greatly. But it was also about what we call 'expressionism', which in Europe was Erich Mendelsohn and the great Fritz Höger, the German architect who did the Chilehaus in Hamburg and the Anzeiger building in Hanover. Great rugged brick structures with pointed roofs – as an ironic parenthesis, Höger was hence acceptable to the Nazis. Nevertheless, he was a modernist. And in the US, after the Prairie period, I would call Frank Lloyd Wright's work 'expressionist' – the work of the '20s, the Hollyhock House, those concrete block houses. That's the argument I'm making here: this is not 'rationalist'. This is not 'purist minimalism'. This is

You know, one of the last people I interviewed for my Neutra book was Philip Johnson. When we met, he was becoming a sort of godfather of postmodernism, whereas he had been the godfather of modernism. I wanted to hear Johnson's story of how they had chosen Neutra to be in MoMA's 'Modern Architecture: International Exhibition' in 1932. But Johnson was moving away from Neutra, and he couldn't quite understand why I was so intensely interested in the man. Although he did say, 'Look, other people agree with you. I was just talking with Arthur Drexler at MoMA, and he was saying that it was time to bring Neutra back to MoMA.' Now this is a lesson not only about the longevity of modernism but also about how Philip Johnson did his famous networking: by the time I got back to my hotel, after having lunch with Johnson at the Four Seasons, there was a message waiting for me from Arthur Drexler inviting me to breakfast the next morning. So with Drexler I did the Neutra retrospective at MoMA in 1982, the same year my Neutra book came out.

This is something I picked up from your books as well: you describe a very thick social network among various architects, their clients and other figures. Do such wide-reaching networks still exist today?

'We don't just want ivory-tower eggheads coming out of architecture schools'

something else, which I maintain – and this raises the ire of some people – is, in a popular vein, Art Deco, Deco, Streamline Moderne. Frank Lloyd Wright and his son, Lloyd Wright, were, among other things, forerunners of that. They were doing it long before it got the label. It was great stuff. And I argue that it is modernist, as well. I don't know about the term 'neo-modern'. I think it's unnecessary, because I don't think modernism died with postmodernism. Maybe it went underground a little bit, but it survived, returned and is still with us.

You must understand, much of what I'm saying comes from having a historian's view: from looking back and seeing these connections – and seeing how important various people were to each other, as well as in general. These people were important to each other in ways that they may not have understood at the time. I think that may be the case today. In 50 years, people will look back at the time we're living through now and see very important connections – ones that we may not notice, as we sit here talking. <