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*Mari Hvattum*

# Five Postcards on Architecture and History

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“Just because the paper is empty, it doesn’t mean you’re starting from scratch.” – Daniel Libeskind



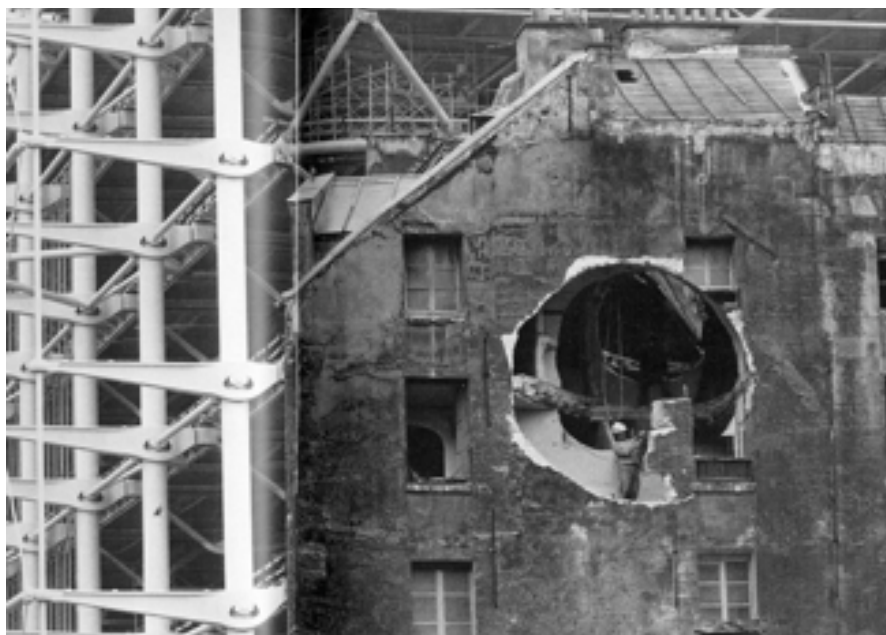
**Fig. 1** Excavation of the statue of Antinous in Delphi, 1894

## I Antinous/Apollo

For years, I had a tattered Xerox copy of a black and white photograph tagged to the wall above my office desk. It was a picture from an archaeological dig in Delphi in 1894, showing a group of sullen-looking workmen leaning on their spade handles around a recently excavated pit. The men view both the photographer and the pit itself with apparent indifference, as if reluctant to take in the object that has just been unearthed. What has come to view is an antique statue; a portrait of emperor Hadrian’s lover Antinous, gleaming white against the black earth.<sup>1</sup> The calm beauty of the statue stands in startling contrast to the coarse surroundings. The men watch it distrustfully, their faces reflecting not the tourist’s enthusiastic encounter with a canonic past, but rather the shock of being confronted with something utterly alien.

<sup>1</sup> The statue of Antinous dates from Hadrian’s reign (117–138 AD). It was excavated in 1893–94 by the French archaeologist Théophile Homolle at the École Française d’Athènes, and is now in Delphi Archaeological Museum.

Fig. 2 Gordon Matta-Clark, *Conical Intersect*, Paris 1975



2 Rilke 1908.

Antinous' reluctant finders bring to mind another shock-inducing statue; the one described by Rainer Maria Rilke in his poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo". After an intense analysis of the figure's disquieting beauty, Rilke concludes: "For there is no place/that does not see you. You must change your life."<sup>2</sup> To Rilke, the past was not dead archaeology, but a vital power forcing us to reflect and change. It comes close, perhaps, to what Hans-Georg Gadamer talked about as *Wirkungsgeschichte*—effective history—history as it affects us, here and now. History is not a collection of facts to be crammed for exams but an inescapable presence that gives depth and complexity to everything we say, do, and build. As opposed to so-called 'future scenarios' which tend to project things we already know, the past harbours something entirely different.

History, then, is a powerful thing; an explosive, horizon-expanding field. But it is not immediately available. Confronted with the past unmediated, we are all like the Delphian diggers, anxious and perplexed, unable to look. That is why we need good guides. To me, Karsten Harries has been such a guide, showing the richness, complexity, and life-changing capacity of historical ideas and configurations. The fragments that follow are greetings to professor Harries on his eightieth birthday. They are all about history, more precisely the kind of history that presents itself in buildings. Architecture, one could argue, is a "wirkungsgeschichtliches" medium par excellence. Buildings tend to last longer than the people building them; often longer even than the program they were meant to house. Buildings encompass layer upon layer of history, life, and remembrance; they affect the lives lived in them and condition what can be built next. Here are five postcards on architecture's history and historicity.

## II 27–29 Rue Beaubourg

In 1975, the American artist and architect Gordon Matta-Clark was invited to participate in the Paris Biennale. Matta-Clark was already well known for his

dramatic building cuts, and the Parisian organizers had arranged for him to get access to two late seventeenth century town houses in Rue Beaubourg. The two were among the last buildings to be demolished during president Pompidou's large-scale Beaubourg clearing, and were situated directly next to the new Centre Pompidou, the building of which commenced that same year. As always, Matta-Clark was fascinated by the strange and unsettling glimpses one may get when looking at things from different viewpoints. Not metaphorical viewpoints in this case; rather, they were brutally concrete. Making two conical cuts through the floors and walls of the old buildings, Matta-Clark opened sightlines that had never been seen before, framing the city and revealing the domestic interiors in entirely new ways. As he put it: "There is a kind of complexity which comes from taking a completely normal, conventional, albeit anonymous situation and redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present."<sup>3</sup> Looking at the eerie photographs of the event, it is easy to understand what he meant. The cuts seem to bring out a temporal depth residing—quite literally—in the old walls, revealing the unassuming yet palpable historicity of the every-day.

Of course, 'Conical Intersect', as the Paris project came to be called, was not about history in the form normally favoured by architectural historians. It dealt neither with monuments, periods, nor styles. Matta-Clark himself talked about 'non-umentality' and saw his own work as a patient and concrete exploration of ordinary life. He was intrigued by the shock of letting familiar things become visible in new ways. "If you look long enough you will be surprised" was one of his oft-repeated statements.<sup>4</sup> In Rue Beaubourg, the surprise was heightened even further by the new Pompidou Centre's iron grip around the old buildings, like a trap ready to clap down over an old world. 'Conical Intersect' gave this soon-to-be lost world a new life, if only for a short while. Its shocking reconfiguration of past spaces threw new light even on the present ones. Matta-Clark's comment on his famous New Jersey project *Splitting* applies also to his Paris work: "You see that light enters places it otherwise couldn't. Angles and depths can be perceived where they should have been hidden. Spaces are available to move through that were previously inaccessible."<sup>5</sup> In the physical struggle with the past, the present is changed.

3 Gordon Matta-Clark in interview with Donald Wall, *Art Magazine*, May 1976. In: Moure 2006, p. 63.

4 Gordon Matta-Clark, "There are no solutions" undated manuscript. In: Moure 2006, p. 122.

5 Gordon Matta-Clark, interview 1977. In: Moure 2006, p. 253.



Fig. 3 Map of the lower areas of Akershus Fort. Forsvarsbygg 2002.

### III A Road Tunnel in Oslo

One way of defining historicity, I guess, is to say that it pertains to the bit of history that we cannot escape. The ‘thick’ time that is there whether we want it or not and that we, as historical beings, are inscribed into. That means that the most banal environment carries its historicity with as much complexity and depth as, say, classical monuments or avant-garde art-works. One of my favourite examples is a technical map of the outer area of Akershus, a late medieval fort in central Oslo. Between the myriads of lines and traces we can discern eighteenth century curtain walls; nineteenth century industrial remnants; 1970s reconstructions of an early modern *enceinte*, all on top of a motorway tunnel from the 1980s. If the plan had been a bit more updated it would have contained even more lines; among them, the footprint of the Norwegian Defence Headquarters, opened in 2006. For all its dry technical character, the map brings out the inescapable historicity that is present in human-made environments, a palimpsest-like quality in which different layers of history cross paths in unexpected ways.

This depth has not only a historical interest. It affects even our contemporary affairs, not least those of the architect. For how to approach this kind of context? How does one choose what to preserve and what to remove; what to develop and what to ignore? When Jarmund/Vignæs Architects, together with ØKAW, were commissioned to weave the 19.000 m<sup>2</sup> program of the new Defence Headquarters into this complex historical loom—partly as new-build, partly as rehabilitation of existing buildings—this was a pressing question.

The starting point was less than ideal. Though Akershus is an iconic and much studied monument, its messy and hybrid fringe areas were far less explored. To fill in the gaps, a research process was initiated in which architects, historians, conservationists and users gathered for a series of seminars. By studying and interpreting the historical palimpsest, the group gradually arrived at a common understanding of how the area could be interpreted and handled. The result is a surprisingly subtle composition, combining bold innovation with a wish to allow as many historical strands as possible to come to the fore.<sup>6</sup> The solution would not have been possible without the historical investigation, allowing the architects to interpret the situation in new ways. The past conditions the present, yet offers at the same time possibilities for the unexpected.

<sup>6</sup> The project is presented in *Byggekunst* (Norwegian Review of Architecture) no 2/2007.

### IV Praha Hradčany

If Akershus in Oslo provides an interesting historical footnote, Prague Castle constitutes a whole treatise. Built on the foundations of an earlier Slavonic fort, the first Christian church was inaugurated here around 870 AD. In the thirteenth century, fortifications were erected that in time would come to protect both Bohemian kings and Holy Roman emperors. With the gothic St. Vitus Cathedral started in 1344 on the remnants of a Romanesque church from 1060, the magnificent Vladislav Hall from the late fifteenth century, Rudolf I's renaissance additions, empress Maria Theresa's grand eighteenth century palace, and Jože Plečnik's mind-blowing gardens from the 1920s, the castle



Fig. 4 Josef Pleskot, pedestrian tunnel in the Deer Moat, Prague Castle 2001–2002.

appears as a time collage. The past is palpably present, not in the form of isolated monuments but as a saturated, interwoven now.

One of the latest additions to the weave is a small tunnel in the Deer Moat—a gorge running east-west between St. Vitus in the south and the Summer Palace in the north, with the Brusnice stream running along the bottom. In the eighteenth century, deer were bred here, hence the name, but later the moat developed into an impenetrable wilderness. Only in the early 1990s, when president Václav Havel initiated a new pedestrian connection from the Vltava river in the east, was the old deer moat reopened all the way into the palace gardens. More than simply a park, the intervention provided a new connection between the town and the castle: a significant gesture in a city where—as Kafka reminds us—the castle has served as a symbol both of power and powerlessness.

Architect Josef Pleskot's little tunnel is part of the new pathway, leading visitors under the so-called Powder Bridge and into the palace gardens.<sup>7</sup> The elliptically shaped tunnel is clad in unglazed tile, its precise concrete openings cutting into ancient geological formations and historical masonry. One gets the sense that the tunnel grabs hold of history and opens it, quite literally. Half the floor underfoot is made of a metal grill through which the recently opened Brusnice stream can be seen and heard. Directly under the Powder Bridge, a niche in the tunnel wall reveals the foundations of an even earlier renaissance bridge. In an admirably straight-forward manner, Pleskot's tunnel uncovers forgotten layers of history, allowing the many pasts of this particular place to contribute to shaping and transforming the experience of the present.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. *A+U* no 4/2002, p. 100-105. The tunnel won Pleskot the European Brick Award in 2004.

Fig. 5 Druot, Lacaton & Vassal: Transformation of la Tour Bois le Prêtre, Paris 17. Photo: Philippe Ruault.



## V Plus

Modernity has nurtured dreams of a clean slate—a *tabula rasa*—right from the beginning. Descartes wanted to erase tradition to the ground, replacing it with a ‘new city’. Le Corbusier dreamt of demolishing Paris. In its turn, the *tabula rasa* became a key target for modernism’s critics, whether they disliked its ideals or its results. Paradoxically, however, modernism’s new city is now itself under threat of erasure. All over the western world, we see post-WWII satellite towns being demolished to make room for gentrified villa suburbs. Far from solving the problem, however, the demolition programs drive the poor out of the city, causing established neighbourhoods to be dissolved yet again.

The French architects, *Lacaton & Vassal*, have spent decades fighting the demolition of post-war housing, seeing it as a senseless repeat of a historical mistake. In 2004 they initiated a research project to map housing quality and improvement potential in Parisian high rise suburbs. They reached an interesting conclusion. For less than the standard square metre price applied in French social housing, one could not only restore these buildings but transform them into places with high architectural standard and excellent common facilities. And even better: neighbourhoods and social networks need not be dissolved, and residents could continue living in their flats during most of the process. “[W]e consider that demolition is aberrant and that transformation would permit one to respond to needs in a more economic, more effective and more qualitative way”, *Lacaton & Vassal* state on their website.<sup>8</sup> In an interview, Anne Lacaton elaborates further: “These buildings were planned on a large scale and very often lack qualities inside. [...] In the sixties, they would first develop a very large master plan with housing blocks, [...] they never went into detail in the design, or into the conditions of what happened inside the buildings themselves. For the transformations, we think that it is interesting to reverse the trajectory: to start from the small scale and provide a max-

<sup>8</sup> The research is presented in *Lacaton, Vassal, Druot 2014*.

imum level of quality there.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of *tabula rasa*, Lacaton & Vassal aim for a qualitative addition—their research project, not coincidentally, carried the name *Plus*. Keeping the physical and social structure of these often-times unglamorous high-rise blocks, the architects injected them with new qualities. *Plus* is a project that retains the past while transforming and enriching the present—a *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the most concrete kind.<sup>10</sup>

9 Harboe 2010, p. 4–11.

10 Some of these “postcards” have been published in different versions as “Virkningshistorier”, *Arkitektur N* no 4/2011.

## In a flash

To work historically means to explore the unknown, forgotten, or neglected reasons for why things—our own lives for instance—have become the way they are. It also means to change those very things, for as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, “a life thus examined is a life changed, a different life.”<sup>11</sup> Historical work makes us aware of differences and allows us, every once in a while, to question our seemingly self-evident present conditions. Walter Benjamin had a keen eye for this dynamics. “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past” he writes. The explosive power of history lies rather in the possibility that “what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.”<sup>12</sup> Architecture can, I believe, offer such constellations, in which an unfamiliar past contributes to a transformed present. As such, buildings demonstrate history’s most liberating lesson: that everything can be completely different. Karsten Harries’ writings on architecture, history, and thinking help keep that uplifting possibility open.

11 Ricoeur 1991, p. 350–351.

12 Benjamin 1999, p. 463.

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## Author

Mari Hvattum is an architect and architectural historian, professor of architectural history and theory at The Oslo School of Architecture and Design. She writes on nineteenth and twentieth century architectural culture and has been particularly interested in the relationship between historicism and modernism. Hvattum is author and editor of books such as *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism* (2004); *Heinrich Ernst Schirmer* (2014); *Modelling Time* (ed. w/M. Lending, 2014); and *Debatten om Stortingsbygningen 1836–1866* (ed., 2016).

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