

# What Is Twentieth Century Architectural History? Italian Answers from the Netherlands

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## Abstract

In this essay I evaluate the historiography of Dutch modern architecture from the perspective of the theory of history developed by the German philosopher Jörn Rüsen (1938). In the Netherlands, the 1960s and 1970s signaled the aging of the architecture built between 1880 and 1940, and the time when its objects slowly became acceptable as objects of study for historians. From the outset, this was a transnational endeavor involving the exchange of knowledge between the Netherlands and Italy, among other countries. In this essay I propose to analyze this Italian-Dutch debate by referring to Rüsen who saw “doing history” as a complex interplay of a semantic, a cognitive, an aesthetic, a rhetorical and a political dimension. I will use Rüsen’s definition to describe a debate in which the *definition* of the past had consequences for the form in which the historical narrative was written. In this way I will focus upon two Italian historians who in the in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s wrote exemplary histories of Dutch modern architecture. They did so from an opposite point of view: while Giovanni Fanelli in the book *Architettura Moderna in Olanda 1900–1940* (1968) opted for a synthetic, integrated approach of history, the neo-Marxist Umberto Barbieri opted for a history in the form of fragments, for example through the reprint of Van Loghem’s *Bouwen Bâtir Building* (1980). While it seems like the work of these two historians should be regarded in this way in strict opposition to each other, I argue that the case becomes different if we analyze their standpoint on the issue of historical objectivity. It is in this sense that both historians have “foundationalist” traits: the question is, how their work in our present age of postfoundationalism can remain relevant to us.

## Keywords

Historiography of modern Architecture, History of Dutch modern Architecture, History of Italian modern Architecture, Philosophy of History, Postfoundationalism