

Mediating History/Distances with Modern Architecture Since 1900

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Historical distance, though commonly understood to refer to the passage of time, is being reconsidered in relation to a wide range of media, of mediatory purposes, in the writing of history, itself a mediatory practice. In his 2013 book On Historical Distance, Mark Phillips argues that the aim of intelligibility and understanding, among other forms of engagement, gives distance a new complexity that was missing from older formulations. Precisely, issues of method and literary style are raised by the writing of surveys of architectural history, commonly disregarded as lacking sound scholarship. Among the canonical architectural surveys written in the 1980s, there is one for which not only readability, but also first-hand experience is crucial. William Curtis travelled extensively through Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa between 1977 and 1981, experiencing architecture and meeting local architects, in preparation for the first edition of Modern Architecture Since 1900 (1982). Moreover, it was illustrated with at least 50 photographs taken by Curtis himself. He had a privileged, at times dangerous, unmediated experience of architecture at a time when global travelling was yet to become frictionless and photographs ubiquitous. This paper argues that Curtis's book is exemplary of a reconsideration of certain mediatory means between the writing of history and its audience—deeply grounded in the disciplinary tradition—that reshapes our understanding of dimensions of distance.

Keywords: William Curtis; historiography; architectural survey; experience; history; distance

*Rather than detracting from its truthfulness, history's dialogical character supplies the essential questions that carry the narrative forward in an effort to establish meaningful relationships between past and present. For this reason, history is best seen as a mediatory practice.*¹

1 Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 5.

To reconceive the notion of distance “in relation to the wide range of mediatory purposes that shape historical representation” is the aim of Mark Salber Phillips in his book *On Historical Distance* (2013).² Among other strategies, the author posits that “the quest for intelligibility and understanding—the push and pull of these fundamental investments gives distance a new complexity that has been missing from older formulations.”³ This paper explores this quest for intelligibility or readability in the surveys of architectural histories of the 1980s in general, and in William Curtis’s *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (1982) in particular, as a means to bridge different dimensions of distance between the discipline, its potential audience and its subject matter.⁴

2 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 1.

3 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 1.

4 William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1987).

When talking about the conditions of historical understanding, Phillips argues that “a genuine encounter with the past must trace a path from initial recognition of alterity to some form of insight and comprehension.”⁵ Some survey writers favour first-hand experience of the subject matter of their writing, even if in so doing, there is a certain loss of objectivity. What is especially interesting in Phillips’s argument, is that redefining distance, “does not require historians to neglect their traditional concern for questions of evidence and explanation, nor to abandon their more recent interest in narratology and rhetoric,” and this is evident in Curtis’s approach to the writing of history.⁶ This paper aims to shed a different light on a genre—the architectural survey—that has seen a renewed interest sparked in recent years.

5 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 2.

6 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 5.

The Distance between Architectural History and its Audience

It was in the 1970s that the history of architecture was “professionalised,” as agreed by multiple North American scholars. In 1988, Marvin Trachtenberg noted that there were “far more well-qualified architectural scholars teaching in colleges than ever, and far more architectural surveys and period courses being taught.”⁷ In 1989, Edward W. Soja talked about an “epochal transition in both critical thought and material life,” since the 1970s to the late 1980s.⁸ Looking back at that time, Keith L. Eggner praised the “vigour and range” that the study of architectural history developed during the 1960s and 1970s.⁹

7 Marvin Trachtenberg, “Some Observations on Recent Architectural History,” *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (June 1988), 208.

8 Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso Books, 1989), 5.

9 Keith L. Eggner, ed., *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.

According to him, survey courses became a standardised part of the new postgraduate programs that had been established in both fine arts departments and schools of architecture at North American universities. Eggener highlights the “intensified interdisciplinarity” of the development of architectural history in the 1960s and 1970s, and how this is “apparent in both the topics authors choose to work on and the methods they use to study them.”¹⁰ Recently, Mark Jarzombek argued the importance of remembering that “until the 1970s modern architecture did not have a dedicated scholarly ‘history,’ and how, as a proper historical field, it looked exclusively into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”¹¹

10 Eggener, *American Architectural History*, 13.

11 Mark Jarzombek, “Architecture: The Global Imaginary in an Antiglobal World,” *Grey Room* 61 (Fall 2015), 114.

More survey courses resulted in what Trachtenberg referred to as “the explosion of architectural literature in recent decades,” and a growing interest which extended to not only the architecture profession, but also to the educated public.¹² In this transitional period, one of the “tremendous” changes in the discipline of architectural history, according to Jarzombek, was how publishing houses “defined a rapidly growing readership of art and architecture books.”¹³ Interestingly, it is an argument that functions both ways, because an increasing quantity of published books reflects a growth in the readership, and this growth in the readership also results in an increase in the offer made by publishing houses to meet the demand.

12 Trachtenberg, “Some Observations on Recent Architectural History,” 208.

13 Mark Jarzombek, “The Disciplinary Dislocations of (Architectural) History,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (September 1999), 488.

Modern Architecture Since 1900 was the result of the academic environment and of this growing interest of publishing houses—a commission from Phaidon Press to Curtis in 1978. In addition, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* was the object of study of my PhD dissertation, and throughout my investigation we established a communication that is reflected in this paper. Curtis used research material he had collected for his own teaching practice in North America and during his trips throughout the world. Some of the main ideas were first formulated in earlier monographs and articles, and in subsequent broader outlines and essays. His aim was to present a “balanced, readable overall view of the development of modern architecture in other parts of the world from its beginnings until the recent past,” and to do so with a certain dispassionate distance.¹⁴ A textbook is a “strange beast” according to Samuel B. Frank, and problems arise when trying to map comprehensively a field as diverse as modern architecture: “since the first category [modern architecture] is vague, the second [in the twentieth century] an arbitrary matter of choice, and the third [throughout the world] doomed to tokenism.”¹⁵

14 William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 13-14.

15 Samuel B. Frank, review of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed. by William Curtis and *Modern Architecture and Design: An Alternative History* by Bill Risebero, *Journal of Architectural Education* 36, no. 4 (Summer 1983), 30.

Curtis aims at the “textbook gap” that he drew attention to in his own review of Kenneth Frampton and Manfredo Tafuri’s histories, and according to Frank, succeeds in improving on his contemporary competition.¹⁶ For Peter Serenyi, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* is more readable than the early histories of modern architecture written by Nikolaus Pevsner, Sigfried Giedion and Henry-Russell Hitchcock (which were not suitable for the college market) as well as contemporary competitors written by Leonardo Benevolo and Frampton.¹⁷ In Stanislaus Von Moos’ opinion, “Curtis succeeds in translating an overwhelming bulk of knowledge into a fluent and never over-loaded text,” which is one of the main characteristics of the writing of architectural surveys.¹⁸ A study of the inclusiveness of survey books used in universities of the United States evidenced this success and concluded that the text more often used for survey courses on twentieth century architecture was Curtis’s *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (third edition, 1996).¹⁹

Another survey, Spiro Kostof’s *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (1985), has been considered a turning point towards this new readership—the students of architectural history.²⁰ In his review of Kostof’s book, John E. Hancock points out that “textbook writing, because the issues it raises have more to do with method than research, more to do with literary style than footnoted documentation, has seemed both a lost art and a thankless task in today’s academic environment.”²¹ However, as Leonard Eaton points out, a textbook, regardless of its readable style, can also be “a synthesis of sound scholarship, up-to-date interpretation, and excellent analysis.”²²

Eaton highlights Kostof’s argument that “all buildings are worthy of study,” and that historians have too often concentrated on major monuments.²³ Sibel Bozdoğan agrees, considering Kostof’s inclusion of non-monumental and non-Western traditions in his architectural survey to have been “rightly recognised and celebrated as a monumental step.”²⁴ Kostof’s methodology for creating a successful textbook for students of history in architectural schools is very similar to Curtis’s approach, including the fact that both incorporate first-hand experience of architecture and their own images into their narratives: “whenever possible, Kostof has taken pains to visit the places about which he writes.”²⁵ In his review, Hancock reflects on Kostof’s methodological approach and on his aim to write a book of unprecedented breadth:

Although in the preface Kostof writes that “all-inclusiveness” was not one of the book’s aims, there is enough reference elsewhere to “a broader, more

16 William Curtis, review of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, by Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, and *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* by Kenneth Frampton, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 4, no. 2 (May 1981): 168.

17 Peter Serenyi, review of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, by William Curtis, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43, no. 3 (October 1984): 274-76.

18 Stanislaus von Moos, “Revising Modernist History: The Architecture of the 1920s and 1930s,” review of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed. by William Curtis, *Art Journal* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1983), 208.

19 Eltem Ö. Gürel and Kathryn H. Anthony, “The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race, and Architectural History Texts,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 59, no. 3 (2006), 70.

20 Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

21 John E. Hancock, review of *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* by Spiro Kostof, *Journal of Architectural Education* 39, no. 3 (Spring 1986), 31.

22 Leonard K. Eaton, review of *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* by Spiro Kostof, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 48, no. 3 (March 1988), 76.

23 Eaton, review of *A History of Architecture*, 75.

24 Sibel Bozdoğan, “Architectural History in Professional Education: Reflections on Postcolonial Challenges to the Modern Survey,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 52 no. 4 (May 1999), 208.

25 Eaton, review of *A History of Architecture*, 76.

*embracing view,” “the total context of architecture,” “a more inclusive definition,” and the like, to conclude that inclusiveness is nevertheless the primary way in which this work is intended to differ from its predecessors.*²⁶

26 Hancock, review of *A History of Architecture*, 31.

Just the following year, David Watkin published *A History of Western Architecture* (1986) and Isabelle Hyman and Marvin Trachtenberg published *Architecture, from Prehistory to Postmodernism: The Western Tradition* (1986), as additional manuals on architectural history, aimed at students, but with an explicit Western bias.²⁷

27 David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1986); Isabelle Hyman and Marvin Trachtenberg, *Architecture, from Prehistory to Post-modernism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Harry N. Adams, 1986).

Even if Curtis’s only deals with the twentieth century, there is a certain parallelism between Kostof’s *A History of Architecture* and *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. Apart from being published around the same time—1985 and 1982 respectively—both books prioritise method over research and a readable literary style over scholarly conventions such as footnotes. Both make explicit their intention to distance themselves from predecessors and to visit the places about which they write whenever possible. Because of its readability, the writing undertaken by both Kostof and Curtis may be overlooked, resulting in a certain lack of acknowledgement of both their contributions, less so with the former than the latter.

In “Some Observations on Recent Architectural History” (1988), Trachtenberg noted that architectural historians were at fault for wanting to keep architectural history “at arm’s length,” making their writing “heavy, obscure, or pretentious, and often concerned with technical matters understandably unpalatable or irrelevant to readers devoted to drawings, paintings and sculptures.”²⁸ While he acknowledges that architecture is a subject not without difficulties, he criticises the majority of architectural literature for not attempting to clarify or reduce such distances. If considered a starting point for any study in the field, the survey, as a genre, fights this obscurantism and connects the discipline with its audience, which encompasses not only students of architectural history, but also educated people and scholars from other disciplines.

28 Trachtenberg, “Some Observations on Recent Architectural History,” 208.

The Distance between Modern Architecture and its Historians

Modern Architecture Since 1900 is, for Curtis, exemplary of what historians should have been doing at the end of the 1970s, and of what previous historians neglected. When he first started writing, it seemed necessary “to avoid the various determinisms

[historical or social, as well as over-simplistic definitions] of some previous authors, and to elaborate a more complex picture of both the internal order of a modern tradition, and of longer-range debts to the past,” by showing how modern masters had learned and transformed lessons from the past.²⁹ Curtis does not “wish to add some glowing extra chapters” to previous historians’ sagas, nor to add to the growing number of “revisionist” histories trying to demonstrate that “modern architecture was some temporary fall from architectural grace,” but to distance himself from them.³⁰ Curtis also understands that it is nearly inevitable to fall into some of the previous historians’ weaknesses the closer you get to the present, but, for Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* is evidence of his attempt to avoid those weaknesses, grounding his narrative on principles of the disciplinary tradition:

*This book was written partly with the idea that a historical bridge might be built across the stream of passing intellectual fashions to a more solid philosophical ground, partly with the hope that this might encourage a return to basic principles. But such aims have been secondary: the first thing a historian ought to do is to explain what happened and why, whatever people may now think of it.*³¹

Curtis defines history as a communal activity, bound to draw on past models though reinterpreting them. In addition, by presenting new facts and buildings, it is possible to re-scrutinise and reconsider personalities and events that “once seemed to have some immutable status.”³² The historian’s task requires a rigorous differentiation between fact and opinion, and a deep understanding of the individual works of architecture, which are historical documents. Despite the importance that Curtis gives to scientific rigour and documentary evidence, in his opinion they are no substitute for insight and interpretive skill, which the historian must use to humbly test their historical hypotheses.³³ In his opinion, the experience of the buildings themselves and the resulting fresh insights have a “liberating effect” against dogmatic and deterministic approaches to the writing of history, arid scholasticism and passing fads.³⁴ Furthermore, he refers to the experience of buildings as “one of the most direct and enjoyable ways of having one’s prejudices upset.”³⁵ In his opinion, architecture should be allowed to speak for itself, to not only the historian, but also the reader:

Maybe too one of the functions of a work of architectural history is to open peoples’ eyes to the richness of architecture, to teach them to see. For

²⁹ Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., 691.

³⁰ Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., 12.

³¹ Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., 17.

³² Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., 12.

³³ Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., 479.

³⁴ William Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (London: Phaidon Press, 2015), 480.

³⁵ Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., 692.

*eventually one must go beyond the text and the photograph to the thing itself. Architecture appeals to all of the senses, and touches both mind and body. It is embedded in daily existence, even in private and collective memories. Some realities exist well beyond books. People should go and experience buildings directly, their sites, their spaces, their unfolding sequences, their changing light and moods.*³⁶

During the course of our communication, Curtis told me that “first-hand experience of architecture is crucial in [his] way of operating,” and in his approach to the writing of history.³⁷ Curtis’s first-hand experience of buildings, and his relationship with architects as traveller and photographer, is evident in the preparation of the book. Curtis holds the copyright on at least fifty images of the first edition, including the pictures in the chapter on “The Architectural System of Frank Lloyd Wright” leading to the type of the “Prairie House,” Mies van der Rohe’s IIT Crown Hall and Lake Shore Drive apartments in Chicago, and Le Corbusier’s work in Chandigarh, India. The quantity and quality of the images that accompany the text is increased in the third edition, and some of Curtis’s pictures from the first edition are replaced by similar ones in colour.

The way it is illustrated is also one of the aspects praised by some reviewers of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. In Martin Pawley’s opinion, the strength of the first edition of the book “lies on its exhaustive selection of examples and the often careful use of contemporary photographs.”³⁸ Jorge Sainz also highlights the improvement in the quality of the reproduction of the graphic material for the third edition, something that distances Curtis’s book from similar surveys. Sainz notes that, in the third edition, “colour appears generously and abundantly not only in the pictures of buildings (increased both in number and quality), but also in drawings and paintings.”³⁹ Andrew Mead considers the third edition to be “much enhanced, with over 800, well-reproduced colour and black-and-white photographs which serve rather than supplant the text (plans are still only occasionally provided.)”⁴⁰

Recalling his time as an undergraduate student at the Courtauld Institute, Curtis remembers the impact that the buildings he visited had on him. Curtis refers to his trips as “the lifeblood of architectural experience,” and highlights the key visits to “California in late 1970-early 1971 and Chicago in the Spring of 1971 when [he] had the chance to experience first-hand the works of Schindler, Neutra, Wright in California and Wright, Sullivan, Mies, Burnham and Root in Chicago.”⁴¹ Curtis

36 William Curtis, “A Historian’s Perspective on Modern Architecture.” (transcript), Engl. vers. of “La perspectiva de un historiador sobre la arquitectura moderna,” trans. Jorge Sainz and read out by the author in Spanish on the presentation of the translation of the third edition of *Modern Architecture Since 1900* at the Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, January 2007 (private Collection).

37 William Curtis, email message to author, August 31, 2016.

38 Martin Pawley, “Fish are Jumping,” review of *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, by Kenneth Frampton and *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, by William Curtis, *The Architectural Review* 174, no. 1041 (November 1983): 6.

39 Jorge Sainz, “Arquitectura moderna: última edición,” review of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, by William Curtis, *Arquitectura*, 49 (July-August 1996): 73. Author’s trans.

40 Andrew Mead, review of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., by William Curtis, *Architects’ Journal* 204, no. 10 (September 1996): 50-51.

41 Curtis, email message to author, August 31, 2016.

recollects the significance of visiting Alejandro de la Sota's Gimnasio Maravillas, in Madrid in 1987; Erich Mendelsohn's Hadassah Hospital, in Jerusalem in 1990; Rick Lepastrier's beach house in the northern suburbs of Sydney in 1980; and Jørn Utzon's church in Bagsvaerd in 1978.⁴² The experience of this last building is so profound that Curtis decides to finish the first edition with it. He reflects on the consequences of some of these encounters:

*A few months living in the remnants of Schindler's Pueblo Ribera Courts in Southern California helped me to realise how important ideas of 'origins' were to several architects of the 1920s. A visit to Mendelsohn's Mount Scopus Hospital outside Jerusalem reinforced an existing interest in regional inflections beyond the International Style. A cold morning in Madrid looking at the Maravillas Gymnasium by Alejandro de la Sota set in motion a revised vision of an entire decade and led to a major engagement with Spanish Modern architecture since. Time living in Doshi's "Sangath" [his own office complex] in Ahmadabad, India, focused attention on a larger range of Asian continuities, and on creative tensions between countryside and city in the Third World.*⁴³

42 Curtis, email message to author, August 31, 2016.

43 Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed., 692.

The writing of *Modern Architecture Since 1900* was at points treacherous. In the preface to the first edition, Curtis states that he was writing the chapter on "The Image and Idea of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye at Poissy" in Beirut, and only "luckily escaped annihilation," resulting in the association in his mind of the Villa Savoye with the sound of gunfire.⁴⁴ Moreover, the last third of the manuscript was "nearly lost at the bottom of the River Hawkesbury in Australia when a canoe tilted over."⁴⁵ From my communication with Curtis, I can add that it happened during a long weekend on his second visit to Sydney in 1980, and that it was a handwritten manuscript. The final chapter "was written in a single twenty four hour session in a beach house on the Queensland coast in the spring of 1981 [fall in the southern hemisphere] after which I [he] plunged into the surf as the sun was rising over the sea."⁴⁶ This happened during his third visit to Australia, and he still recalls the beach house, "about 70 miles north of Brisbane at a place called Coolum Beach"⁴⁷ at the Sunshine Coast: "a beautiful white house on stilts with tin roof."⁴⁸

44 Curtis, "Preface to the First Edition," 7.

45 Curtis, "Preface to the First Edition," 6.

46 William Curtis, email message to author, June 3, 2016.

47 William Curtis, email message to author, March 3, 2016.

48 William Curtis, email message to author, June 17, 2017.

In summary, for Curtis, the writing of history, like architecture, is mainly a creative practice involving the innovation and experience of the creator's mind that needs to understand who

is going to read it. This ambivalence between the practice of historians and of architects is not new, and can be explained by considering an author as a “book constructor.”⁴⁹ I argue that Curtis’s choices to build his narrative by synthesising previous scholarship, while avoiding theoretical debates; describing the experience of buildings; and avoiding quotes and an excess of notes, combine to enhance the readability of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. Curtis accepts that in emphasising the accessibility of the text there is a risk of ultimately hiding or disguising its potential scholarly value.

49 André Tavares, *The Anatomy of the Architectural Book* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture; Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016)

Distances Then and Now

Those writing architectural history surveys in the nineteenth century, also made “a frequent comparison between the act of building and the writing of architectural history,” and it confirms Dan Karlholm’s argument that “the importance of the survey texts lays in its making of the field of study.”⁵⁰ Petra Brouwer regards James Fergusson, Wilhelm Lübke and Franz Kugler as pioneers of architectural history and inaugurators of the genre of the survey in the nineteenth century. The three authors reflected on the advantages and limitations of the survey text in the introduction to their books, highlighting the merit of synthesising of previous scholarship and making it accessible to a wider audience which included the educated public of that time –the connoisseurs. In her paper for the fourth annual conference of the Architectural Research in Europe Network Association, entitled “A World of Architectural History” (2018), Brouwer discussed their work in terms of readability, their use of photography and their privileged willingness to travel; all tainted with the limitations of its colonial time. I would argue that there are similarities and resonances in the approach to the writing of history between these authors and the work of Curtis, even if he only surveys the twentieth century, and Kostof in the 1980s. In the case of *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, Curtis does not comment on the fact that, in the late 1970s, his first-hand experience of architecture of the non-West, his claim of constructing an unmediated history, was the result of a rather privileged condition—similar to that of the survey writers of the nineteenth century.

50 Petra Brouwer, “The Pioneering Architectural History Books of Fergusson, Kugler, and Lübke,” *Getty Research Journal* 10 (2018): 105-108.

Moreover, surveys and world histories of architecture written in the nineteenth century have been reconsidered recently as precedents of the contemporary scholarship on “global.” One of the key contributions to the field is Kathleen James-Chakraborty’s *Architecture Since 1400* (2014), which Frampton

has referred to as a “mega-academic book.”⁵¹ As was the case with Curtis, she used the material she had prepared for her lectures in Berkeley. In a forthcoming essay that she has generously shared with me, also giving me permission to mention, James-Chakraborty reflects on the process of constructing the book and on the demands of writing an architectural survey. As a writer, she considered herself to be “far more dependent than usual on fellow scholars,” including her former teaching assistants, and the work to be the boiling down of a shelf of monographs into a few pages.⁵² Lastly, she recognised that the real audience of a survey is “the curious lay person whether an undergraduate, a tourist, or perhaps a scholar from another field,” what in this paper I have already referred to as educated public.⁵³ She was prompted to write an account that would distance itself from “three new global surveys” that she had been asked to adopt in her teaching or to be a peer reviewer for the manuscript.⁵⁴ I met James-Chakraborty as the chair of the 2016 meeting of the European Architectural History Network in Dublin—since then, she has contributed her insight to my research—and talked to her about the process of constructing the book at the 2019 conference of the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) in Providence. During the course of our communication, James-Chakraborty shared her reasons for writing the book:

*I wrote Architecture Since 1400 very consciously in opposition to Kostof, the text I was using for my own survey course, and to the other texts that I was being approached by publishers to use or being asked to review in manuscript. Architecture Since 1400 arose as well out of a very particular class that covered that material, rather than my Modern Architecture survey, which I construct very differently. In particular, I was furious about the coverage (or lack thereof) of work by women in all of these books and manuscripts and by the sense that, even when the so-called Global South was covered that they were still seen as in some way less modern.*⁵⁵

I argue that, as a result, James-Chakraborty distanced her account also from precisely the resulting literature of that “epochal transition” period between the 1970s and 1990s, including not only Kostof but also Curtis’s books—just as they distanced themselves from preceding and contemporary authors.

To conclude, in her keynote address “On the Future History of Modern Architecture” at the 2019 SAH conference, Joan Ockman reflected on the different dimensions of distance.⁵⁶ She finalised her lecture with a seemingly obvious assertion: that

51 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *Architecture Since 1400* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Kenneth Frampton, “A Conversation with Kenneth Frampton: Can There be a Global Architectural History today?” CCA lecture at the Paul Desmarais Theater, delivered on April 6, 2017, accessed May 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRWp5AqAZjs>.

52 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, “Daring to Draft a Canon,” draft chapter for a forthcoming publication shared with the author and quoted with her permission.

53 James-Chakraborty, “Daring to Draft a Canon.”

54 Kathleen James-Chakraborty email message to author, July 1, 2019.

55 Kathleen James-Chakraborty email message to author, June 8, 2017.

56 Joan Ockman, “On the Future History of Modern Architecture,” (Eduard F. Sekler Talk, SAH 72nd Annual International Conference, Providence RI., April 25, 2019).

history is a mediation between the past—its subject matter; the present—its audience; and, the future—which from what has been explored in this paper could be the actual making of the disciplinary field. Under this lens, Curtis’s *Modern Architecture Since 1900* could be the 1982 present. Then, I argue that, in terms of his approach to the writing of history, Curtis’s book can be considered to mediate the distance between the colonial approach of the architectural surveys of the nineteenth century—that is the past; and, the future—at that time—attempts at the writing of a global history of architecture, deeply grounded in the disciplinary tradition.