

A global history of architecture for an age of globalisation

Murray Fraser, Professor
Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, London,
United Kingdom and General Editor, 21st Edition of *Sir Banister
Fletcher's Global History of Architecture*, London; New York, NY:
Bloomsbury, 2019

If we take the most plausible definition of “globalisation,” then it is a broad-brush term that becomes useful when describing the new geopolitical, social and cultural realities that have emerged since the ending of the Cold War in the late-1980s and early-1990s. With no longer a simplistic polarisation of the world into us-dominated capitalist nations opposed to USSR-dominated communist states (with other countries such as Maoist China or non-aligned nations in the Global South squeezed awkwardly into the margins), today we perceive a more fluid and open networked system with myriad nodes of interaction and complex flows of interchange and influence, both positive and negative. The rise of Asian economies with the shift of capital towards the east, and the spread of religious fundamentalism and terrorism, are but a few of the consequences.

Over these last three decades, architecture has clearly been much affected by globalisation, whether through the spread of the concept of “starchitecture,” new models of how to organise international multi-nodal architectural firms, the sheer ubiquity of trans-spatial digital design methods, the extensive sharing of visual images and other information about myriad projects around the world, a profusion in the global exportation of building materials and components, dramatically increased levels of mobility of labour among architects, and so on. Many such aspects of internationality have existed to some form and some extent for long periods prior to the era of globalisation—often as a result of trade routes, wars, repression, colonization or other factors—and yet the conditions today are categorically more intense, diverse and continuous. But has our understanding of and sensitivity to the globally produced links and influences within architecture, whether today or in the past, evolved or matured much as a result? Here the answer would seem to be no—or at least, not yet.

21 Perhaps this is only to be expected, in that genuine change only comes dripping slow and frequently in unexpected or traumatic ways. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has after all claimed:

Therefore globalization provokes explosions, tragedies and social and cultural collapses of all kinds. For five centuries we [in Western countries] believed that utopias were achievable, and we have believed in their vanity. Now we have to think differently, and reflect on our place in the world. This will take a very long time... centuries, forcibly... But societies have always shown that they are able to overcome considerable challenges.¹

If, then, it will take a long time, perhaps even centuries, to arrive at a more thoroughly globalised conception of architecture, how do we decide what we ought to be doing for now? This was the question that struck me when asked to become the General Editor for the new, fully rewritten 21st Edition of what we have renamed as *Sir Banister Fletcher's Global History of Architecture* (to be published in book format and online by Bloomsbury Press in early 2019). The inclusion of the term "global history" is deliberate, signalling what is intended as the greatest sea-change in how the book has been written since its first outing in Imperial London back in 1896.

There appeared to me three essential problems to address as General Editor when rethinking *Banister Fletcher* for the current age of globalisation: cultural bias, tendentious illustrations, and a false authorial voice. Each of these shortcomings had been acknowledged to some degree by previous editions, but insufficiently addressed. The most fundamental problem was the quasi-colonialist conception of *Banister Fletcher* from its outset. Perhaps this was inevitable for its times, since the initial 1896 edition was published at the very moment when signs were already emerging that Britain's delusion of imperial domination was coming to its end. The open portrayal by Banister Fletcher and his son, Banister Flight Fletcher, of British and European architecture as being preeminent, served to offer reassurance to Western readers. The first three editions spoke of no architecture outside Europe; it was not until a short section at the end of the 4th Edition in 1901 that non-Western examples were discussed, albeit shackled under "The Non-Historical Styles." To rub in the point, for the 5th Edition in 1905 the younger Fletcher—his father having died in 1899—even drew what he called "The Tree of Architecture," a visual representation of Western cultures as the recipients of architecture's long tradition. Its six highest branches, those feeding into the "Modern Styles," belonged to Belgium/Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, England and Spain. By the time of the 6th Edition in 1921, in the wake of the First World War, Banister Flight Fletcher's revised diagram now had on its tree a very uppermost branch for the USA—widely tipped by contemporary British champions of the Neoclassical "Grand Tradition," like Albert Richardson, to become the architectural leader in years ahead. It nonetheless still entrenched the prejudice that architecture, at least from around 1000 CE, after the Romanesque period, was a Western phenomenon. In Britain, America and other English-speaking countries, *Banister Fletcher* duly became a cornerstone of architectural

¹ Elena CUE, interview with Jean-Luc Nancy: "There is no West anymore," *Huffington Post*, 14 July 2016. URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elena-cue/interview-with-jeanluc-na_b_10964130.html. Accessed 11 March 2019.

schools until at least the mid-twentieth century, whereas elsewhere there grew a strong and bitter reaction, starting with Japanese scholars in the early twentieth century and then spreading to China, India and elsewhere in Asia.

Subsequent editions of *Banister Fletcher* did attempt to redress the balance, even inviting a few non-Western contributors here and there: as an example, in the 18th Edition in 1975, the Sri Lankan architect Minnette de Silva wrote a section on India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. For a subsequent edition intended for publication in the mid-2000s, the General Editor, John McKean, planned an explicitly Post-Colonial version.² Sadly, it never happened. It is instead the new edition's duty to tackle head-on the colonial legacy of the *Banister Fletcher* series, even if we cannot possibly claim that the process is complete. In deciding how much text to allocate respectively to particular countries or regions, a strict quota system was clearly unworkable due to uncertainty about what the basis should be. Present-day population figures projected back pro-rata into the past? Current geographical extent projected back into the past? A further difficulty is that, as yet, there exists considerably less scholarship about the architectural history of large parts of the globe, especially Africa, to enable a full rebalancing—although happily this situation will surely improve over time. Such problems aside, this edition can claim to be the most globally balanced survey of architectural history to date, anywhere. The rough chapter allocation per region is: Africa 10%; Americas 10%; Middle East 15%; Central and Eastern Asia 20%; South and Southeast Asia/Australasia 10%; Europe 35%. The last-cited figure, although substantial, is far lower than in previous global surveys, and still reflects Europe's continuing weight today within architectural discourse and practice. Yet if one takes what is typically classified as the “West” (i.e. North America and Europe), then its proportion of chapters in this 21st Edition of *Banister Fletcher* is 40%, with “non-Western” regions thus comprising the rest. It is probably as far as is practicable at the moment, and I am sure that future scholars will push this rebalancing further in due course. Indeed, this new *Banister Fletcher* is not intended as the end game, simply a step in a process whereby architectural history will become more globally distributed and networked.

The second problem is of the tendentious use of illustrations in what Banister Fletcher and his son termed the “comparative method,” which they meant not simply in the art historical sense of placing images of buildings together to trace similarities and dissimilarities, but also their belief that a truer analysis could be achieved by drawing each example in their book in a similar manner and to the same degree of detail. It was an approach influenced strongly by new techniques in archaeology in Western nations in the late nineteenth century. While this has gifted us some exquisite *Banister Fletcher* drawings—many of which are included in this edition wherever that chapter's author felt them accurate and relevant—theirs was ultimately a futile goal. The principle of standardizing drawing conventions in pursuit of accuracy was rendered irrelevant as soon as scientists realized the “observer effect” of

2 John MCKEAN, “Sir Banister Fletcher: Pillar to post-colonial readings”, *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 11 no. 2, 2006, p. 187–204. URL: https://www.academia.edu/17783943/Sir_Banister_Fletcher_pillar_to_post-colonial_readings *The Journal of Architecture* Volume 11 No. 2 2006. Accessed 11 March 2019.

4 | intervening in the analytical process, affecting the results themselves, which is clearly the case whenever one chooses to select which aspects to draw and which to omit. Entirely anachronistic, and culturally loaded, the term “comparative method” not surprisingly disappeared from the book’s sub-title for the 18th Edition in 1975, never to resurface. Yet the intervening editions of *Banister Fletcher* have simply ducked the issue of how best to show the buildings under discussion, and hence for this 21st Edition the decision was taken to raise the bar altogether in terms of illustrations, by introducing colour images for the very first time and by consciously showcasing the full spectrum of different kinds of architectural representation. If the original “comparative method” failed in its attempt to standardize, our hope is that a more heterogeneous visual approach will help enrich the architectural analysis. In contrast to the intended clarity of, say, the *Banister Fletcher* drawing that compares ancient Greek columns of the Doric order, the inclusion in the 21st Edition for instance of Madelon Vriesendorp’s painting of philandering skyscrapers—created for the cover of *Delirious New York* (1978), by Rem Koolhaas—helps to speak of more subconscious and subjective appreciations of architecture that are perhaps unsettling and rooted in desire.

The third problem of hitherto *Banister Fletcher* editions, in their false and self-limiting use of a singular authorial voice, one that regarded itself as detached and all-encompassing, was thankfully easy to alter. It is replaced in the 21st Edition by a fully reshaped text in 102 chapters (amounting to 1 million words) that are written by eighty-eight leading scholars from around the world. Each of the scholars is engaged upon innovative primary research into their particular specialist field within the past six millennia, and so in recognition they are given their own bylines. These experts are not solely architectural historians, but also include architects, archaeologists, art historians and cultural historians. Most have written individually, although several chapters are co-authored. In their own voices, and adopting their own approaches, the chapter authors cover a remarkably broad range of material and ideological aspects of architecture—including such crucial factors as design methods, building technologies, labour processes, availability of materials, associated creative practices, representational techniques, economic systems, cultural beliefs, social formations, aesthetic values and everyday lived practices, among other aspects. There has been no attempt to direct what each author writes about, or which architects and buildings they should choose to include or leave out: as the subject experts, it is their autonomous right to decide what is presented. One-third of the authors are female scholars, by far the highest proportion in any *Banister Fletcher* edition, although still but a step in the process towards equal gender balance. And as a consequence of relying on such a large number and such a diversity of contributors, the emphasis in the edition is undoubtedly more on discussing the world, empirically, as a complex assemblage of regions and places that have experienced historical change in their own differing ways—as opposed to trying to offer more generalized theories about such transformations. Within a condition of intensifying globalization, when our understandings of the processes and outcomes are not yet sufficiently developed, this seems a more believable position to take.

And this is exactly how we envisage the 21st Edition of Banister Fletcher as a whole: as being comprehensive but not definitive, as wide-ranging and yet full of gaps and overlaps, as a forum for multiple voices without pretending there are not others who can contribute, and as but a step towards changes in thinking that are yet to come. Hopefully the book offers a model for a more diverse, globally balanced, open-sourced and networked account that can use technologies like the Internet for more collaborative, trans-spatial methods of researching and thinking and disseminating in the field. As a complement to the more detailed scholarly studies that we carry out, we need a broader intellectual map of the subject globally, while also acknowledging that any such map will be shaped by the prevailing values of that particular time. In this sense, the aim for the new *Banister Fletcher* edition is that it will help to shift the vision of the architectural history survey away from something that is closed and synthetic and seemingly fixed, to one that is open and relational and provisional. Other organisations and forums such as *ABE Journal* are of course part of the transformation—yet what is required most of all in the coming years and decades is a profusion of architectural histories written by scholars from countries in those parts of the world where the gaps in knowledge are greatest, such as in much of South America and Asia, and above all the African continent.

Index by keyword: *globalization*

Schlagwortindex : *Globalisierung*

Indice de palabras clave : *globalización*

Index de mots-clés : *mondialisation*

Parole chiave : *globalizzazione*

6 | Figure 1: drawing of the Doric order. This drawing, an example of the “comparative” technique, illustrates variety and change in the proportions and profiles of the Doric order as used in Classical Greece. Some labels are outdated: the correct names are B/ Temple of Athena, Paestum; C/ Temple of Hera II, Paestum; D/ Temple of Aphaia, Aigina; E/ Hephaisteion, Athens; F/ Parthenon, Athens; G/ Temple of Apollo, Delos. Source: Banister Fletcher

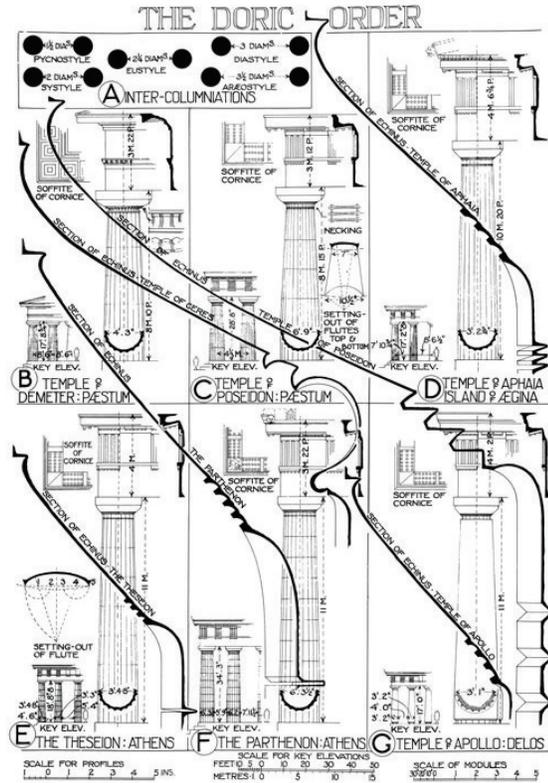


Figure 2: front cover painting for Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (1978) One of the all-time great architectural images, this painting by Koolhaas's wife, Madelon Vriesendorp, fronted the innovative book on New York that Koolhaas deployed as a parable against Functionalism. His text—mixing planning and pleasure, profit and passion—was summed up by this dreamy, Dali-like image of philandering skyscrapers. Source: Madelon Vriesendorp

