EAHN: Microhistories of Architecture (Zurich, 12-15 Jun 25)

ETH Zurich, Switzerland, Jun 12–15, 2025
Deadline: Sep 15, 2024

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"Microhistories of Architecture" - Thematic Conference of the European Architectural History Network.

What can an idiosyncratic detail tell us about the history of an entire building or the people that built it? What is the importance of a single edifice for the history of a city? Can we rewrite the history of a canonical work of architecture by adopting the viewpoint of an anonymous craftsperson or a passer-by? More broadly, what does the life of one individual – perhaps an anonymous commoner, who lived centuries ago and left only scant evidence – matter for the grand narratives of history?

A few decades ago, such questions were at the centre of a historical method known as Microhistory. Microhistorians devoted their efforts to foregrounding the voices, subjectivities, mentalities and experiences of historical subalterns such as peasants, slaves or women. Around the same time, the Subaltern Studies group, pioneered by Ranajit Guha, sought ways to amplify such “small voices of history” in colonized and post-colonial contexts. The aim of all of these authors was to use marginal evidence and hyper-specific case studies as a lens through which to revisit larger historical narratives: to zoom in, in order to eventually zoom out again.

Carlo Ginzburg’s The Cheese and the Worms, first published in 1976, is often seen as a foundational work of the microhistorical method. The book opens with the evocation of a poem by Bertold Brecht, in which a “literate worker” wonders: “Who built Thebes of the seven gates?”. Ginzburg adds: “The sources tell us nothing about these anonymous masons, but the question retains all its significance”. Already from its start, the method of Microhistory offered itself for investigations in architecture: who was it that actually built the famous works of architecture that make up the historical canon? Who inhabited them and how? What did these people think of the famous monuments of antiquity or the works of famed architects? Did they leave their own marks on these monuments?

This EAHN Thematic Conference engages with the methodological tradition of Microhistory as a way to both interrogate our discipline’s capacity to rethink its own canons, and to question the historiographical challenges that come from applying the microhistorical method to architecture. At a time when architectural history joins the rest of the humanities in bringing to the fore marginalized, suppressed or minoritarian voices, such questions acquire new urgency.

Rather than limiting its scope to a particular theme, period or geography, this conference instead places emphasis on a specific method. We ask historians of architecture, cities and landscapes to come together to discuss the promise of Microhistory for our field and its particular relevance for the current moment. We invite our participants to bring their trifles, marginalia and scant evidence, and to use these to write architectural histories from perspectives, subjectivities and mentalities that have hitherto been excluded from our accounts. We welcome papers on any geography and chronology, from antiquity to the very recent past, but we will prioritize those that focus on under-represented geographies and periods of history, or those that shed light on previously unknown aspects of canonical projects and topoi and bring them in contact with broader narratives and historiographical traditions.

Contributions may include:

- Close examinations of architectural or material details (which contradict canonical typologies, stylistic and cultural taxonomies, or periodologies).

- Close readings of text sources on architecture beyond canonical architectural discourse: accounting books, minutes of trials, ownership records, correspondence, etc.

- Close readings of marginalized voices that were involved in the making of the built environment or specific buildings, as evidenced through archival sources, but also speculative or counterfactual history and critical fabulation (albeit on the basis of historical evidence and context).

- Histories of dissonant voices or of conflict within an architectural project or the life of a building or city (particularly if they can help de-centre the voice of the architect and the patron by bringing in those of the craftsperson, labourer, servant, etc.).

- Local, vernacular, indigenous and non-academic accounts of specific buildings and cities, including non-canonical archaeologies and uses of the past and its monuments (from vernacular spolia to popular lore).

- Depictions of canonical architecture from a lay-person’s or subaltern perspective, as well as depictions of the subaltern, or of subaltern architecture in canonical works of painting, literature and art in general.

- Histories of Microhistory in architecture: how architectural writers and historians have tried to apply the method of Microhistory to the study of the built environment – whether successfully or not.

Proposals should include an abstract of no more than 400 words and an author’(s) bio (ca. 200 words per author). Abstracts will be evaluated primarily on the basis of the suggested method and their relevance to the conference theme, but also in terms of thematic originality and exploration of previously unknown or marginalized topics or perspectives. Contributions should be the result of original research and should not be previously published or in the process of being published elsewhere.

Please send your abstracts and bios to gregorio.astengo@gta.arch.ethz.ch and nikolaos.magouliotis@gta.arch.ethz.ch by 15 September 2024. Authors will be notified of the com-

mittee’s decision by the end of December 2024.

Reference:

CFP: EAHN: Microhistories of Architecture (Zurich, 12-15 Jun 25). In: ArtHist.net, Jul 10, 2024 (accessed Nov 16, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/42295>.