

Race & Podcast Shownotes

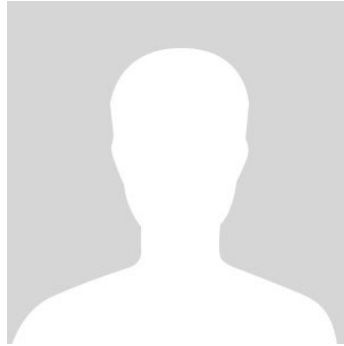
American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Vincent Scully's Architectural History

Participants:



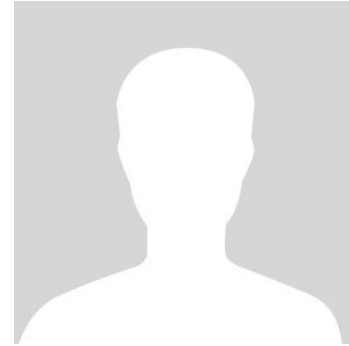
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Links and References:

Online Resources:

Vincent Scully, "The Stick & Shingle Style," Yale University DeVane Lectures <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTtsbOsLPTc>

Vincent Scully, The Shingle Style and Frank Lloyd Wright (Modern Architecture Course) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LdPwDGkyzE>

Roger Kimball, Civilization Is History at Yale https://www.wsj.com/articles/civilization-is-history-at-yale-11580342259?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink

Bibliography:

Vincent Scully, *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955; 1971).

Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–168.

Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005)

Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

Music:

Scott Joplin, "Ragtime Dance"

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American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Vincent Scully's Architectural History

Script:

****Musical intro****

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Jacqueline (J): Okay guys, what are we getting into today?

Michael (M): I was reading about how Yale cancelled their intro to art history class. It kind of shook the world back in January of 2020.

J: Lol kind of a niche world.

M: I know . . . But it snowballed a lot of conversations around the way we teach history.

Anna (A): Well, it's about time. That class only highlighted the idealized, white, western Canon.

M: True, but it was also one of the oldest and most popular survey classes offered. It was taught by Vincent Scully for decades.

J: Who's Vincent Scully?

A: Vincent Scully was a famous Yale professor. He was an art historian who wrote a lot about architecture. Scully was fundamental in understanding the theory and design of American architecture and urbanism. During a time when the International Style erased ornament and national differences in architecture, Scully set his mark on classifying an American Style that would cement a national identity for American architects.

J: Really?

M: Basically! The Yale history survey drew on Scully's book *American Architecture and Urbanism*. He did try to incorporate the contributions of Indigenous builders and material culture in that history, but his efforts were often kind of awkward through his patriarchal, whitewashed lens.

J: Ugh, give me a break with all these old men trying to tell us how the world works.

M: This got me interested in his 1949 doctoral dissertation, which later became his book *The Shingle Style and The Stick Style*. There were multiple revisions over time and as I was reading, I was noticing this conscious attempt to define a relevant vernacular "American Architecture." Scully did a lot of research into famous American architects like H. H. Richardson and Frank Lloyd Wright and helped construct a kind of lineage from one to the next. That gave him the groundwork to do the same thing for the postmodernist movement in the United States, beginning in the 1960s.

A: That's why the cancellation of the Yale course was so dramatic! It was basically the death of that narrative he was part of writing.

J: We love some drama!

A: Totally! Now teaching history isn't going to be about a genealogy of singular white, male geniuses anymore. Now we can re-read history taking the settler colonial context into consideration.

J: Settler colonial?

A: Yeah, when we study American history, we always have to keep in mind that it started out as an invasive settler colony, where Europeans sought to establish their own society by replacing the indigenous cultures that were already there. This is called settler colonialism.

M: In his 1955 book, Scully chronicles the development of shingled wooden houses from 1872 to 1889 through the evolution of their floor plans. Referencing American and European architectural journals from that period, he presents the history of the Shingle and Stick styles within a larger narrative of American architecture, explaining their origins and their influence on later movements.

J: But wait Shingle Style? Stick Style? I don't know anything about this. Are they just made of shingles and sticks?

M: Well, that's definitely part of it. So the Stick Style developed alongside a new method of wood framing in the US in the 1830s—the balloon frame. Some of the architects then tried to express this new vertical framing within the walls on the outside of the buildings with vertical board-and-batten siding.

J: Is that like barn siding?

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: Yes, just like Midwestern barns and sheds. The use of board-and-batten siding invokes images of a rustic American heartland culture, something Scully is desperately trying to articulate in his book as a point in American architectural history that all subsequent American architecture is in debt to.

So then the other major part of the Stick Style is the porch: if you can picture the posts that hold up your typical porch, they make the framing visible in another way . . . as kind of an open skeleton.

J: Got it, so Stick Style is all about the sticks . . . the wood framing. Then what about shingles?

M: Right, well, not gonna lie, shingles are definitely a big part of the Shingle Style. It came about after the Stick Style, around the 1870s. Whereas the Stick Style was about that vertical framing and an image of construction, the Shingle becomes more horizontal and is meant to have a more natural, almost organic look. The shingles kind of make this tight surface skin over the volumes of the house. And they often have these fairly exaggerated roof lines.

J: Huh! Some of these look pretty wild: I'm looking at these pictures of the 'Kraggsyde' house. It has this big arch, I guess for cars to drive under? And all of these turrets and porches. Where was all this coming from?

M: This is where it gets juicy!

J: Oh I'm excited!

M: So the Stick Style was largely pushed by this guy Andrew Jackson Downing. He and some others were publishing these style guides for houses at the time. And, yes, they were about new construction techniques like the balloon frame, but they also illustrated this romantic vision of the American home. And what Scully doesn't talk about is that when someone like Downing is drawing designs for these homes overlooking a picturesque garden, what they're not drawing is the colonial context—the slaveholding economy that affords the wealthy white clientele their lifestyle.

A: Right, it's because of agricultural slave labor that people elsewhere could even use land for leisurely gardens rather than growing food. Without it, there would be no giant 'Kraggsyde' mansion. So that whole romanticized vision leaves a lot unsaid.

M: Exactly. Then there's also a sentiment that arises later in the 1800s, especially around the Grant administration, that modern America is becoming morally corrupt, and that it was growing too large. So they felt they needed to return to a time when America was smaller, to colonial America. In fact, there was this 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia that was supposed to celebrate all of the progress of America . . . but what people walked away with was a disdain for the modern advancements and instead a love for the historic colonial displays.

J: Woof! Backfired!

A: Hmm . . . I think I see where this colonial fetish is going. This colonial revival trend must be where that "natural," "organic" vibe of the Shingle Style you were describing comes from.

M: Yes! Totally. Scully brings up this one photo of a colonial house with this long sloping roof and shingles. This was published in a popular magazine at the time, that you can absolutely see reflected in the Shingle Style.

A: And that "naturalistic" interpretation of those colonial styles plays into a typical settler colonial narrative that tries to position the white settler as having a natural claim to the land they're settling. And so it all constructs and validates an image of an "American" architecture and style.

M: It even seemed to me like Scully was still big-time feeling this nostalgia. In the introduction to the 1971 edition of the book he said: "Clearly enough, the stick and shingle houses, like the colonial work which in part inspired them, were the product of an America which, despite its civil strife, was infinitely smaller and less psychologically beset than that of the present day."

J: So this Scully guy was really into selling this story of "American Architecture."

M: Yep, you got it, Scully was a Yale man through and through. He was born in New Haven, went to Yale for undergrad, for his masters, and his PHD and then taught there his entire life, he basically never left.

A: And guess who was his favorite group of guys to hype as quintessential American architects?

J: White guys?

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J: White guys?

A: Yep, specifically white architects associated with Yale like Robert Venturi and Robert Stern. So apparently people named Robert . . .

M: Talk about people in power choosing the mirror images of themselves!

A: Yeah, feminist scholar, Sara Ahmed talks about whiteness allowing reification to be done. The normalization of white men in power and as the people who write our histories and define our world has crafted our world so thoroughly that people weren't questioning the fact that Scully's history-writing and worldview was so narrow.

The Stick and Shingle Style excludes pretty much any mention of indigenous cultures from the narrative, instead focusing on the development of the American style through a white settler colonial lens. But I will say, I know later on in 1975, Scully wrote the book *Pueblo: Mountain, Village and Dance* about the connection between the architecture, landscape and culture of indigenous Americans in the southwest United States.

M: That's true. You can tell later in life he was starting to realize that glaring absence, but maybe didn't quite know what to do about it. Even though there are a lot of stylistic connections, by writing about it in an entirely separate book, he keeps the narratives separated . . . this is American architecture and this is Indigenous architecture.

A: Like we were saying about the board-and-batten siding evoking a vernacular style and the "natural" appearance of the buildings, rather than any indigenous practices, he positions the stick and shingle styles as the root of American architecture. In the book, he relates the work of people like Frank Lloyd Wright and Robert Venturi back to this root. In that way, by replacing the native subject with the white settler as the origin, he plays into a settler colonial telling of history.

J: So it's a positive move that his course is being put into question?

M: Definitely, not that it's not complicated to still be studying architecture at an Ivy League institution period, but it is important that some departments are starting to question the settler colonial narrative of architecture and the western canon.

A: Right, in Ania Loomba's book on Colonialism and Postcolonialism, she explains that when people are trapped in their usual bubbles, whether it's an academic or political setting, or just a social circle, it's difficult to think outside them. And because people get stuck in their ways, those bubbles also hold a lot of power. Scully was an insider in the very formal, academic discourse of American architecture. Such discourses are often static, binary, and don't allow for complexities. Here we can start to question history-writing and bring in space for rethinking, rewriting, and re-examining histories portrayed as "set in stone." As we just said, even Scully was starting to rethink his own writing.

J: So, what's next?

M: For Yale, I think they are moving in the right direction. According to Art History Chair, Tim Barringer, the forthcoming curriculum will deliver new classes, like "Art and Politics," "Global Craft," "The Silk Road," and "Sacred Places." Instead of putting an emphasis on European art as the apex of cultural development, there will be a focus on various global regions, cultures and traditions that are equally deserving of study.

A: While this is a good start, I think we also have to be critical of the ways we interact with history. Moving from Loomba's reading of static discourse, we can venture into something Ariella Azoulay calls potential history. Potential history "strives to retrieve, reconstruct, and give an account of diverse worlds that persist despite the historicized limits of our world." Historians, like Scully, must examine their role in legitimizing and crafting history as official narratives of a closed archive. Discussing a diverse, multiple, often ignored past engages with outcomes in the continuous present.

J: So in this case with the Stick and Shingle Styles, it's not just about being critical of their settler colonial origins as styles, it's about examining how we write histories, and who writes these histories, and why.

M: Exactly! Re-examining history is gonna be an ongoing process, but we're off to an exciting start.