

Zeitschrift: gta papers
Herausgeber: gta Verlag
Band: 3 (2019)

Artikel: Introduction
Autor: Stalder, Laurent
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-880669>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 06.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Laurent Stalder is Professor of the Theory of Architecture at ETH Zurich.

Introduction

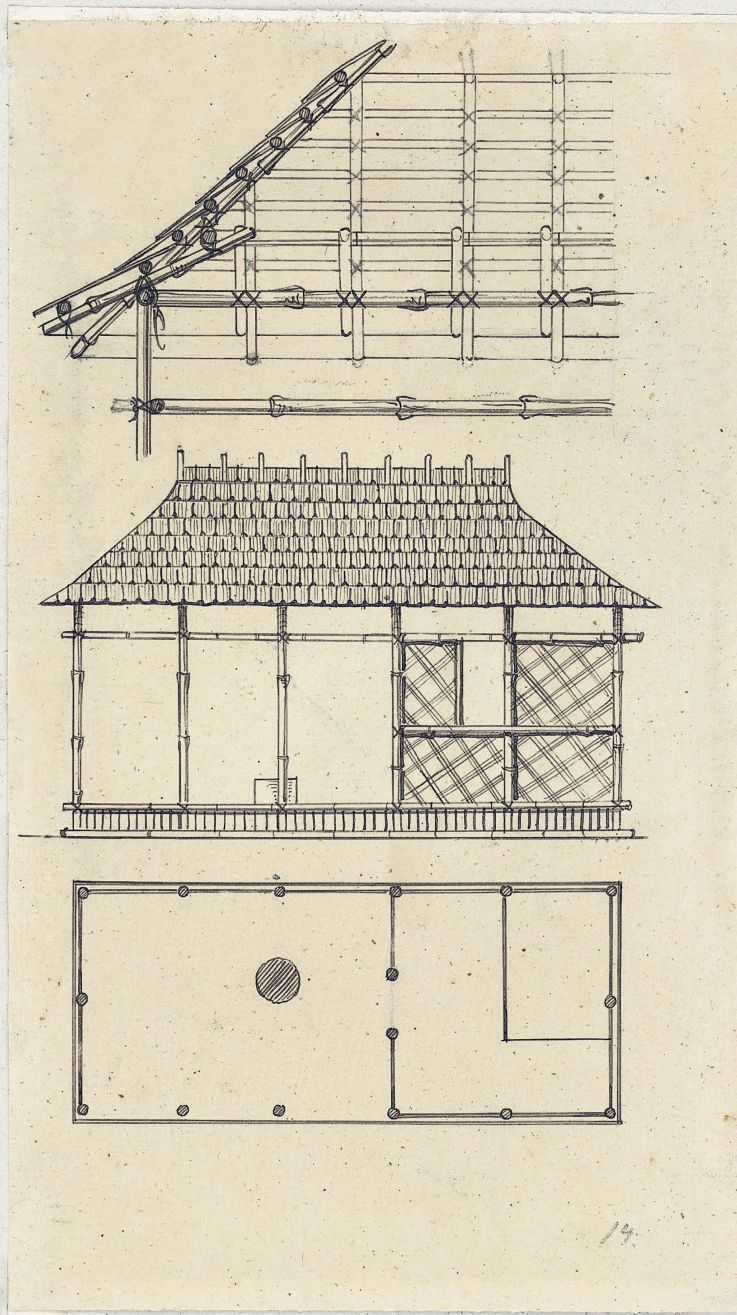
Laurent Stalder

Founding myths of architecture are persistent. Even though the scientific-minded nineteenth century tried to banish them to the black hole of history as irrational troublemakers and twentieth-century historiography transformed them into a matter of historical investigation, founding myths have maintained an astonishing topicality in architecture independent of such critiques. Numerous are the examples in the last two hundred years of imaginary constructions aimed at explaining either a supposedly original form or founding principle of architecture. Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc — usually celebrated for his rationalist approach to architecture — prefaced his own world history with a flimsy hut of bent branches, while Le Corbusier, another allegedly rationalist, used the “primitive temple” to demonstrate the normative character of the *tracés régulateurs*. Even where the recourse to a primitive dwelling does not seem at first glance to be particularly adapted, as with modern building technology, it has found entry, if not as myth, then as “parable” of an original form of occupation: for example, the camp fire as primitive model of the “power-operated solution” in Reyner Banham’s writings. ¹

A good proof of this persistency are the various documents relating to founding moments that have made their way into the archives of the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (the gta) at ETH Zurich during the last fifty or so years. These include a slightly blurred photograph of the wooden hut built by Paul Artaria where Swiss modernism was supposedly born; the stilt houses, precursors of the modern *piloti*, to which Adolf Max Vogt would devote a whole book; the countless photographs of infrastructural buildings, which are referred to for their seemingly spontaneous plasticity or ingenuity; several drawings by Siegfried Giedion of prehistoric traces, constituting the “Beginnings of Art” of his *Eternal Present*; and the geometric figures of Sinbad, cited at the thirtieth anniversary of the institute. These documents should not be conflated with the ones relating to ground-breaking or topping-out ceremonies, the foundation of a movement, or the approval act for a new institution, events whose dates can be precisely reconstructed; for instance, the documents relating to the opening of the gta (January 1, 1967), its inauguration ceremony (June 23, 1967), or even its rebirth after the first generational crisis (September 1, 1986). Such documents might record a foundational event, but they defy the dimension of the myth. Myths in architecture do not record facts. Rather, they figure, in their diversity, as attempts to give a meaningful framework to a discipline that escapes any final definition.

¹ Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire de l'habitation humaine* (Paris: J. Hetzel, 1875), 4–7; Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1927), 65–68; Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (1969; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19–20. See also Hans-Jürg Leibundgut, *LowEx Building Design für eine ZeroEmission Architecture* (Zurich: vdf, 2011), 5, where the opening sentence reads: “Am Anfang war das Feuer” (In the beginning there was fire).

fig. 1 Gottfried Semper, drawing of the “Caribbean Hut” for the second volume of *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts* (1863).



Karakische Hütte.
Gr. Langpunkt 8.

One of the most compelling examples from the gta Archives is Gottfried Semper's "Caribbean Hut." ^{fig.1} At times it has served to explain the structural origin of architecture, at times its textile origins, and at times its fundamental laws of metabolism. Yet, the hut's triumph — its worldwide success over one and a half centuries — is all the more astonishing because little is known about it. Reportedly, it made an appearance at the Great Exhibition of 1851, in the Trinidad section. But apart from a brief report by its discoverer — including a small, quarter-page depiction with ground plan, elevation, and a section through the roof framework — along with a short description (in the official catalog) of the articles it contained (which were of Spanish or West Indian origin, as "pure" Caribs no longer existed), hardly anything else is documented about it or has been handed down to us. ² Its size, sponsor, builder, and whether it was an original construction brought for the exhibition or newly built — all of these things remain a mystery.

As frustrating as this might be for the historians, it has done nothing to diminish the hut's influence. On the contrary, as a reference point bereft of historical age it encompasses — if not as a "speculative" then at least as an "exotic" model — all of the qualities that constitute a founding myth. It keeps marking, with the primary and at the same time spontaneous nature of its form, the beginnings of architecture and symbolizes a congregation of the four elements of architecture from which the entirety of world architecture can be derived. It finds its *raison d'être* not because it is authentic but because it has an effect. ³ This might explain why the institute has devoted more research to the legacy of Semper's work than to any other writing in the archive in the last fifty years. Indeed, archives are not only collected by but also make the history of institutions.

Remarkably, at least at first glance, for an institute that bears the term *history* in its title and whose official duty is to conduct "scientific research," as stated in its first statutes, figures of origin are not limited to its archives. ⁴ The inauguration of the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture on June 23, 1967, was interspersed with several references to such figures, beginning with a "furrowed mollusk engraving" from Conrad Gessner's *Thierbuch* (1557), offered by the president of the ETH board, Jakob Burckhardt, as a christening gift. Presented as "the most consummate of buildings," the gift was a way to define the position of the institute as a "Sonderling" (oddball) inside a polytechnic institution. The gift served to question how far the "intuitive" would have to cede the path to the "exact-scientific work" as practiced otherwise in the school, and by this to acknowledge other forms of knowledge as present in artistic practices. ⁵ Similarly, Vogt,

² Franz Bosbach, *The Great Exhibition and Its Legacy*, Prinz-Albert-Studien 20 (Munich: Saur, 2002), 85. Elena Chestnova, whom I thank for this bibliographic reference, is currently working on tackling the riddles around Semper's hut.

³ See Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), 10.

⁴ "Satzungen des Instituts für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, ETH Zürich," April 26, 1974, gta Archives, ETH Zurich.

⁵ Jakob Burckhardt, "Begrüßung," in Jakob Burckhardt, Adolf Max Vogt, and Paul Hofer, *Reden und Vortrag zur Eröffnung*, gta 1 (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1968), 7–9, here 8.

the first head of the gta, in his inaugural address built up his argument around not Semper's primitive hut but that of the abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier. Vogt thereby introduced a research interest that would be followed by his successors. Since its foundation, therefore, the gta has engaged with founding myths in a way that makes it a fitting place to outline the changing role of these myths in historiography over the last fifty years.

The choice of Laugier undoubtedly reflected Vogt's own research and interest in the French architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, beyond Laugier's hut, Vogt was concerned with something far more general. He wanted to demonstrate the relationship between theory and practice and between the present and the past – a quadripartite that has served the institute as a basis with much success. The question was not whether the French abbé's theory – the hut with the four tree trunks, four top beams, two frontispieces and a ridge beam (a structure similar, according to Vogt, to that of the Roman temple of the Maison Carrée in Nîmes) – is eccentric or not. Instead, its significance was, according to Vogt, the impact of its theoretical assumptions on classicism around 1800. As he pointed out in his conclusion on the role of theory within architecture, "Quirky theories can likewise yield profound 'facts,' namely entire architectural epochs." Not coincidentally, he then cited as a further example *Space, Time and Architecture*, "an account ... in which the great architectural groups of the Western world" could recognize themselves. ⁶ With these two fundamental exemplars – one of them supposedly ringing in classicism, the other in modernism – Vogt delineated not only the institute's early fields of research but its goals and ambitions within the ETH's faculty of architecture: the operative dimension of theory.

Vogt thus not only tried, from the perspective of a historian, to describe the framework of the history of ideas in which the power of founding myths takes effect. He also, from the perspective of the theorist, wanted to legitimize the operative role of the founding myth in the determination of a reference system for an architecture to come. Seen from this vantage point, the boundaries between the explanatory potential of founding myths and theoretical constructs become fluid. Who can definitively determine where the lines might be drawn between the abbé's theses on the structural system of architecture and the "universally valid principle" of "transparency" postulated by Bernhard Hoesli? ⁷ Or between the conventions of regional architecture and the conventions of linguistic systems in architecture as pursued by Martin Steinmann and Bruno Reichlin? ⁸ Or between the frequently renewed analysis of the ground plans of historical cities here at

⁶ Adolf Max Vogt, "Das Institut, seine Aufgabe, seine Verpflichtung," in Burckhardt, Vogt, and Hofer, *Reden und Vortrag* (see note 6), 13–19.

⁷ Bernhard Hoesli, "Transparente Formorganisation als Mittel des Entwurfs," in Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, *Transparenz*, gta 4 (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1989), 73–107, here 73.

⁸ Martin Steinmann, "Wirklichkeit als Geschichte: Stichworte zu einem Gespräch über Realismus in der Architektur," in *Tendenzen – Neuere Architektur im Tessin: Dokumentation zur Ausstellung an der ETH Zürich vom 20. Nov.–13. Dez. 1975*, eds. Martin Steinmann und Martin Boga (Zurich: Organisationsstelle für Ausstellungen des Institutes gta, 1977), 9–14; and the questionnaire on architecture and semiotics compiled by Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart in *Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst* 58, nos. 4, 6, 10, 12 (1971), and 59, no. 2 (1972).

the institute (as pursued by Paul Hofer, André Corboz, and Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani from continually new standpoints) and the invention of form as analyzed two decades ago on the occasion of the institute's thirtieth anniversary? Or even the lines between the principles apparently embodied in a primitive Caribbean hut and the four elements of architecture?

A further perspective is necessary, one that relativizes the operative character of the founding myth. As Werner Oechslin, Vogt's successor at the gta, would point out in several essays, the resort to tales or legends from far-off, fabled times seems to be particularly useful "whenever philosophical inquiry proved to be too difficult and demanding."⁹ A good example is the legend around the philosopher Aristippus, who discovered geometric figures on the beach at Rhodes after being shipwrecked and enthusiastically judged them to be a sign of human existence. Vitruvius would use this legend to substantiate the rationalness of human activity in general and by this the scientific character of architecture via its affinity to mathematics.¹⁰

However, to interpret such myths as alibis intended to evade confronting complex material would be an oversimplification. Rather, the exercise is to understand myths not only as an explanation or justification for one's own actions but as a genus in the individual fundamental questions of architecture, which in their complexity and contradictory nature can be continually re-posed anew. For this purpose, they prove particularly insightful. This perspective narrows the character of the founding myth yet at the same time opens it up. It narrows it by relativizing the myth's operative and explanatory character: the principles of the hut in the woods as they served Laugier in the context of classicism, or the theory of clothing disclosed in Semper's Caribbean hut as it served the protagonists of postmodernism. And it simultaneously opens it up by respecting that founding myths allow a fundamental architectural stance to be assumed. This is what constitutes the founding myth's lasting significance for architecture, explaining its persistence throughout history. And it is also why primitive huts and the theoretical models derived from them still enjoy such currency and validity.

Yet, due to the systematic appraisal of this genus, architecture and its history and theory seem to be characterized by almost too many founding myths in recent years.¹¹ Suddenly it is Adam who was the first architect, suddenly Cain; in one place it is Daedalus, in another the noble savage; then animals again, or the figure of the precisely calculating engineer; then Nature, that great architectural craftsman, all-provident and all-legitimizing. Correspondingly, in the texts of authors as varied as

⁹ Werner Oechslin, "Geometry and Line: The Vitruvian 'Science' of Architectural Drawing," *Daedalos* 1 (1981): 20–35, here 21.

¹⁰ Ibid.; Werner Oechslin, "Dinocrates and the Myth of the Megalomaniacal Institution of Architecture," *Daedalos* 4 (1982): 7–26.

¹¹ See Joachim Gaus, "Die Urhütte: Über ein Modell in der Baukunst und ein Motiv in der bildenden Kunst," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 33 (1971): 7–70; Georg Germann, "Höhle und Hütte," in *Jagen und Sammeln: Festschrift für H. G. Bandi*, eds. Rudolf Fellmann, Georg Germann, and Karl Zimmermann (Bern: Stämpfli, 1985), 121–30; Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972).

Vitruvius, Filarete, Rivius, Laugier, Goethe, Garnier, Loos, Banham, Kurokawa, Virilio, Sloterdijk, and many others, the “huts” originate in caves, then in copses or in tents or in timber edifices or in stone edifices; or, depending on climate and building material, in reverse order; then again in shrouds, membranes, or spheres (round, oval, or cylindrical); in tombs or in monuments, in silos or in ship’s cabins, in Atlantic bunkers or in fortified towers. In one case the beginnings lie in geometry, in another in bare necessity, in a further case in the four elements, in yet others in “fire” or language.

Two aspects can be derived from this. The first is that what distinguishes founding myths is that when taken together they do not form a closed whole. As outlined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*, the longer one examines myths, the more sweeping and broader the “swathes of mist” become that describe them, without ever making the domain that they occupy any more comprehensively or permanently intelligible. As myths relate to human life, no clear circumscription of their limit is ever possible.¹² This applies to founding myths in architecture in the same measure. The second aspect is that, even when the historian’s task lies in attaining an understanding of the individual founding myths in their historical peculiarity and significance, myths nonetheless evade historical classification. They are, in the words of the religious scholar Gerard van der Leeuw, “exemplary,” “archetypal,” and “eternal,” and, as such, “beyond temporality.”¹³ In this sense, founding myths convey less about the architecture of particular epochs and instead express the ways and means by which particular epochs have attempted to conceive the infinite realm of architecture. The ultimate point is not only what influence the Caribbean hut had on the architecture of the nineteenth century but in which ways the nineteenth century prompted architects to no longer think simply in terms of European architecture and its classical tradition and instead to think in terms of architecture from throughout the world.

The systematic reappraisal of founding myths thus brings with it an opening of the corpus that marks the domain in which architectural argumentation operates today. The differing aspects that can be identified throughout the history of the gta might also be read as different moments in how history and theory have been practiced at the institute: the setting out and institutionalization of the principles of historical research in an architectural school with the call to grant theory an operative role; the aim of establishing historical research as an academic discipline dedicated to the history of architecture and its theory in its entire historical scope and depth and which, as a consequence,

¹² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques: Le Cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964), 7–40, here 10

¹³ Cited in “Mythos, Mythologie,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 6, eds. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Grönde (Basel: Schwabe, 1984), 281–318, here 303.

simultaneously relativizes the operative and speculative dimensions of theory; and, finally, the necessity to perform against the background of a historiography increasingly dominated by fragmentation and relativism. In this regard, the question of the search for the origin must, by necessity, be questioned in favor of a genealogy that attempts to reconstruct the circumstances of individual practices in their singular and therefore also unique character — an approach that completes the shift from the search for universal knowledge (what is architecture? what are its origins?) to an empirical evaluation (which architecture? which standpoint?).¹⁴

¹⁴ See Manfredo Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project,'" *Oppositions* 17 (1979): 54–75; Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire," in Suzanne Bachelard et al., *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (Paris: PUF, 1971), 145–72.

¹⁵ In relation to the work of art, see Gilles Deleuze, "Les signes de l'art et l'essence," in *Proust et les signes* (1964; Paris: PUF, 2006), 51–65.

If this calls for an individualizing approach, then it is not meant in the sense either of a personification of the author — which would demote architecture to a question of taste — or of a new methodology — which would overshoot the subject and result in further fragmentation. What is required is an approach based on individual questions that, because they differ continuously, entails a constant series of unique standpoints from which architecture is examined.¹⁵ At stake, therefore, are less the precise moments of foundation and more the fundamental questions addressed to architecture, such as the position of the architect, the role of theory, the actors involved in the creation of a material, the question of style, or the definition of autonomy. This is the approach taken in this issue of *gta Papers*: the engagement with founding myths does not aim at any search for origins but rather at constituting again and again an appropriate axiomatic frame of reference within architecture — a discipline lacking any axiomatic foundation.

Irrespective of the fact that perspectives and expectations attached to founding myths may have changed in the last fifty years and that these shifts are reflected in the history of the *gta*, what seems to linger as the institute's tacit foundation are the four cornerstones that were established in 1967: the interrelation between history, the present, theory, and practice. Not pure theory but epistemological endeavor; not pure history but historical awareness. The main focuses may have shifted, standpoints may have taken on new definitions, and problems may have changed, but the institute has remained faithful to this quadripartite. Credit, however, is not due to the institution. The institution may set out the framework, but its achievements are due to the work of all its collaborators.