What the essays in this part have in common is that they each offer a perspective that challenges mainstream academic thinking. Post-colonisation theories question the universal applicability of Western paradigms and are able to make sense of conditions that are so chaotic and conflicting that the idea of a single comprehensive reading loses all relevance. New materialist ideas developed in the fields of philosophy and political sciences stress the agency of inanimate things, helping researchers to see humans as part of a larger (and vulnerable) ecosystem, evaluating our endeavours through the lens of non-humans. In addition, feminist perspectives interrogate the power structures underlying our understanding of architecture through storytelling and engagement with alternative experiences of the production of architecture.

In her piece, “The Mysteries Encountered when Finding Reality,” Helen Thomas describes the search in the 1960s and ’70s for viewpoints that opposed the then dominant Western research traditions in their use of history. Joseph Rykwert’s master’s course set up at the University of Essex in 1968 challenged the distance between architectural history and practice. The architects Fernand Pouillon and Yasmeen Lari both put history as building practice to work, Pouillon in accessing the history of stone, Lari in developing a “reset vernacular.” All three demonstrate “new realities” that reveal themselves through history as a source. The transgression of academic borders also opens a route to alternative viewpoints that are capable of perceiving alternative worlds. The playful imagination that storytelling introduces is one such tool. Starting from the reality of the object, in this case a deserted school building in an Iranian oil town, Sepideh Karami uses photographs and fictional narratives to make sense of “the mess,” in this case a postcolonial setting, allowing her to speculate on pasts that might
not reveal themselves otherwise. Entire speculative worlds come to life in Jana Culek’s alternative understanding of the architectural utopia. Culek compares architectural and literary utopias, with the aim of including the underlying social processes and conditions, all of which are revealed in series of drawings presented at different scales to question the “form” of utopia. Yet another way of capturing social processes is developed in the project Growing up Modern, in which Julia Jamrozik looks for the meaning of architectural culture beyond the professional debate. The oral histories she has collected paint a colourful picture of life in iconic buildings from a child’s perspective. By turning not to the clients, but to their children, the buildings reveal their function as social spaces and places of memory, which have left a surprisingly strong mark on some of their occupants.
CHAPTER 12
The Mysteries Encountered When Finding Reality
Helen Thomas

One day in December 2019, I travelled from the Barbican in London to the Copyright Bookshop in Ghent to celebrate the publication of Marie-Jose Van Hee’s book about her work. It was here that William Mann introduced me to Caroline Voet, but in a way, we had already met. I had recently been using her book on Hans Van Der Laan with my students at Kingston University; she had been reading my article on Joseph Rykwert and his time at the University of Essex, which she had come across in her initial research for this book. Our meeting in this room lined with books – the captured thoughts of our peers and mentors – was an apt place to begin discussing the practice of architectural research. This activity had produced the myriad desirable publications that surrounded us and had caused us to come together in the type of social encounter that researchers actively seek – the incidental juxtaposition of different perspectives. But underlying this inquiry into what constitutes research, especially as embodied in this relationship between designing as a dynamic creative process, and history as legacy and provocation, is another question, which is why do we research?

There are three overlapping spheres of action within which the researcher potentially operates, which are explored here through the work and milieu of three architect-writers. Two of these spheres, which are the social and the political, rely on collaboration, competition, and hierarchy, and are communal. The third, called here the creative, reverts to the individual. It is a way for the subjective and the intuitive to connect to the consensus and order of the social and the political, and specifically to embrace the collaborative nature of design. Searching for a starting point of the current tensions between the conceptual work of academia and the hands-on work of the practising architect, and which also provides a rich site for identifying the interplay between the social, the political, and the creative, is the early pedagogy of architect and historian Joseph Rykwert.
Joseph Rykwert and the Problem of Institutional Reality

A shift in the productive relationship between the design process as experience and action towards its possible future, and history as a repository waiting to be mined, was embodied in the master’s course in the history and theory of architecture set up by Rykwert. His proposal to the University of Essex in 1967 stated that “[t]here is at present no course of this nature being offered at any school of architecture or university in this country; or indeed anywhere else that I know of.”

In the autumn of 1968, just four years after the University of Essex had opened its doors to around 120 students, three men arrived at the Department of Art History in the School of Comparative Studies. These were Rykwert’s founding students, each of them with architectural training, as stipulated in the prospectus, which stated that “[t]he scheme of study will be a self-contained programme for students who are familiar with the basic notions of planning and designing, and who also have some experience of architectural and design office practice.” At the time, history and theory were not integral to the education of the architect, and in the words of an early student called John McKean, “no-one was teaching history of architecture in schools, far less ideas. There wasn’t any kind of philosophical debate in my experience and I think for the people around.” Cultivating the embodiment of architectural history and theory into design thinking was fundamental to Rykwert’s plan, and also for his colleague Dalibor Vesely, who Rykwert had invited to teach with him.

Rykwert is well connected and has many friends. McKean’s course notebook, for example, reveals that, in finding ways to apply his thinking to present-day architecture, Rykwert introduced the work of Aldo van Eyck, who had published The Idea of a Town in his journal Forum in 1963, Giancarlo De Carlo, who he knew through his travels through Italy during the 1940s, and Hassan Fathy. Each of these architects is an example of the thinker-practitioners that Rykwert and Vesely were training their students to become. The most important educational process for them to carry this out was the intense study and discussion of historical and philosophical texts. Rykwert’s written description of his seminar course, Theoretical Literature of Architecture Before 1800, explicitly stated that “[p]articular weight will be given to the implications of theory for contemporary practice.” McKean’s notebook records the following advice, given during his first meeting on this course – “it” being the text: “First, read it, then second, make it clear that you understand it. Third, add commentary and fourthly include your own attitudes, any ideas, feelings etc, however way out.” Another student, Helen Mallinson, remembered that during “four, six weeks we looked at one paragraph of Alberti […] I was completely taken aback by the whole thing, by the intensity of it.”

The ambitions acted out through teaching the master’s course were also political, a term understood here to have several implications, one of them
being the radical intent that underlies so much of research practice as an activity and its outcomes as a goal and catalyst. This is the ambition to reflect on and change the way that we ourselves and others think about and ultimately engage with the world, or to contribute to a larger movement whose objectives we are sympathetic to.

The setting of the researcher can influence the nature of the political expression. It might be hierarchical and internalised within the institutional context of academia, or practical and economical within the commercial world of practice. For Rykwert and Vesely, there were two political issues at stake within their academic context. One was the intellectual challenge to the rationalist foundations of modern architecture and the hegemony of Enlightenment thought and its influence on architectural education. According to their student Alberto Perez Gomez, they used a pincer action: “For me their approach worked very well together,” he told me, “Joseph went ‘forward’ from Vitruvius to the eighteenth century, Dalibor ‘backward’ from phenomenology to the nineteenth century ending with Semper.”

The second issue was the invention of a productive and symbiotic connection between the practice of architecture and the transformation of academic knowledge through discussion and research.

Unfortunately, this dream did not align with the politics of the institution in which it was set. The master’s course became untenable at the University of Essex. Within this newly established education and research institution, the Department of Art History was modelled not on an art or design school, but on the Courtauld Institute of Art. This was where the establishment framework of art history and connoisseurship reproduced itself. Michael Podro, who came from the Courtauld to Essex shortly after Rykwert, told me he came because the department needed someone with superfluous “reading lists.” Cast out of the academy, the master’s course and its participants were obliged to become peripatetic.

By 1973, seminars were being held in the basement kitchen of the Soane Museum in London, around the kitchen table. Removal from an established setting and institutional frameworks defined a situation that relied on social relations enacted around a table and dependent upon ritual. These nomadic circumstances could be described as incorporating an intense version of the social relations underlying research practice. Belonging to a group bound by common knowledge and codes provides a setting for individual work. This work can then be tested, validated, and ranked within the context of these shared values. The master’s course depended upon the charismatic presence of its two main teachers – Rykwert and Vesely. Mallinson told me that she got the feeling that “Joseph was the stable person who set up not just the administration but the fact that you had tea, and that someone was always organised to bring biscuits. There was the sense of civilization, an order of business that Joseph was very responsible for,” she said. “There was a kind of ethos to the way one
was expected to participate.” Mallinson took part in seminars hosted in Hugh Casson’s office at the Royal Academy and was joined by David Leatherbarrow. He remembered that just as important as the Royal Academy was Fortnum and Mason across the street. “At the first meeting of the seminar,” he said, “Joseph took the whole group there to select and buy all the apparatus for making coffee. The context we had was limited to those who participated in the seminar.”

The table at the centre of a select group of people hosted more that simple tea parties, however. Enactment of the texts themselves was also ritualised – they were read aloud and they were dissected with the same intensity as poetry. For some of the participants of the seminars, this experience of exchange and shared interpretation of complex texts became embedded in forms of architectural practice. The outcomes of these new practices were not necessarily buildings. Students also became teachers and writers. Drawing as a practice was inspired by the teachings of the course, and a well-known practitioner in this sense was Daniel Libeskind, recognised until the turn of the century through his Micromegas and Chamber Works series.

**Mysterious Reality**

The Iron Pillar of Delhi is a mysterious column that was cast sometime in the fourth century, now located in the courtyard of the Quwwatul Islam Mosque in Delhi’s Qutub Minar complex. It has resisted oxidation for 1,600 years, and although its chemical composition has been analysed, the technological knowledge of the metallurgists who created it remains enigmatic. The column bears history in another way, through the inscriptions that cover it. Nevertheless, it is a secretive object that ultimately withholds the processes of its construction and the intentions behind its manufacture from the researcher. Its past is inaccessible – both in the sense of its material origins, even where it was made, and also in its cultural meaning over time. As an object, it has an oracle-like quality. As an utterance and an agency, its messages are ambiguous and obscure. In this sense, it resonates with a translation of a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche’s text “On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life,” which states: “When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it.” This powerful phrase is open to many interpretations that spring from the relationship between the past, present, and future that it suggests. In most architectural histories, this relationship today differs from that of the twentieth century, for example, when the role of the architect, or the builder, in making the future corresponded with a Western belief in technological progress that corresponded to the dream of utopia that had motivated colonisers and modernists.

Rykwert and Vesely’s use of historical and philosophical texts, their moving backwards and forwards through time, was a precursor to today’s questioning
Fig. 12.1  Iron Pillar, Quwwatul Islam Mosque, Delhi © Indrajit Das.
of the legitimacy of Western ideas of technological progress and its outcomes. As researchers, we are engaged with finding and also creating narratives of the past that are useful for the present and which provide a field of action for the future, but the utopias of the twentieth century are no longer available. The academic institution favours the scholarly above all other forms of narrative. Scholarly, in this instance, is the verifiable and rigorously sourced, the peer reviewed and firmly located within existing traditions of thought and structures of knowledge; it accretes. But if design and architectural practice are introduced into the equation – that is, an engagement and response to an uncontrollable world, with unpredictable ways of thinking and acting that exist outside the academic system – the narratives connecting history, theory, and practice cannot be seamless and objective, purely scientific, or theoretical. This questioning of the once-dominant themes of modernism – technological advancement and the novelty it engenders, mass production and industrialisation – which enabled the coining of terms like first world and third world, and a view of the future as a superior present, will be explored next through the approaches of two very different architects to the realities of their historical, geographical, and cultural situations.

**Fernand Pouillon’s Use of History**

He who, without betraying the constraints of the modern programme or materials, produces a work that seems always to have existed – that is, in a word, banal – may consider himself a man well satisfied.

—Auguste Perret, 1952

French architect Fernand Pouillon (1912–1986) was a man with a biography so vivid that it overshadowed his presence as an architect in the French cultural imagination for many years. He was a prolific builder, developer, teacher, and also a writer, whose form was fiction. While languishing in prison for fraudulent bankruptcy, Pouillon passed his time writing, and he was abundant and talented. In addition to his autobiography, he wrote a novel set in thirteenth-century Provence. It is narrated through the diary of Guillaume Balz, who is the master builder of the Cistercian abbey of Le Thoronet, but also of course, the embodiment of Pouillon himself. In French, this book is called *Les Pierres Sauvages*, which has been translated into English as *The Stones of the Abbey*. On the English cover, we learn from Umberto Eco that this is “a fascinating contribution to the understanding of the Middle Ages,” as if it were a minutely researched and scholarly publication. I would argue that, on the contrary, this is a fascinating contribution to the understanding of the mid-twentieth century, or at least a corner of French culture in a small part of France. Pouillon’s narrative is not academic or scholarly but fictional. The site of research was not external, but
Fig. 12.2 Details of limestone façades, Pantin Estate, Paris, 1955–1957 © Chair of Adam Caruso, ETH Zurich.
internal and drawing from his latent knowledge. Much of this knowledge was gathered through practical experience as an architect and developer.

His architectural ambitions were grandiose, described in his autobiography as the capability to build

Two hundred housing units at 200 metres from the city, built in 200 days, for 200 million francs. [...] I planned the construction in cut stone, a Pouillon system of flooring, a Pouillon method of load-bearing walls, a Pouillon vaulted structure. All this represented a housing development of simple invention, achieved at a cost as low as possible and within a time frame that nobody thought possible.⁹

The research processes he carried out to achieve this objective were practical, managerial, and technical. His theory of architecture is implicit within his novel. Unlike his modernist counterparts, and explicitly his nemesis Le Corbusier, he never wrote manifestos, treatises, or tracts. It is through the voice of the master builder that Pouillon revealed his ideas about architecture as a creative and cultural force, and these incorporate a belief in the presence of the past.

Although the narrator tells the story, it is the hard limestone that is the protagonist in Pouillon’s novel. Much of the action revolves around the management of the workforce – a combination of lay brothers and priests who threaten mutiny over the time-consuming and difficult approach to the construction’s mining, cutting, laying, and dressing, which was required for stones that had to be “roughly finished and delicately assembled.”¹⁰ The master builder finds himself justifying this work to himself and his colleagues. Quoting his voice from the book, he said: “Thus we began our discussions about the exterior facings, laid with dry joints, that is, without mortar [...] standard practice in the days of antiquity.”¹¹ “This method of laying, my method, will give a touch of richness to what is otherwise austere: it will weave a design on every wall, a net of variously shaped mesh or an open lacework of dark threads.”¹²

The master builder’s monologues give rare insight into Pouillon’s processes of design and into the way that he makes connections between the past and the present in which he was building. There are hundreds of possible passages that could be quoted here, as he details the reasons, both practical and poetic, for his decisions.

Although I have given the abbey its proportions and harmony, it is the stone alone that will preserve the independent soul of the place; when it is reduced to order, it will remain as beautiful as a rough-pelted wild beast. That is why I do not want to use mortar or daub it with lime; I want to leave it a little freedom still, or it will not live.”¹³
Pouillon knew the quarry that was mined for the construction of Le Thoronet through his relationship with the Fontvieille quarry near Arles in Provence. He had started using stone from this quarry when he was running the Vieux-Port project for Auguste Perret in Marseilles during the 1950s. The building site required a large supply of stone, and the owner of this quarry had developed special cutting machines for rapid extraction. He would use this stone throughout his life, including in his large Algerian projects.

In terms of his architectural milieu, his social sphere, Pouillon was an outsider. For example, in May 1953, the ninth International Congress of Modern Architecture was held in Aix-en-Provence. The topic under discussion was the Housing Charter, and Roland Simounet presented his studies on the Mahieddine shanty town in Algiers. Pouillon was too busy to attend. At the beginning of the month, he had met with Jacques Chevallier, the new mayor of Algiers, and he was already at work for a large housing development in the city. The foundation stone was laid four months later. Another factor that set him apart was his aim, not for originality, but to achieve the commonplace, or a banality derived from continuity with the past. On several occasions, he quoted his master Perret, with the words cited above.

**Yasmeen Lari’s Practical Approach to Reality**

A return to an earlier observation, made in relation to Rykwert’s questioning of Western ideas of technological progress, brings the discussion to the work of Pakistani architect Yasmeen Lari (1941–). Her fifty-odd-year career as a professional architect has transformed in reflection of Pakistan’s own history and its relationship with the west. During the 1960s, around the same time that Rykwert was introducing history and theory into the architectural curriculum, Lari was training as an architect at Oxford Polytechnic, now Oxford Brooks University. She returned to Karachi to work for a British construction company, but soon after founded her eponymous practice. As a member of the elite, she had access to many prestigious commissions. She approached these with the brutalist style she had learned in Britain, including the house that she built for herself and her family in Karachi in 1973.

During her brutalist years, Lari collaborated with Hungarian Canadian architect Eva Vecsei, who was based in Montreal, on the design of the Finance and Trade Centre, Karachi, completed in 1989. During one of Vecsei’s visits to Pakistan, she was accompanied by Lari’s husband, Suhail Zaheer Lari, who had been photographing rural architecture as part of a wider heritage project, to the provincial city of Thatta with which had been the medieval capital of Sindh. Fig. 3 shows a traditional house illustrating the use of wind catchers to corral air for passive cooling, which was a strategy that they used in the Finance and Trade Centre.
In 1980, Lari and her husband set up the Heritage Foundation, through which she developed strategies for protecting the ancient and historic buildings of Pakistan’s cities. Lari researched and wrote about the traditional architecture of places like Thatta, using her husband’s photographic record of these buildings and other key vernacular structures to publish books on the subject and to carry out various projects. More unusual strategies for preservation included the celebration of specific buildings in ceremonies accompanied by bands, speeches, plays, and comedy shows. Later, she organised a programme of cleaning and mural painting by students and schoolchildren. This was also the moment that the political and social quality of her work began to flourish. Lari told me:

The problem with architectural practice is that you are so isolated from the reality of the country. You are busy doing work for the corporate sector or for others, and you never get the chance to really work with people. I had never sat on the street before in my life, and then my heritage work taught me that I could be with and come close to people.
Lari’s research in places like Thatta was important to her, as she pointed out: “having been trained as an architect in the West, there was a period of unlearning as I tried to relate to the reality of the country and roamed our amazing historic towns for inspiration.”\textsuperscript{14} The intimate relationship between research and practice that Lari’s work with Pakistan’s architectural heritage bears comparison with that of Pouillon and the medieval architecture of Provence.

In 2005, a huge earthquake in the north of Pakistan caused Lari to change tack. She went into the field and started to put her historical and theoretical knowledge of vernacular architecture to work in the service of emergency housing and other essential provisions for impoverished and now homeless rural communities. One of the ways that the past permeates the buildings of Lari and Pouillon is through the construction materials that they use and the simpler technologies that they employ. As in the work of more conventionally modernist architects, these have been used at the service of mass production, and explicitly mass housing. But unlike the modernists, they have sought historical continuity in terms of the materials and methods of construction that they use.

As we have seen in Pouillon’s housing developments in Paris, and in fig. 4, which shows Lari’s reinterpretation of the rural \textit{chula}, or open stove, their use
of tradition does not mean a repetition of historic form and technique, but rather a responsive interpretation for the present. Where Pouillon used stone, Lari uses bamboo, mud, and lime plaster, whose techniques she has researched and modified. She is proud of the zero-carbon character of these materials, which are readily available and whose construction methods are familiar to the self-builders who use them.

Lari calls her reconfiguration of traditional structures and technologies “barefoot architecture.” Another way of describing it is as a reset vernacular. Where the traditional *chula* was built on and in the ground, a new prevalence for flooding meant that this method was no longer viable. The different, wilder natural environment that results from a changing climate requires that the traditional design must change to accommodate it. Lari’s solution is simple. The stove is raised on a platform, which now creates an outdoor room of variable extent. It can incorporate storage and space for socialising or simply remain a place for cooking.

Rykwert, Pouillon, and Lari come from very different worlds, socially and politically: the fringes of 1960s establishment Britain, a deliberate position outside the mid-twentieth-century French avant-garde, and the heart of Pakistani high society, which, by definition, is a postcolonial nation. Nevertheless, the relationship between writing and action – whether teaching, building, or activism – is a common thread, where the plausibility of received realities is always challenged.
Notes

2. Introduction to 1967 prospectus for the School of Comparative Studies at the UoE, UoE archives, probably written by Joseph Rykwert.
4. Helen Mallinson quotes are from an interview with the author (3 July 2002).
6. David Leatherbarrow, email interview with author (7 October 2002).
8. In 1961, Pouillon was charged with fraud and bankruptcy, partly due to his dual role as architect and developer. He was in prison for eighteen months before escaping to Italy and then to North Africa. Upon returning to France in 1963, he was imprisoned again, and this is when he wrote Les Pierres Sauvages, which was published 1964.

Bibliography
