

4-1. Compare and contrast Walter Benjamin's and Sigfried Giedion's respective interpretations of iron construction.

Giedion as Benjamin's History

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To compare Benjamin's and Giedion's interpretations of iron construction is neither to correlate nor contrast the two, but to observe the evolutionary mechanism of history at work. Giedion's interest is to document the role of iron as a new building material which precipitated the advancement of an era. Benjamin, writing in the midst of two world wars, and an international depression, seems to be seeking lessons from history at a time when the whole world is looking for hope, and finds the inspiration he is looking for in Giedion's writings on iron construction.

In "Building in Ferroconcrete" Giedion presents the emergence and evolution of iron as he has observed it, reporting with journalistic fidelity the controversies and discussions surrounding the material throughout. Perhaps because he lived through this dynamic era, he takes the opportunity to ruminate on a lifetime, pausing occasionally to extract grains of truth and to underscore moments of historical gravity he hopes not to be forgotten. For example, he witnesses history repeating itself within his own life and suggests: "It seems that in the human organism certain attitudes develop that only later crystallize in reality. Just as industry was recognized as the fulcrum of the century before the development of mechanical engineering, so, too – on a reduced scale – is a housing form today emerging before the social structure is ready for it." (p. 102). And to assure that no one fails to realize the profound momentum technological advancement has gained in so short a time, he gives a comparison of scale we can identify with even today: "To ascertain at what point we now stand in this development, consider the fact that the same requirements architects then used for the design of the individual new building tasks are today applied, with the same words, to the design of the entire city." (p. 112).

Giedion's tome becomes the discovery of Benjamin's research and his material of study. In his "Arcades Project," Benjamin sets out to research the multi-faceted architectural and social phenomenon of the arcades of the 19th century. As he learns about iron as a precipitator of change, he discovers the roots of his present day with apparent awe. Through his research, he uncovers history in even greater breadth than what appears in Giedion's writing.

** He uncovers the mystique which was once associated with the new material: "The Austerlitz Bridge was one of the first iron structures in Paris. With the lightning flash above, it becomes an emblem of the dawning technological age." (p. 151).

** He engages in an extended conversation with history on the debate surrounding iron as an "artificial" building material and yet one having inherent qualities for design: "Iron inspired a certain distrust just because it was not immediately furnished by nature, but

instead had to be artificially prepared as a building material.” ... A.G. Meyer, Eisenbauten (Esslingen, 1907), p. 14.” And subsequently: “And their distinctiveness [of forms in iron], ... is the product and expression of the natural properties of the building material, since such properties have been technically and scientifically developed and exploited precisely for these forms.” ... A.G. Meyer, Eisenbauten (Esslingen, 1907), p. 23.” (both, p. 157)

** He unveils the wonder of innovation: ““The ... conditions of the material ... are volatilized in ‘limitless possibilities,’” A.G. Meyer, Eisenbauten, p. 11.” Iron as a revolutionary building material!” (p. 157).

Benjamin’s “Arcades Project” seems primarily to be an investigation of how advance of any kind interacts with the flow of time. Throughout his research, and through his extrapolations on history, we perceive overtones of wonder and a voracity for optimism, as if he were looking to the past to find hope for the future, exultant that maybe this will all happen again.