

Lessons from Close Reading

PALMYRA GERAKE

University of Illinois at Chicago

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By drawing an analogy between precedent analysis in architecture and close reading in literary studies, this paper advocates for the potentially radical pedagogical consequences of incorporating close reading into architectural education and practice. Precedent analysis is presented as a textual strategy in a predominantly visual field that affords architects the opportunity to parse the vast amount of knowledge and intricate decision-making that comprises the architectural process. The enduring relevance and disciplinary importance of close reading in the field of literary studies is showcased as a useful precedent for the field of architecture, which has struggled to maintain a dialogue between long-standing disciplinary debates on autonomy and the role of theory in architecture and contemporary narratives that see architecture as a socially embedded practice. While precedent analysis has obvious limitations as a vehicle for the study of architecture, it does have the potential to transcend its traditionally formalist reputation and engage in a dialogue with contemporary design concerns by revealing the insidious ways power structures infiltrate spatial language.

Paying attention: almost anyone can do it; and it's not requisite for reading, but for reading well? At any rate, attention, properly paid, will, over time, with personally productive tendencies or habits of focus and repetitions of thoughts remembered into generally applicable patterns, beget method.

—Andrew DuBois, “Close Reading: An Introduction”

INTRODUCTION

Invoking architectural precedents is a ubiquitous practice in both the profession and the academy. In many cases, however, our attitude towards precedents is opportunistic: we look to them for inspiration. We study precedents through the lens of a body of widely accepted knowledge and shared preconceptions and we invoke them, often rather casually, as de facto justifications for the use of certain architectural tropes.

Using architectural motifs without questioning their origins and without investigating their contingent behavior can not

only create unoriginal and incongruous buildings but also stall architectural discourse. While a comprehensive knowledge of history would go a long way in helping the contemporary architect contextualize these inherited ideas, it is the architect's ability to decipher and subsequently deploy—recontextualize—the operative qualities of these ideas that contributes to the creation of thoughtful architecture and to the evolution of the discipline.

By drawing an analogy between precedent analysis in architecture and close reading in literary studies, this paper advocates for the potentially radical pedagogical consequences of incorporating close reading into architectural education and practice. The analogy is particularly apt not only because precedent analysis and close reading both look at their respective subject matter closely but also because they share an association with formalism, which close reading has been able to transcend during its century-long history, achieving broad appeal within the field of literary studies.

CLOSE READING IN LITERARY STUDIES

Close reading is the practice of critical study and sustained interpretation of a text. It has its roots in the exegesis of ancient texts, primarily of religious nature. In the field of literary studies, it emerged as a practice in the 1920s in the work of I.A. Richards (*Practical Criticism*, 1929), William Empson (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1930), and T.S. Eliot. The New Critics, as they came to be called, believed in the intrinsic value of the text and opposed historical and biographical avenues to interpretation.

When literary studies to different kinds of “texts” in the 1970s and 1980s, this “expansion into diverse textual realms” and the subsequent loss of literature as “the de facto center of the field” led literary scholars to find a replacement in close reading. As a result, close reading became the essence of the disciplinary identity of the field of literary studies.

Even as the influence of New Criticism waned in the aftermath of the Cold War, close reading remained a fundamental skill for literary critics, practiced widely within the discipline by academics of differing persuasions. The academic community continues to have engaged and meaningful conversations about the nature and methods of close reading, but there

<p>LEGEND</p>	<p> WALLS COLUMNS MAJOR BEAMS OVERHEAD </p> <p>STRUCTURE</p>	<p> RELATED CONFIGURATION REMAINDER OF BUILDING </p> <p>PLAN TO SECTION</p>	<p> UNIQUE REPETITIVE REMAINDER OF BUILDING </p> <p>REPETITIVE TO UNIQUE</p>	<p> OVERALL SYMMETRY LOCAL SYMMETRY OVERALL BALANCE LOCAL BALANCE REFERENCED COMPONENTS POINT AND COUNTERPOINT </p> <p>SYMMETRY AND BALANCE</p>
<p> NORTH INDICATOR ELEVATION SECTION </p> <p>FACTUAL SHEET</p>	<p> DIRECT DIFFUSED INDIRECT INTERIOR SPACE </p> <p>NATURAL LIGHT</p> <p> MAJOR MASSING SECONDARY MASSING </p> <p>MASSING</p>	<p> MAJOR CIRCULATION SECONDARY CIRCULATION USE-SPACES REMAINDER OF BUILDING VERTICAL CIRCULATION </p> <p>CIRCULATION TO USE-SPACE</p> <p> UNITS REMAINDER OF BUILDING </p> <p>UNIT TO WHOLE</p>	<p> SQUARE 1.4 RECTANGLE 1.6 RECTANGLE DIMENSION OR UNIT ANGLE GRID LINES RADIUS CENTER </p> <p>GEOMETRY</p>	<p> ADDITIVE UNITS SUBTRACTION WHOLE SUBTRACTIVE UNIT </p> <p>ADDITIVE AND SUBTRACTIVE</p> <p> MOST DOMINANT TO LESS DOMINANT </p> <p>HIERARCHY</p>

Figure 1. Graphic standard legend. Roger H. Clark and Michael Pause believed that it was necessary to establish a graphic standard so comparisons could be made across diagrams for the same building and across similar diagrams for different buildings. Roger H. Clark and Michael Pause, *Precedents in Architecture*, xi.

appears to be consensus that the practice of close reading is a “sine qua non” of literary study. “Close reading, like motherhood and apple pie, is something we are all in favor of,” writes Jonathan Culler, professor emeritus of English and comparative literature at Cornell University, “even if what we do when we think we are doing close reading is very different.” The wide appeal and methodological fluidity of close reading are exemplified by *Close Reading: A Reader*, a 2002 anthology of exemplary close readings by some of the twentieth century’s foremost literary critics, which includes works of feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, queer theory, new historicism, and others. Close reading’s appeal is not limited to academic circles either. In the last decade, close reading has even found its way into the Common Core Standards for K-12.

The idea of paying attention to the text in and of itself might appear natural to scholarship today, but it was not always so. In his introduction to *Close Reading: A Reader*, Andrew DuBois argues that the New Criticism was a radical response to historical scholarship that seemed more interested in sociology and biography than in literature.

This historical background suggests parallels to the moment in which we find ourselves today, a moment of reckoning. Once again we care about who writes and what they represent

outside of their literary work—or, in the case of architecture, who designs (are they white and male, are they corporate, etc), who builds (do they offer fair wages, do they work with unions, etc), and who for (are they authoritarian governments or fossil-fuel companies, etc). Much like close reading in literary studies evolved to reconcile the New Critics’ concern with the text with the desire to consider extrinsic context and engage with the world, close reading in architecture can find a similar balance.

It is in this context that the enduring relevance and disciplinary importance of close reading in the field of literary studies despite its early associations with the formalism of New Criticism is a useful precedent for the field of architecture, which has traditionally struggled to maintain a dialogue between those who advocate for the autonomy of the discipline and those who see architecture as a socially embedded practice.

The question then becomes: can precedent analysis be to architectural education and practice the sine qua non that close reading already is to literary studies?

CLOSE READING AND PEDAGOGY

Close reading appears to be common sense but it can have radical pedagogical consequences. As Paul de Man writes in his essay “Return to Philology” about his personal experience as a teaching assistant for “The Interpretation of Literature,” a course taught by Professor Reuben Bower at Harvard in the 1950s:

Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge.

The sentiment expressed here by de Man resembles what Culler refers to as “a respect for the stubbornness of texts, which resist easy comprehension or description in terms of expected themes and motifs.”

Performing architectural analysis as a form of close reading can have a similarly revelatory effect. As more and more studios are premised on social issues, students have become increasingly well-versed in a variety of extra-disciplinary topics, but they often lack the formal literacy to render their ideas effectively through design. Professional practice is not immune either to this translation gap between design and a new level of social awareness. There is no better way to become (more) formally literate than to look closely at architectural precedent unburdened—to the extent possible—by prior knowledge and preconceived notions and focused solely on making sense of what is actually there.

CLOSE READING IN ARCHITECTURE

In *Precedents in Architecture*, Roger H. Clark and Michael Pause, argue for “a way of thinking about architecture that emphasizes what is in essence the same, rather than different.” In identifying shared patterns and themes, their mode of analysis hopes to “pursue archetypal ideas that might aid in the generation of architectural form.” Their concern is for a “continuous tradition that makes the past part of the present,” and their motivation is to see “between and beyond the layers of historical styles, within which architecture is generally categorized and presented, [and] make history a source of enrichment for architectural design.” Emblematic of their approach is the graphic standard that they develop and deploy consistently in their analyses so that comparisons can be made

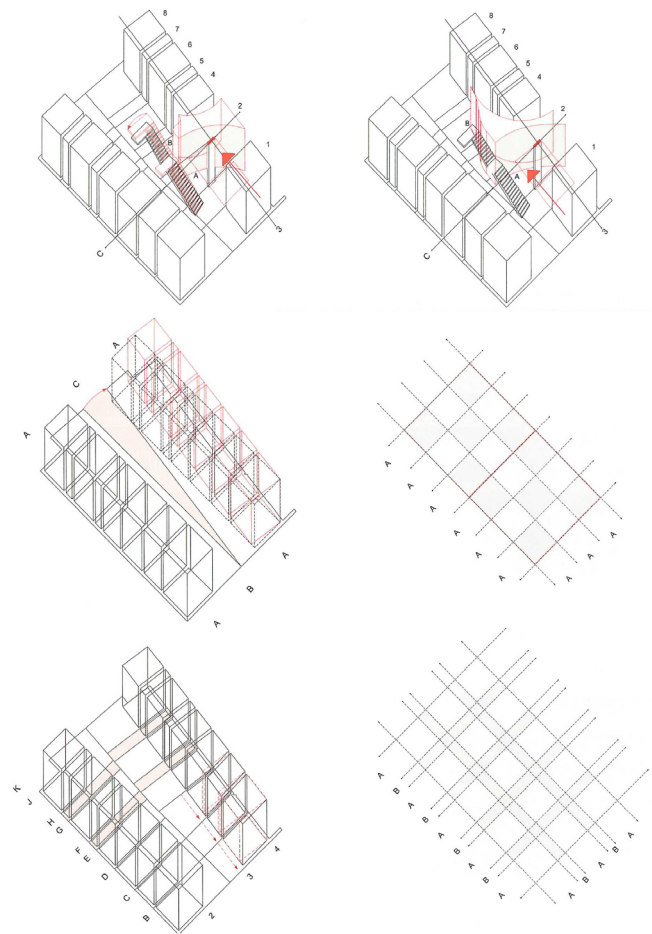


Figure 2. Diagrammatic analysis of Luigi Moretti's Casa “Il Girasole”. Peter Eisenman wrote of Casa “Il Girasole” that “it is here that an idea of what might be considered a text in architecture might be introduced.” Peter Eisenman, *Ten Canonical Buildings 1950-2000*, 28 (quote), 42-43 (diagrams).

across diagrams for the same building and across different buildings for similar concepts (Figures 1 and 3).

While there is value to looking at precedents as contingent instances of an ecumenical and evolving body of knowledge rather than chronologically fixed points of reference, these readings should follow—not precede—close reading. In other words, when “reading” a circular plan, one should attempt to forget what one knows about other circular plans and first look closely at the circular plan in front of them to understand its unique disposition and organizational logic. Only after performing such a close reading can one effectively attempt to place the precedent in question within the larger context of the discipline and even use it as a source of formal inspiration for a contemporary project in architecture.

Drawing parallels between close reading and the “reading” of architecture is not a novel concept in architecture. In *Ten Canonical Buildings 1950-2000*, Peter Eisenman writes:

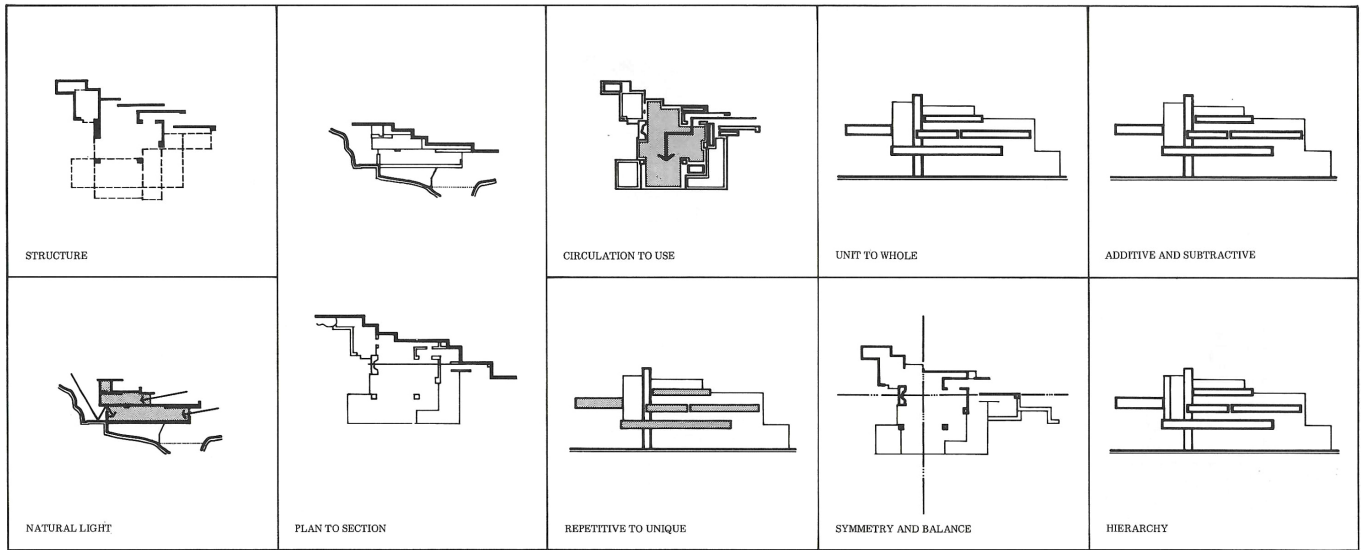


Figure 3. Diagrammatic analysis of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater (Edgar J. Kaufmann House). The near identical look of the “unit to whole,” “additive to subtractive,” and “hierarchy” diagrams illustrate the inadequacy of Clark and Pause’s analytical strategies. Roger H. Clark and Michael Pause, *Precedents in Architecture*, 133.

Colin Rowe first taught me how to see what was not present in a building. Rowe did not want me to describe what I could actually see [...] Rather, [he] wanted me to see what ideas were implied by what was physically present. In other words, less a concern for what the eye sees—the optical—and more for what the mind sees—the visual. This latter idea of “seeing with the mind” is called here “close reading.”

Later in the same text, Eisenman discusses his understanding of close reading even further:

Close reading can be said to define what has been known until now as the history of architecture. But for our purposes here, close reading also suggests that a building has been “written” in such a way as to demand such a reading. If the first question posed in this book is: “close reading of what?” then one of the answers proposed in the following chapters involves the close reading of critical architectural ideas.

Eisenman’s understanding of close reading, which follows in the footsteps of his mentor, Colin Rowe, does not appear revolutionary at first glance. But as Jeffrey Kipnis writes in a deeply personal and poignant tribute to Eisenman’s work:

If today his design research is widely regarded as a disengaged academic conceit, his project has always entailed, and continues to entail, a political conjecture: architecture can only assist the empowered to exercise insidious control over the suborned if the latter are not paying close attention to the architecture itself. Only then can a palace or a courthouse or a museum or a cathedral or a library

or a villa induce submissiveness. The very qualities we most admire in great works of architecture – intimacy, repose, spirituality, transcendence, stateliness, majesty, awe – while not in and of themselves to be despised, are nevertheless also the very architectural instruments that authority uses to belittle, to subject. Whenever a work of architecture demands close attention, close reading, its palette of effects cannot but change in character from the emotive to the intellectual, and it can no longer serve so easily the ends of power.

The main takeaway from this observation by Kipnis is that close reading of our surroundings, in this case, architecture, is part and parcel of a critical consciousness. The close reading of architecture can reveal the insidious ways power structures infiltrate spatial language and, as such, it can influence the future production of an architecture with the capacity to resist. Architecture, after all, is political not merely as an act of building but at its core, in its spatial and morphological manifestations.

In a recent lecture he gave on November 17, 2020, at Cooper Union, Eisenman reiterated his belief that it is the existence of disturbances to the norm—to what is expected—that create a critical work of architecture. At the same time, he admitted that the kind of close reading that would reveal such disturbances invariably requires prior knowledge, thus rendering the act of close reading a learned activity that demands a mastery of the discipline and often privileges certain disciplinary histories over others.

Eisenman’s version of close reading is a much more nuanced approach to close reading compared to Clark and Pause’s

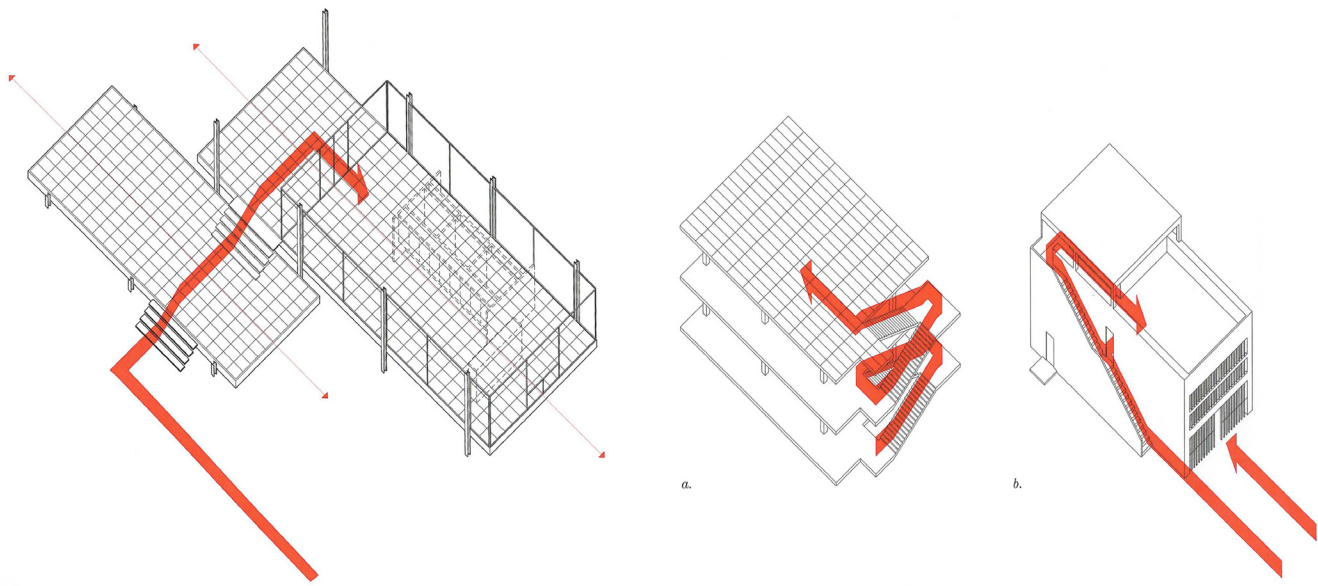


Figure 4. Diagrammatic analysis of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House in comparison to Le Corbusier's Dom-ino diagram and Maison Citrohan. Peter Eisenman, *Ten Canonical Buildings 1950-2000*, 62-63.

purely formalist take on precedent study. "Without apology," they write in their preface to *Precedents in Architecture*, "we make no attempt to discuss the social, political, economic, or technical aspects of architecture." The authors go on to acknowledge that "a sound architectural idea will not [...] inevitably lead to a good design" and that "to be sensitive to the potential of archetypal pattern in design does not lessen the importance of concern for other issues or for the building itself." Yet, the apolitical formalism underlying their approach, as well-argued and well-intentioned as it might be, ignores extraneous factors that today are increasingly part of the conversation on architecture.

The kind of diagrammatic precedent analysis exemplified by Clark and Pause cannot be limited in scope. The diagrams included in their book are clear and eminently teachable but they are literal, one-dimensional, and ultimately uncritical—in Eisenman's words, they only describe what one can actually see. But even the much more nuanced analysis performed by Peter Eisenman, despite its emphasis on criticality, is limited by its implicit focus on an insular disciplinarity.

LESSONS FROM CLOSE READING

How, then, is close reading to be performed in architecture in a way that can be of use in today's hyper-politicized world? What lessons can it learn from close reading in literary studies? Below are a few initial observations and thoughts, by no means comprehensive, on how close reading can be incorporated into architectural teaching and practice.

There is an inherent lack of specificity to the term close reading that has probably contributed to its lasting relevance in literary studies: it suggests methodological fluidity. Precedent analysis is a similarly open-ended field of study and that's probably a good thing, if it means that precedent analysis, like close reading, can be a rigorous yet adaptable way of looking closely at architecture.

Perhaps the first step in preserving the precious non-specificity of the term "close reading" is to identify close reading in architecture as a skill—a way of seeing—instead of a methodology or technique. This is not a trivial distinction: associating the act of close reading in architecture with a particular analytical methodology might inadvertently lock close reading into an uncomfortable association with an ideological camp.

Remaining open-minded about methodology also means embracing different means of representation. Because of its built-in abstraction that works across design ideologies, diagramming can be used effectively in both precedent analysis and design. But the diagram is not the only tool at the architect's disposal. In addition to diagrams and traditional drawing types, other means of representation that can be used in close reading include: inventories of parts, photographs, videos, 3D model reproductions, written text, etc.

In their 2016 book *Treacherous Transparencies: Thoughts and Observations Triggered by a Visit to Farnsworth House*, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron used photographs and written text to critique Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (Figure 5). What prompted Herzog and de Meuron to compose and publish their observations was their first visit to the house in



Figure 5. Mies van de Rohe's Farnsworth House as documented in *Treacherous Transparencies: Thoughts and Observations Triggered by a Visit to the Farnsworth House*. The unflattering time of day and year as well as the awkward cropping of the image, which places the emphasis on the ground over which the house hovers, create an altogether new reading of this otherwise well-known and well-documented "canonical" work of architecture. Photograph by Pierre de Meuron (fall 2014).

2014, late in their life and career, at which point they experienced what could be termed a reversal of expectations. These expectations, especially about well-known and well-documented buildings, often build up over years of study and practice in which we never actually look closely at precedents, but we are told what we are supposed to think of them. This casual and unquestioning look at precedents is precisely what close reading seeks to replace.

In the example of Herzog and de Meuron's reacquaintance with the Farnsworth house, the gap between expectations and experience raises an interesting question about whether experiencing architecture in person is a prerequisite for close reading. The answer is no, but it comes with the caveat that criticism is concerned with the problem of unity—the relationship of the parts to the whole. And so, when defining the object of close reading, every effort should be made to look at the whole.

In architecture, of course, defining the whole can be tricky: a reasonable whole could be a building as it currently exists or a building as it was originally built before later interventions or a building as it was originally designed but not as it was ultimately built or all of those conditions taken together. It could include the experience of being in the building itself or not, depending on whether an in-person visit is a possibility. The object of interest could even be a project that was never built, a set of drawings, a single drawing, a rendering, written text, etc. Whatever the source material, identifying it is the first step in performing a close reading of it because of close reading's insistence on drawing conclusions directly from the "text."

The million-dollar question becomes: is it possible to be committed to the "text," but also engage with the world? Close reading might not be the ideal vehicle for understanding extrinsic contexts in relationship to a work of architecture but committing to it prior to engaging in generalizations and before

adopting the conclusions of others at least guarantees that one is not likely to miss what is actually being said by the work.

Moreover, close reading is inherently subjective, its subjectivity coming, unsurprisingly, from the subject (the “reader”) The act of close reading takes on the interests and personality of its executor. When the definition of what constitutes the architectural “text” is itself subjective, as we have just seen, that subjectivity is amplified. While under certain circumstances subjectivity can be a liability, in the case of close reading in architecture, it can be the key to opening up a traditionally formalist practice – analysis – to concerns extrinsic to a strictly disciplinary view of architecture.

What does all this mean in the context of architectural pedagogy?

First, close reading should not be reserved for “canonical” or widely publicized works of architecture. It is a skill that can help architects and architecture students to evaluate for themselves any work of architecture, built or unbuilt, even everyday “background” architecture, which is often full of unexpected surprises and also where the slow and quiet evolution of accepted formal norms occurs.

Secondly, close reading should be undertaken without pressure to transition immediately into design. This doesn’t necessarily mean that assigning precedents in studio cannot be pedagogically useful. But because of the limited time available to students in the context of a studio and the explicit or implicit desire to read into precedents strategies for design, those exercises rarely result in true close readings. If the analysis of precedents is deemed essential to a particular studio, a dedicated course, which precedes or runs concurrently with the design studio, can allow for the time and space needed to practice those close reading muscles away from the distraction of design.

CONCLUSION

Despite its limitations, close reading in the guise of precedent analysis has the potential to transcend its traditionally formalist reputation and to engage with the world, becoming an invaluable pedagogical tool for students and practitioners of architecture alike. As “readers” of architecture continue to refine and redefine the means and methods of architectural analysis in an attempt to capture a number of contemporary design concerns, they can usher precedent study meaningfully into contemporary pedagogy and practice.

ENDNOTES

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6. DuBois, “Close Reading: An Introduction,” 4.
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8. Paul De Man. *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 23.
9. Culler, “The Closeness of Close Reading,” 20.
10. Roger Clark and Michael Pause, *Precedents in Architecture* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996): v.
11. *Ibid.*, v.
12. *Ibid.*, v.
13. *Ibid.*, ix.
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18. *Ibid.*, v.