Exploding the History Survey

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The architect lives in fascination and with a sense of lack that she seeks to remedy.

> —adapted from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind"

Like other remnants of early modernity, the facts- and lecture-based history survey structure has run its course. Facts are a dime a dozen in the internet age, too plentiful and disconnected to make sense of. Meanwhile, architectural history students increasingly tend to treat their lecture courses as a consumer experience, filling a grocery bag full of building details that they then shelve before going back to the studio.

Many different approaches have enframed and organized the facts of the history survey course, all with their own validity and worth. Ultimately, though, the survey's highest aim should be to encourage students to actively engage the study of history and to bring it into the context of their critical engagement with the larger architectural field. I believe that the study of architectural history is a study of relationships—relationships between architecture and culture, religion, political power, gender, philosophical ideas, climate, and materials. This paper proposes an attitude and structure for the history survey that emphasizes these relationships and encourages active, individual engagement with architectural history through original, synthetic thought.

The size and structure of our program at Mississippi State gives us a history survey with a class size of around 50 students, fluctuating from year to year from 35 to 65. All faculty members teach studio and a support course, which means that both our architectural history professors are architects who also teach studio. The history sequence has three survey courses and no electives, so the survey forms our students' only opportunity to engage the history of architecture in a direct and sustained way. In many respects, the way I teach history is a response to the urge to open up the survey to a deeper level in the absence of elective courses.

The survey as I teach it manifests my belief that a meaningful study of the history of architecture must be enframed within the history of ideas. It also reflects our field's conviction that the synthetic thinking that energizes architectural design yields a deep and lasting form of learning. Finally, it exhibits my deep conviction that significant learning occurs when the student frames the search, engaging his or her curiosity and fascination, and it reveals my utter boredom with architectural style. The move toward student-framed searching parallels a general trend in our program to move away from facts- and skills-based teaching towards an approach that emphasizes open-ended, self-motivated searching and a passion for learning. All these attitudes influence the content and structure of the survey in significant ways.

An introduction to historical interpretation

The different era addressed by each course in the survey suggests a different ideational frame for each. History I, which studies prehistory through Gothic, offers the opportunity to lay out the progression of architecture as it parallels the slow intellectual

evolution from mythic to rational thought. Because my own doctoral research has focused on French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's challenge of Cartesian rationalism, the ancient history course suggests to me a chance to explore how architecture was conceived and made before the rise of rationality. The course presents architectural history as a form of speculative thought as defined by Henri Frankfort, "thought concerned with human purpose and human destiny," thought whose conclusions are rationally unverifiable.[1] Studying the architecture of the Old and New Stone Age, early Mesopotamia, pre-Columbian America, early Asia and India, Egypt, Crete, and Mycenae sets up architecture as a means to mark the earth, approach the divine, and provide structure to existence. It presents architecture in mythopoetic societies as a primary means for knitting the visible to the invisible, making tangible the order of the cosmos.

The course content also offers a chance to study the structure and artifacts of the matrilineal societies of Old Europe, early Mesopotamia, and Bronze Age Crete. It is a particular pleasure to explore alternative religious and social structures, moving students outside the cultural constructs they take for granted through the medium of architecture.

With the Greek culture, the course enframes architecture in relation to the birth of philosophy, and we examine how humanism, rationalism, and idealism affect the making of architecture—yet how central architecture remains in cultural expression. Then Roman architecture allows students to understand the adaptation of humanist principles to a highly centralized and organized state power structure. The Dark Ages and Medieval period present architecture that expresses the European cultural evolution brought about by shared power between a strong church and a strong feudal system—when humanist principles were overshadowed by monotheistic belief, but blossomed in a new way in the late Middle Ages. As each period presents its particular blend of religion, political power, gender issues, climate, materials, and technology, the course addresses their manifestation in architecture. From the course, students take an awareness of cultural differences and an understanding of how architecture is always *about* things, how its forms and details reflect its generative conditions.

To me, the relationships of architectural history are the key to making it a vivid educational experience. In addition to enframing architectural history within the history of ideas, at every opportunity the course relates architectural history to principles of design, from the Minoan emphasis on variable experience to Roman principles of order to Gothic strategies for infusing architecture with light. The course makes constant reference to the issues students are facing as they learn and practice the basics of architectural design.

History I is the only course in the survey still structured around lectures and exams.[2] Every year I try to concentrate on fewer buildings and connect them more explicitly to overarching ideas. The idea is that the students get to know a few seminal buildings from each period, but, more important, gain a framework for understanding other buildings they will encounter in the future—teaching them to fish so they can eat for a lifetime. Exams are long essay format, and in each one students must connect general cultural or intellectual ideas to typical architectural manifestations of the ideas and then offer specific architectural details in support of their answer. A typical exam question may connect to design issues and the larger ideational context, for example: "It is the year 1200 and you are a master builder charged with updating an existing Romanesque church to express current (High Gothic) ideals. Annotate sketches of a plan, façade, and interior elevation to explain what changes you would make and on what grounds you would justify them."

Transforming the format / grounding the classical revivals

After the first term, the survey keeps its connections to the history of ideas and the synthetic thinking of architectural design, but changes to a format that emphasizes independent learning. History II, the middle course, examines Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical architecture. Midway through this course comes the watershed moment of the Enlightenment, and the course's subject matter offers the opportunity to explore the very different ideational underpinnings of Renaissance and Enlightenment architecture.

In a nutshell, the central question of the course is how the use of classical elements and planning principles in architecture changes with the change from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment world view.

The course enframes Renaissance, Mannerist, and Baroque architecture within the Neoplatonist Great Chain of Being that stretches from dumb matter to the spirit of God. The architect forms the central link in this chain by using geometric principles to bring divine order to mute stone. - Furthermore, the human body manifests the link between divine idea and physical matter with its geometric correspondences illustrated in the Vitruvian Man. These ideas set up the study of Renaissance architecture as a beautifully synthetic bridge between the material and the ideational

Within this framework, we study the great buildings of the Renaissance as design problems: What were the first principles? How did the next building work out an awkward detail that the previous one left unresolved? How did architects think spatially as they provided hierarchy, clarity, and richness to their designs? What is the visual and physical logic of the parts and the whole? How did Mannerist and Baroque architecture move past Renaissance ideas to form their own original spatial visions? How did northern European climates, cultures, and building traditions contribute to forming different architectural manifestations of Renaissance ideals?

Although Neoclassical buildings share a vocabulary and ordering principles with Renaissance architecture, the course enframes them within their quite different world view, the scientific paradigm of the Enlightenment. The course explores the growing fissure between the classical style and industrialized culture and relates the issues to current problems in design. It asks students to synthesize ideas and ask, for example: How do the empiricist ideas of Locke and Hume influence the design of architecture? What does architecture of the Enlightenment have in common with the scientific method? How could Eclecticism spring from the Enlightenment in a way that it never could have from the Renaissance period? Is assembling classical details true classicism?

The course abandons the traditional lecture-and-exam format to adopt a structure of online lectures and homework questions, class discussions, and guided independent inquiry. One third of the semester grade comes from homework and one third from each of two research projects. An excerpt from the syllabus:

> This history class will be taught in a radical way. There will be no lectures, no lists to memorize, no exams. My lectures and notes will be posted in the course folder in PowerPoint format. You will use the course notes, the course textbook, and other sources as needed to answer daily homework questions and do two historical searches, all of which will go into a semester-long journal that chronicles your learning process.

Each week I put a lecture online (fig. 1). Students read the online lecture, the course textbook, and other readings to answer substantive homework questions that require original and synthetic thought. They bring their answers to the weekly lecture discussion, in which they do the bulk of the talking as I guide them through the major issues in that week's lecture. Because they have read the entire lecture online, we can focus in-class discussion on selected themes and details.

In the side aisles, each bay is defined by a transverse arch that is received by a pilaster in the side wall.

Look at the articulation of how the force of the arch is visually transported to the ground. What is logically worked out about it? What is left unresolved? Work this out before you go on.
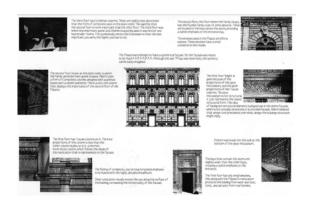
Fig. 1. Image from online lecture.

For example, in class discussions we critique Bramante's first and final plans of St. Peter's from the standpoint of clarity and hierarchy. Students truly engage the design as they give

a group crit to the developing plan, identifying places where the first plan was too detailed and fragmented and discovering how the second plan focuses on fewer spaces with clearer spatial hierarchy. Since they have all faced moments in their own design work where they must clarify their design ideas, discarding some elements to focus on others, this discussion hits home.
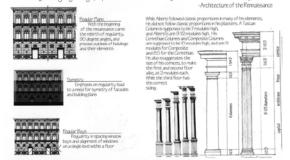
Other discussions center more on ideas, as when we debate why Gothic revivalism struggles so much harder to fit within the industrial age than does classical revivalism or when we debate whether Labrouste's architecture is more classical or more modern. Because of the subject matter the era presents, as the term progresses class discussions increasingly address the growing fissure between architecture's modern environment and its classical appearance. This tension between modernism and revivalism grows steadily until the course ends, leaving students almost gasping for the architectural modernism of History III.

In addition to the lecture discussion, each student attends a weekly (on the first project) or biweekly (on the second project) research pinup session as I guide them through two six-week research journal projects (figs. 2-5). These journal projects are the heart of the course. In each project, students select a topic aligning with their own interests and devise a simple question to answer. Topics range from "What are the underlying proportions of Santa Maria Novella?" to "Why did Michelangelo put double columns in the Laurentian Library vestibule?" Then the students pull on threads to see where they lead. Typically the question evolves over the course of the search as the work leads in unanticipated directions.   For example, one student began with a question about Leonardo's schemes for centralized churches that led him to Leonardo's notebooks. His fascination with the notebooks led him in a new direction, and his final work connected Leonardo's ideas about musculature to his church wall sections.

The intention of the search is less to answer the original question than to immerse each student in the search.   In this process, students become familiar with library and internet resources—books, articles, and websites, and their investigation opens architectural history to them in a new way. As
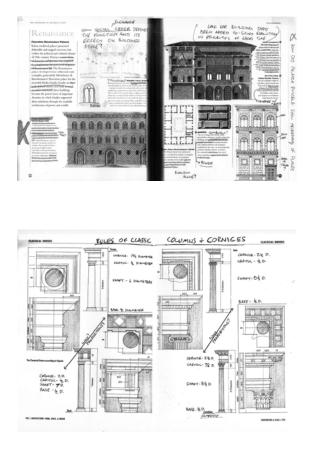

Figs. 2 and 3. Graphic summary pages from student research journal investigating classical influences on the Palazzo Rucellai's façade.

they become used to finding answers for themselves, learning transcends passive involvement and becomes their own responsibility, giving them an important tool for lifelong learning.

By engaging in a pinup project rather than a term paper, the work becomes more public. Pinups are in a 12" x 18" format, which easily accommodates up to a 11" x 17" photocopy or print and is big enough to allow public viewing but small enough to carry around.   In each pinup, students show the tracks of their work in a combination of found and original text and found and original images. This might take the form of photocopied chapters or articles, highlighted and annotated with summaries and questions to show the student's engagement with the text.   They also pin up photocopied images, overlaid with graphic analysis or analytical notes. As the work progresses, the proportion of found to original work shifts, and students pin up original and synthetic thoughts about the research subject.   During the final week of the project, each student produces a

Figs. 4-5. Preliminary research pages from student research journal.

5-page graphic summary and a 300-word written summary of the search. In both summaries, the object is to communicate their findings with clarity. In the graphic summary, this involves arranging information with visual hierarchy that allows a viewer to quickly grasp the main findings. In the written summary, it is more a matter of clear and organized writing.

Since I divide the students into smaller groups to facilitate discussion, I meet 4-6 hours a week for a 3-hour lecture class. This format takes more of my time, but it is much more rewarding than lecturing to a hall full of passive information recipients. I continue to look for ways to improve the structure of the survey, but I am convinced that this more active learning format engages students more deeply in the history of architecture.

The issue of modernity

History III keeps the format of the preceding semester while addressing issues of modernity and the conflicting, lingering pre-modern ideas that underlie architecture from the late nineteenth through the early twenty-first century. This course is framed around the questions of modernism, postmodernism, and authenticity, drawing from Hilde Heynen's *Architecture and Modernity*, internet summaries of Martin Heidegger's concept of authenticity, and other writings. We begin by exploring the definition of modernity and the concept of authenticity, and the implications of both for architecture exiting a long period of classical and other revivals.

Examining a succession of early movements, students explore the ideas and principles that underlie various early versions of modernism from Arts and Crafts onward, each time striving to discern what is modern and what is not. To answer this question, they work to get below the appearance of the architecture and examine the thought process that produced it. After working through early and mature modernism, students then face the question again with postmodernism and deconstructivism: what is modern about them, and what is not? Are they authentic, and why?

For the first research project, students can choose any building or architectural movement up through the end of the twentieth century to briefly address five issues: modernity, classicism, abstraction, authenticity, and technology/materials. In the second project, each student must choose a twenty-first-century building, identifying its connections to classicism, modernity, abstraction, authenticity, and specific architects and movements within the historical stream. Because many of the recent buildings have little written about them, the final project requires students to engage more in original analysis, and the questions they address bear directly on their work in the design studio. This last research project brings history squarely back into relationship with the current day and underscores the seamless relationship between architectural history and current architectural design.

Conclusion

I've been refining my lecture content for twelve years, but the structural transformation from lectures and exams to class discussions and research journals is brand new: I've taught History II and III under the new format one time each. Student reactions to the new format fell into two camps, but they were very telling camps. The ones who preferred the old exam format did so because it was less trouble to them. Except for intense cramming before exams, the course took relatively little effort. Yet the failure rate for this course format has been climbing steadily, to an astonishing and unprecedented rate of over 25% in the spring 2005 term. Students who preferred the new format mostly enjoyed the deeper understanding they got through weekly homework questions and the exciting discoveries made through their research. Moreover, no one who completed the work failed this course.

Many students complained about the increased work requirements of the course, which falls within university guidelines of nine total hours per week (including time spent in and out of class) for a three-hour lecture course, but which exceeds the load history students had come to expect. The other principal complaint was that some students felt that they didn't come away knowing enough facts about history in general, though they knew a great deal about their individual research areas.

Over the next two years, I'd like to devise a short "exit exam" for graduating students who took history classes in the old and new formats to see who remembers more. And I continue to look for ways to improve the course. In the two new-format courses I've taught, I've experimented with the number of research projects, the frequency of pinup sessions, the size of discussion groups, and the degree of open-endedness in the research project brief. As I feel my way towards the most effective approach, however, I remain convinced that the new format enables a superior level of learning.

After completing the history survey, students have investigated for three terms the connections between the history of architecture, the history of ideas, and the current-day act of design. They have engaged in a series of independent research projects that opens up to them the domain of historical research. This active inquiry takes the architectural history survey out of the textbooks and squarely into the realm of spatial inquiry that energizes architectural design and defines our profession. As such, it fits seamlessly into their lifelong learning.

Endnotes

[1] Henri Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Harmondsworth, G.B., 13-14.

[2] Primarily this is because I teach it every other year and haven't taught it since changing course format last fall. However, when I teach this course again, I may choose to keep this course in the traditional format. As the entry-level course in the sequence, it provides an opportunity to introduce students to a larger intellectual enframement of architecture in a course format with which they are already familiar.