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The Education of the Architect

Historiography, Urbanism, and the Growth of Architectural Knowledge

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OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/2641.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2641.001.0001)

Anyone who can think back over sixty years of curricular development in schools of architecture will be deeply impressed by the changes that have been occurring in historical studies, as reflected in teaching programs.

The history of architecture has been taught by two different kinds of teachers, the first having been formed in the company of other historians and the second coming from among students in architectural curricula. The first has the advantage of participating in the vast ongoing traditions of scholarly activity, where excellence brings its own rewards without the need to focus on any particular set of students or readers. But it is rare to find academic scholars who are truly sensitive to the art aspects of architecture, while also being responsive to its scientific, social, mathematical, and technical facets. Consequently, the scholar-historian may tend to view architecture as a broad cultural and humanistic phenomenon, but may have less than full credibility among the architects themselves.

Since many believe that architects, perhaps more than any other profession, need to have a considerable understanding of the contributions made by previous and other cultures, it follows that the profession's schools want their own historians to be fully immersed in the architectural value system before presuming to interpret these contributions. History would appear to them as one of the specializations within architectural practice, into which recruits come in response to the appeal of scholarship and travel.

Today, this long-standing polarization is fading away as the best features of both systems are increasingly being combined by would-be historians.

Architectural practice in the period 1880–1930 was broadly eclectic, but American architecture schools were so dominated by the Beaux-Arts that student projects tended exclusively to emulate French models. These models, originally inspired by archeological finds, and popularized among students by reproductions of the brilliant renderings made by the *pensionnaires* of the Villa

Medici in Rome, were later vitiated by the heaping on of irrelevant ornamentation.

Studying in the *école* was never very bookish. In the French system, the teaching of architects descended from royal patronage and was combined with that for the other visual arts, not connected to universities. Learning was through observation of examples, visual aids, and working things out in the atelier. Americans who experienced this education brought those methods back to the United States and sought enthusiastically to have them dominate the American scene, but in the meantime the first university-based departments of architecture had also been created; ultimately they prevailed and the independent ateliers faded away.

This policy, of teaching architects in university settings, is the outstanding American contribution to the field. Although the schools do not yet feel fully at home in that setting, placing them among academicians ultimately had an important influence on the development of the subfield of history, theory, and criticism of architecture that we see today.

But before that influence manifested itself, architecture students learned history from older architects whose interest had led them to travel and to observation of the monuments. Although these teachers did their best to provide linkages between the monuments studied and the social and political developments that produced them, the result was often descriptive rather than interpretive.

In those days, personal anecdotes often sweetened the presentation. C. Howard Walker told the story of an archeological crew nonplussed in the presence of a Greek temple stylobate lacking any indication of column location and spacing. As they ate an evening meal, someone saw the grazing rays of the sinking sun casting shadows from the slightly elevated (because unworn) column locations. They all jumped up and traced the locations on the stone, thus solving their dilemma.

The “survey” studies were generally limited to the traditional grand tour of even earlier days, that is, the railroad-accessible centers of Italy, France, Spain, and England. The program that survived at MIT until the 1930s was called “European Civilization and Art.” It embraced more than architecture, but of course it did not include eastern Europe, which owing to the Iron Curtain remains little known, even today. In the standard reference book on architectural history of the time, Sir Bannister Fletcher included a chapter on the “nonhistorical styles,” in which he summarily disposed of Islamic and Oriental achievements in the field.

The presumed goal of this line of instruction for future architects seems to have been to indoctrinate them with the ability to recognize and locate cor-

rectly in time and place the characteristic monuments, to know which classical order was pictured, to distinguish among the named phases of Gothic architecture, and to know the difference between Byzantine and early Christian examples. From today's perspective this knowledge, although valuable, was narrow and elitist because it ignored both vernacular products and major cultures elsewhere in the world. Since that time, great advances in travel opportunities and communication, not to mention the demographic mixtures that are occurring, are leading to wholly new views of global cultural achievements.

The modernists' criticism of that kind of history teaching was that it enabled designers to choose among historical styles to copy during the period of eclecticism—Egyptian for cemeteries, classical for banks, Gothic for universities, and so on. So eager were the modernists to get rid of using the past as an open quarry that Gropius advocated that students should not be exposed to historical knowledge until they had developed as designers through studio experience. At the University of Pennsylvania, the architectural history faculty were transferred out of the architecture department and into the larger company of other historians elsewhere in the university.

This abrupt about-face in the architectural curricula, this general deemphasis of historical studies (except, perhaps, that some attention was paid to the roots of modernism) prevailed during the Bauhaus-influenced era, and froze the recruitment of future historians from the architectural population. However, there were numerous other sources. The period saw the emergence of many scholars who were not architects: some took the Mumfordian position of freelancing without an academic base; most were attached to humanities programs in various colleges and universities, typically in those institutions that did not have professional courses in architecture. These scholars showed a preponderant interest in the development of American architecture. They were also more prolific in publishing, and produced valuable studies of prominent architects: Jefferson, Sullivan, Wright, and many others. They brought to light the antebellum South; they traced the birth of the skyscraper; they documented the craftsmen-builders of the East and West Coasts; they commented on problems of urban growth and design; they examined the land-use effects of new transportation modes. Although largely devoted to American phenomena, they offered a broader vision of the place of design in the culture than could have been shown at the time within the professional schools.

Meantime, the newfound global responsibilities of our country following upon World War II were changing the attitudes of thinkers and doers alike. Modernism was losing its dogmatism and its pretensions to reform society.

As the expatriate modernists aged and left the scene, innovative leadership devolved upon native American practitioners; lyrical deviations from the mod-

ernist cult became common, and new regionalisms appeared. Fresh ideas from the likes of Wurster (husband and wife), Venturi and Scott-Brown, and Jane Jacobs fueled the changes. We began to pay attention to our native vernacular history and to see that new growth must seek to enhance, not fight against, an existing environment; it must adapt to the physiography and make conscientious use of energy and resources.

Paradoxically, the focus on these national concerns has not prevented a simultaneous attention to the world situation, particularly its less industrialized, less economically successful portions. A considerable factor in this growing awareness is the educational prominence of American research universities in attracting, along with more women and native minorities, foreign students. Our graduate schools, which in the fifties and sixties had many Europeans, today have more representatives from the Third World, either as recent immigrants or as genuine foreigners who want to apply American thinking to problems in their home countries. Their presence here educates us.

This brief overview of the intellectual reorientations occurring during the whirlwind half-century just lapsed serves as a reminder, to those of us whose careers began earlier, of how primitive, simplistic, and chauvinistic our outlook was at the outset.

In the presence of these new stimuli, the lapse of interest in architectural history during the Bauhaus domination could not endure. A cohort of architecture students born in the United States began to turn their attention to historical matters. The implantation of architecture schools in American universities was finally bearing fruit, for these young scholars could observe and absorb the ways applied in other departments to develop perceptions based on new knowledge. Their rubric shifted toward a redefinition of the field: it became *history*, *theory*, and *criticism*. There was a wish to explore not merely the physical legacy of architecture but also the written literature about architecture from different epochs. Theorists and critics had produced commentaries even in ancient times, and there was a specially rich field to be cultivated from the Renaissance, a time when the practice of architecture began to emerge as a learned profession and the records of and comments on the lives of that period's heroes became more abundant than those of earlier times. Interest also gravitated toward half-forgotten writings of certain thinkers from the Enlightenment, as well as of those who sensed the tension brought about by the rise of industrialism and the war between handicrafts and mechanization introduced in factory production. In short, it is as though, to justify its status in academia, architecture needs to digest its patrimony as a prerequisite to assuming the privilege of making its own contributions, or, at the very least, to be

immersed in intellectual environments where insights into the historical process are abundant and highly valued.

Learning of this sort is certainly not aimed at facilitating direct emulation of historical precedents, as might have been the attitudes promulgated during the early years of this century. The age we live in is one in which the civilizing possibilities of design are being reappraised. Perspectives on how we got where we are may illuminate the paths we must take in the future.

So it is that history, theory, and criticism have become a leading growth component in architecture curricula across the nation. And one has only to look at the lists of names of those associated with this movement—professors, assistants, and student Ph.D. candidates—to realize how global and multicultural the activities are.

At the university where I have experienced the growing recruitment to careers in historical studies, there is pride in having been instrumental in this movement and great admiration for the role played in it by the colleague in whose honor these essays are dedicated.

