conference was Architectures of the Moving Image, in acknowledgment of the need for this field to turn its attention to questions of design, structure, and space.


Breaking the Ten-to-One Barrier

Compare the attendance roster of an annual SAH conference to those of the same year’s meeting of the American Historical Association, American Political Science Association, the College of Art Association, or Modern Language Association: historians of architecture, urban design, and landscape architecture are few. The field is sparsely populated with scholars who work on disparate topics, attend or participate in occasional conferences, and contribute to journals that are sustained by a small group of devoted readers.

Many factors underlie and reinforce this, creating a self-perpetuating circle of relative disciplinary isolation. Among the most easily remedied factor, however, is a single technical obstacle. Scholars are usually not able to document adequately their published work because the cost of doing so is prohibitive. The ratio of images that I show in a lecture, compared to the images I publish in an article on exactly the same material, is on the order of 10:1. I suspect most of my colleagues would say more or less the same.

Analyzing architecture and urbanism necessitates mastering a complex and wide-ranging set of skills, including the ability to decipher the documents that are the built environment’s stock in trade: architectural photographs, floor and site plans, sections, axonometrics, sketches, design and technical drawings, topographic maps. Most scholarly articles contain too few illustrations for even specialists to critically assess an author’s claims. Most lay readers and scholars from other disciplines, untrained in these specialized visual codes, cannot be expected to and probably do not try to comprehend the occasional technical illustration that is typically published in a scholarly book or essay.

The scarcity of its practitioners and their disciplinary isolation together impoverish contemporary architectural history. New scholarship, even groundbreaking works, rarely receive substantive, ongoing discussion and debate. (Colleagues joke that few undertakings better epitomize Adolf Loos’s “spoken into the void” than publishing one’s first scholarly book.) This vacuum of critical debate, among historians of the built environment with each other, or with scholars from other disciplines, inhibits individual scholars’ intellectual growth and vitality in the field as a whole.

JSAH online can be an enormous facilitator of such productive discussions and debates. Circumventing the high cost of printing, JSAH online will allow the publication of scholarly articles containing many more illustrations, and in different kinds of formats, than is the norm. A greater density of visual documentation will surely help to make scholars’ arguments more transparent and comprehensible both to specialists and to others. And because the internet is (at least ideally) a “worldwide web,” a wider range of interested parties—including scholars from other disciplines—will be able to access top-notch works of architectural history. JSAH online promises to be one crucial step toward creating the wider audience and more vibrant scholarly discussion and community that contemporary architectural history deserves.

SARAH WILLIAMS GOLDFHAGEN
Co-editor
Positions: On Modern Architecture and Urbanism/
Histories and Theories

Ceci tuera cela: Digitalia and Its Unintended Consequences

The intended consequences of the rapid rise of digitalia, in all its polymorphous permutations, are abundantly clear to anyone in reach of a $200 laptop and a solar-powered battery. Turn on your HDTV, listen to a downloaded song on your laptop, watch an On Demand movie or DVD, or talk to someone on a cell phone while viewing your favorite film on an MP3 Player as you GPS your way to the iStore. These are but a sample of the intended consequences of media-driven digitalia that may one day supplant the analog world in which we dwell. However, what of the unintended consequences for those of us who practice the craft of architectural history, theory, and criticism? Moreover, if one ascribes to Victor Hugo’s argument about the printing press killing architecture, what does that say about the relation of 0s and 1s to traditional print and paper publications, particularly architectural books and journals?

Analog media will not evaporate overnight anymore than architecture did owing to Gutenberg and movable