That’s Not Architectural History!

Or What’s a Discipline For?

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At a Society of Architectural Historians annual meeting several years ago, two scholars sat in the hotel bar discussing a paper that had been delivered in a session that afternoon. After an intelligent critique of the paper, the conversation concluded when one said to the other, “That’s not architectural history!” Their conversation and that statement stuck with me, not because it was so resoundingly intended as a condemnation-via-dismissal of a scholar’s work, but because it called to mind the many conversations I have had with colleagues over the years who have, at times, questioned the relationship of my own scholarly efforts, and those of other scholars whose work I admire, to the field of architectural history. Indeed, what is and is not architectural history is a question I’ve considered throughout my career since I have consistently worked across at least two disciplinary boundaries, and since both my career and my scholarship have recently taken me in directions that move beyond the traditional confines of our field.

Declaring that some subjects of study are or are not architectural history raises a host of interesting questions. Aside from defining architectural history as the study of buildings (and landscapes and cities), it must be acknowledged that somewhat flexible, if not expansive boundaries encompass the field, and that those boundaries periodically shift according to a range of intellectual and cultural forces. But is architectural history enhanced when we add scholarly practices through approaches referred to as interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, or cross-disciplinarity? Where, exactly, are the borders between what is learned “outside” and what is learned “inside” a field? How permeable are those boundaries? And what, after all, is a discipline for? Isn’t our work as scholars primarily about the asking and answering of important and meaningful questions? Does it matter how much architecture appears in the mix as long as we pursue our answers with the greatest level of scholarly rigor and integrity and end up with answers not otherwise obtainable? What percentage of the recipe has to include designed and built works in order for it to qualify as architectural history? And what is at stake in all these questions? What, precisely, is being asserted when we say “That’s not architectural history!”? Perhaps most important of all, what is at stake, in this moment of turmoil in academia and in the humanities, and during this era of digital revolution, when we strictly adhere to our discipline and its perceived boundaries?

I must note two things at the outset: First, I am an architectural historian who teaches in a landscape architecture department that grants two professional degrees (BLA, MLA) and a PhD degree, and I direct a humanities center at a large public university in the United States. Despite my occupational context, I recognize that the dynamics of institutions and their approaches to scholarship vary, but
institutions in both the U.S. and the U.K. are now equally vulnerable to the vagaries of economic and political shifts that impact the ways we work; Second, I fervently believe histories of the built environment can tell us things about past societies, cultures, and lives that we can’t glean from any other source. Like many of my colleagues, I have spent my career studying buildings, landscapes, and cities, and I share a belief held by many of them that the special task of the architectural historian is to elucidate the ways in which space matters both now and in the past—not just abstract space, but the fine-grained, material aspects of space: volumes, style, form, materials, and the details of constructed and inhabited environments as well as their representations. To ignore this is to ignore the unique knowledge that historians of the built environment bring to historical questions and arguments. But I also believe that the traditional boundaries of our field confine us in ways that may be, at times, intellectually stifling, and that at their worst, marginalize our enterprise substantially. As we daily observe (and hopefully, resist) the erosion of the humanities within institutions of higher education, it seems an apt moment to once again ask ourselves: What’s a discipline for?

Unfortunately, we have no recipe, no calculus that tells us when we have included enough architecture (or landscape, or urbanism) to define our work as architectural history. Most questions asked by architectural historians today are complex enough to demand movement outside the methods and approaches of traditional architectural history. We simply can’t answer all our questions about a building by looking at the building itself or by examining the archives that hold records pertaining to that structure. Questions about labor practices, financial agreements, land tenure, the creation of materials and material culture, and the daily life of buildings (to name a few) demand that we move outside our traditional boundaries and beyond our traditional archives. If the “recipe” matters to us in determining definitions of our field, so might the method or approach taken by scholars who move beyond traditional disciplinary practices. But are these problems with which we should concern ourselves? And if so, why?

Academic disciplines are clearly useful in numerous ways, and they have served important purposes in the academy for hundreds of years. As part of a system that usefully organizes thought into clearly defined categories, disciplines have provided standards (for better or for worse) for evaluating the quality of a work. The formation of academic disciplines took place long ago, and their boundary formations—despite nearly forty years of claims to interdisciplinarity—remain fairly intractable. By delimiting what is “inside” and what is “outside” of any given field, disciplinary boundaries serve administrative purposes by determining the scope of scholarship in departments. Disciplinary definitions help justify the allocation and distribution of resources such as faculty time, discretionary funds, and graduate assistantships. They also help establish guidelines for evaluating promotion cases (and tenure in the United States) although that particular realm of evaluation is increasingly troubled when multi- or transdisciplinary scholarly practices form the core of a dossier. For example, what of the scholar whose work engages truly innovative practices that are brilliantly transdisciplinary (perhaps even uncomfortably so) but that do not immediately seem to serve the requirements of a disciplinarily defined department, especially one that grants professional degrees in architecture, landscape architecture, or urban design? What of the scholar who engages in emerging forms of scholarship—in digital humanities projects for example, or in public scholarship? This question often becomes very pressing for architectural historians employed in professional schools of design, where the imperatives of professional practice and accreditation requirements sometimes result in ever-more rigid boundaries and restrictions for humanists who teach within their walls. In those locations, the pressure to produce architectural histories that are either immediately instrumental to design studio instruction, or that vaunt the architect and his or her professional endeavors, remains intense, if highly misguided. This, I would argue, as Craig Wilkins has argued, is not only detrimental to the study of architectural history, but is even more damaging for the study of architecture itself.

Although scholars have long questioned disciplinarity’s utility, newly formulated inquiries have appeared with increasing frequency and they have received more focused study in the past decade, with both James Chandler and Judith Butler providing particularly useful critiques. As Chandler has pointed out, disciplines are a social formation, they are institutional arrangements with specific embodiments that are not particularly flexible. They provide a basis for testing some kinds of theories and structures; they provide some standards against which scholarship may be evaluated since they contain shared canons (both intellectual and bibliographical). They also allow those who practice within a discipline’s boundaries to be the holders of claims to essential truths about a field. And as Chandler also reminds us, institutional arrangements, no matter what the official claim, have a lot at stake in enforcing the inside/outside arrangement of traditional disciplinary categories. Moreover, Butler has pointed out that disciplines help scholars determine what qualifies as legitimate scholarly expression. However, they can also limit intellectual freedom by demanding conformity and compliance with constricted professional norms that can
deprive fields of intellectual innovation. For Butler, disciplines become a problem for scholars when they delimit and define “what is thinkable and what is seeable” and thus constrain intellectual freedom. Seen in this way, the importance of critiquing disciplinarity transcends the concerns of individual scholars and becomes closely connected with the fate of the humanities more broadly.

Disciplines reinforce what is known, and they reinforce the limits of the possible in fields by policing the boundaries. They establish comforting and comfortable limits that reassure us when we don’t feel comfortable asking some questions (I don’t need to do that work because it’s not in my field; I don’t have to ask that uncomfortable question because it’s not in my field; I don’t possess the expertise to answer that question). In part, that’s what a discipline is for. And that’s also precisely why disciplines are a problem.

Questions about disciplinarity intersect with those about audience. Viewing our field through the eyes of other scholars is of the utmost importance if we are to avoid entering an “intellectual cul de sac” that is sealed, closed off from the endeavors of scholars in other fields. Many humanists working outside of architectural history do not know our field exists, and if they do know, they have very limited knowledge of our endeavor. They remain largely unaware of its history, its historiography, its scope of inquiry, its intellectual contributions. The average architectural historian likely owns scores of books by humanists from a range of fields, yet our publications—which have so much to offer historians, sociologists, cultural studies scholars, geographers, scholars of comparative literature and cultures (to name a few)—do not appear on their office shelves and are seldom included in their footnotes. By policing our own disciplinary boundaries, we substantiate this condition because we end up writing largely for other architectural historians. And when we do so, we aren’t reaching the people who make decisions about the built environments we inhabit. We certainly aren’t reaching interested members of the general public, among whom we might be cultivating greater levels of spatial literacy. And we limit our ability to contribute to the humanities more generally.

For whom then, are we writing? Design professionals (architects, landscape architects) seem increasingly uninterested in the histories of their fields and most publishers today realize that they are not buying our books. It is certainly true that we write for ourselves—for other scholars in our field—but that is a quite limited audience. Can we afford, then, to marginalize our field of study—especially in an era when citizen scholars who contribute to web-based scholarly projects will be on the rise, and the necessity for our work will increasingly come under question? Moreover, the severe funding restrictions increasingly experienced by scholars in both the U.K. and in the U.S. now play a significant role in reducing architectural history’s impact. Put another way, what is our fate if we don’t address these questions in a time of profound change in academia?

I want to suggest that our collective future as humanist scholars will be less bright if we do not carefully (re)consider architectural history’s definitions and its realm of inquiry. I want to suggest that instead of policing the known boundaries of our field that we instead consider some fresh frameworks for thinking about what we do and how we do it; that we become far less concerned with what is and is not architectural history and far more concerned with what our endeavor is contributing to a broader intellectual and scholarly realm. As someone who has long defined herself as an interior or multidisciplinary scholar, the ideals I have valued in academic scholarship are also at stake: Breadth of vision and (hopefully) of audience; the freedom to ask questions that I find of interest and value without worrying about whether or not they constitute or fall within the defined boundaries of my chosen field; and the ability to move freely across intellectual boundaries and to wade into unknown intellectual waters in the relentless pursuit of the continued and continuing education most academics seek and value.

One way we might do so is to consider the work of the theorist and scholar of visual culture Irit Rogoff who has recently formulated a series of questions related to the inscription of boundaries, both those that are real/physical/spatial, and those that are academic/institutional/intellectual. Rogoff is particularly interested in scholars working within the academy who now move ever closer to “transdisciplinary” and “undisciplined” practice; in scholars whose work routinely breeches the boundaries of knowledge production, resulting in a migration of ideas and bodies across traditional borders of intellectual practice, but also in fears related to the perceived dissolution of academic traditions with their attendant budgetary and administrative entanglements. Such transdisciplinary academics, with their movement across disciplinary realms, certainly evoke the anxieties about the potential loss of accepted claims to truth, and the erosion of notions of and claims to expertise mentioned above. Yet if, as Rogoff asserts, interdisciplinarity meant “pushing boxes of books from one place to another, but always ending up with the same books but in new locations,” transdisciplinarity rejects the confinement of disciplines altogether, arguing instead for research and scholarship driven by a question and the desire to follow a path toward the production of scholarship that will answer that question. Disciplinary boundaries confine because, as she states “thought cannot leap beyond what it knows how to know.”
Might movement beyond these boundaries lead to intellectual liberation? It is possible that the intellectual world created by Web 2.0 (and yes, there is a powerful, if often dismissed, intellectual world on the web), with interactivity that enables multiple participants to produce new knowledge simultaneously and collaboratively will also transform scholarly production in ways we cannot yet anticipate. These new modes will disallow the forms of territoriality and ownership that traditional disciplinarity encourages. In that rapidly approaching world, it is very likely that no one will care whether or not we, as scholars, declare “That’s not architectural history!” What will matter, to those of us who study the built environment, is whether or not anyone still cares.

Notes
1. A version of this essay appeared in the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain Newsletter 88, no. 100 (Summer 2010), 1–4. I wish to thank David Brownlee, Zeynep Kezer, and Abby Van Slyck for their comments on drafts of this essay.
7. Irit Rogoff, “Unbounded,” (introductory chapter) in Unbounded—Limits’ Possibilities (New York and Berlin: Lukas and Sternberg, forthcoming in 2011). Rogoff has acknowledged that her ideas on this topic have been greatly influenced by the writings of Jacques Derrida. The manuscript is in press, and I quote it here with kind permission from Irit Rogoff.