In 1989 Robin Evans noted, “we are only just beginning to investigate the power that drawings and photographs have to alter, strategize, obscure, renew, configure and diffuse what they represent.” More than twenty years has passed and perhaps we are still “just beginning” that investigation, only today the field of study itself has changed. Computer-aided design is not just changing the nature of the architectural profession, outmoding traditional ways of designing and assembling buildings, and privileging large corporations over small firms, it is also posing new challenges to the archivist and the scholar. Digital media has transformed the publishing industry; should it also prompt new ways of thinking about how we present our research and to whom, and in what form? Must a written narrative continue to preoccupy the practice of architectural history? Should a rigorous digital model of an historical site be considered a work equivalent to a publication? Long gone are the days when the art or architectural historian as teacher was the keeper of the treasured image; our students now can access more images of buildings and sites on their phones than we can provide during class time.

As architectural historians we study and communicate through drawings, prints, photographs, and models of buildings and cities. We scrutinize the relation between visual and textual representations, negotiating the gaps that separate drawings from buildings; we present architecture through discourse and formulate ways of seeing the landscape. We employ architectural representations as vehicles for presenting ideas, but often do so uncritically. Given the technological sea-change taking place in the production, storage, and reproduction of textual and visual content, it seems appropriate to ponder the historical problem of representation. This special issue of the *JSAH* is intended to serve that purpose.

Buildings can be seen to represent an idea or ideology, be it kingship, domesticity, Enlightenment, imperialism, socialism, and any number of other iterations selected by the architectural scholar and the people she studies. In this approach to the problem of representation, the building or urban ensemble is seen as an emblem or a symbol of a dominant set of social relations, even if imperfectly realized in practice. Underlying such analyses is the assumption that only some people and institutions have the language, resources, and authority to make themselves or their ideas manifest in public. In other words, not everyone wields the power of representation. Scholars may focus primarily on the formal choices or encompass the social and political processes through which these representations are validated.
Related to this method are those scholars who analyze architectural rhetoric or the set of architectural figures and conventions that stand in for and speak the values of “real” ones that are absent; rhetoric that endeavors to “convince the viewer of the ‘truthfulness’ of the representational elements.” They present us a history of the intertwined nature of architecture as representational and abstract art, and of the debates between historical and abstract styles.

The body of literature that examines the techniques of representation—perspectives, sketches, orthogonal drawings, and computer-aided modeling—has primarily focused on the technological innovations that have altered the practice of the architect and the imagination of buildings. Some of these, Robin Evans’s essays for example, have been sensitive to the process of translation—as in transportation and attendant transformation—from drawings to buildings, questioning the priority of the two-dimensional object over the three-dimensional building and vice versa. It is difficult for us to imagine iconic buildings, from the Egyptian pyramids to the Guggenheim museums, apart from their representations as published images; their iconicity is a product of their presentation in the media. Some scholars have turned to the specific problem of the role of textual and visual representations in the dissemination of architectural knowledge with the broadening of the public sphere from the eighteenth century onward, to evaluate the role of a reading public and mass media in the circulation of architectural ideas in the modern world. From their perspective, the rift between representation and reality holds little sway.

Architectural drawings and virtual models work as projections into time and space in multiple senses; they not only will an image of the future building in the present, they extend and elaborate the fabric of buildings in dimensions and locations that cannot be realized in lived tactile space. Renaissance architects projected bird’s-eye views long before these views could be experienced in practice. Now virtual space as prosthetics seeks to extend our sensory reach and minimize the distinction between virtual and real space in immersive digital environments. And yet, as Diane Favro notes in this issue, we still contend with some older problems of “truthfulness” when it comes to digital reconstructions. There is diffidence in accepting that all historical narratives are constructions in which one chooses what one elucidates and what one leaves out. Few scholars have interrogated the language and conventions of architectural historiography, the narrative mode through which the visual and textual evidence are gathered to present a coherent story.

The articles in this special issue self-consciously reflect on the role of visual representations of buildings and cities—what they do or do not do. Take the architectural plan, for example. An ancient tool, the building plan has been drawn and used in innumerable ways to generate and represent building form: as templates, models, and commodities in pattern books, builder’s guides, and catalogues; as municipal documents and construction drawings; for diagramming spatial and formal relations; and as expressionistic drawings that bear traces of the design process. By the nineteenth century, municipalities, by requiring permissions for new residential constructions and modification to existing buildings (showing addition of rooms and plumbing, for example) had turned this highly technical device into a commonplace object that placed a new demand of visual literacy on ordinary citizens. David Friedman’s article examines one of the earliest systematic uses of the architectural plan for the documentation and valuation of property in Renaissance Rome. As Friedman argues, as an ensemble these plans allowed the citizens to see the topography differently, enabling a new city imagination.

Representations always work in relation to other representations, of a kindred or opposing sort. They work serially to conjure a building, but they are also frequently detached from their original ensemble and their reinsertion into older relationships allows us to understand their contemporary import. Neil Levine’s article studies the process by which Henri Labrouste produced the perspective drawing of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève by tracing the photograph of the building, and argues that the mechanical interface between the building and drawing resonates Labrouste’s desire to articulate a new industrialized aesthetic.

If new technologies impart novel ways of understanding the building or spatial ensemble, altering the relation among buildings, images, and text, they perpetuate older traditions in equal measure. Samantha Martin-McAuliffe and John Papadopoulos’s re-evaluation of the Periklean building program is prompted by the view of the Athenian Acropolis publicized in photographs since the late nineteenth century. These photographs created a purified vision of the Acropolis, archaeologically cleansed of post-antique debris—later building layers of Byzantine and Ottoman empires were obliterated from site and sight as less valid than their antique predecessors. These photographic points of view, they argue, have also predisposed us to reading the significance of the buildings in a manner very different from what might have been intended by their makers.

Aron Vinegar extends the relation between architecture and representation by taking us on an excursion into Viollet-le-Duc’s drawings of cats and the sculpted animal figures at Château de Pierrefonds, suggesting that we not read these translations from drawings to buildings through
an iconographic lens, because their meaning is not lodged in their iconicity. Rather, he urges us to recognize the dynamic possibilities of forces and movements that are let loose in Viollet-le-Duc’s drawings. From this perspective, the restored château and its sculptural program emerge as civilizing emblems of a warring culture in which aggressive movement is represented and provisionally restrained.

The autobiographical trace that Viollet-le-Duc left in the château directs our attention to the agency, and attendant power, that resides in all translations from drawings to buildings. Representation as portrait (of “reality” or “nature”) and representation as proxy (stand-in) are interrelated and this interrelationship is the locus of agency. From this overlap we get the third meaning of the term representation—to stand for, which when extended takes us to its deployment as political representation, the ability to present oneself or others in their absence, to become the representative in whom power is delegated. Indeed, representations are rarely, if ever, neutral; they are implicitly or explicitly about desires, authorial intentions, and power. Victor Tschudi’s article on the plaster model of the city of Rome reminds us of the resilience of such desires, as he demonstrates the extent to which this Fascist-era artifact has monopolized the imagination of the city, and the aesthetic, archaeological, and political implications of this monopoly in the digital present.

The articles in this volume do not exhaust possible investigations into the problem of representation. We will continue this discussion in the December 2012 issue of the JSAH, addressing those instances where the historical contingencies of representation are foregrounded, moving toward those cases where the subject of representation is itself in abeyance. The concept of representation in the history of architecture is ripe for theoretical elaboration.

Keith Eggener’s term as book review editor (North and South America) ended with the June 2012 issue. I want to thank Keith for his exceptional and dedicated service to the JSAH, and for helping the transition to incoming book review editor William Littmann.

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Notes
10. Raymond Williams made a distinction between three uses of the term: representative “who stands for others but in his own terms”; the political sense of “making present, representing the opinions of others”; and the commonplace use of representative “to mean typical sample or specimen.” See Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 268.