of such a platform should be obvious. Not only does it allow for a broad range of traditional visual data—drawings and still photographs—it also provides more recent forms, including scrollable panoramas, video, and digital modeling. These tools and of themselves do not, of course, constitute scholarship. When combined with paradata, they can and do provide supplemental means for experienced scholars to parse and arrange existing research toward further discovery and new research.

Despite the promise shown by Digital Humanities projects like the Virtual World Heritage Laboratory, the UCLA/USC collaborative known as HyperCities, and others of their kind, broad integration of information-technology intensive research practices in the humanities has lagged behind those found in the sciences. The reasons offered for this disparity are familiar: the inherent parallels between scientific practice and computational capacities as well as differences in the criteria and extent of research funding among disciplines in their respective realms. But the biggest impediments to wider adoption are arguably found in the challenges of the initial learning curve demanded by these new practices and skepticism on the part of many academics that newfangled tools should supplant the tried-and-true methods of archival scholarship. The reality is that these tools would not supplant existing scholarly practices but supplement existing methods, remaining dependent upon traditional expertise but greatly expanding the capacity of human investigators to collect and sort all forms of data toward the work of current and future forms of research.

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Katerina Cizek, director
A Short History of the Highrise
Short film and “Op-Doc” for the New York Times launched in October 2013

Henry David Thoreau once noted that “every apartment in which man dwells [should] be lofty enough to create some obscurity where flickering shadows may play at evening about the rafters.”¹ Despite the fact that Thoreau abhorred urban life, the existential human quest for magic from the unlikeliest of places—confined living quarters—is similar to that of A Short History of the Highrise, an interactive documentary conceived and directed by Katerina Cizek and published online by the New York Times in the fall of 2013.

The short interactive online documentary, which prides itself on placing the human aspects of high-rise life to the fore, is a hearty yet wistful work whose most striking aspect is its visual interpretation of source material. Cizek’s approach to her sources and narrative style itself flickers with a keen sense of play—as well as a certain amount of obscurity.

Highrise is an “op-doc” subdivided into four sections, three of which—“Mud,” “Concrete,” and “Glass”—trace a roughly chronological story of multifamily living from Roman times to the present, while a fourth—a slideshow of apartment life contributed by readers—offers an impressionistic picture of contemporary apartment life from an anthropological perspective. The historical sections are narrated by the singer Feist through rhyming verse, which can feel both entertaining and trite. Imagine an early photograph of the Dakota, reanimated through a suite of software programs so that the building slowly grows from behind the tree line of Central Park West while the ice skaters in the foreground are unfrozen from time, skating in circles while the Dakota steadily grows behind them. Now imagine this reactivated image set to the following narration: “Not so very long ago / Though the city of New York was still young / From the land beside a new sort of building sprung / A montage of modern conveniences, the residential high-rise building grew / Running hot water, elevators, doormen; all of it was new.”

The playful tone of the script aside, the piece is a serious and important work of architectural multimedia for a number of reasons. For one, it warmly introduces real architectural concerns, in this case about the past and future of a major aspect of housing history, as well as archival materials into a growing genre of documentary film that does not fear tinkering and tampering with visual source material to achieve a deliberately winsome aesthetic end. Beyond the obvious advantages this has in reaching out to nonspecialists, it is also unwittingly in dialogue with a growing crisis in the profession of architectural history itself. This crisis stems from what some have called the fetishization of “archives” and the perceived sanctity and need for pure treatments of the artifacts contained within them. The luster within the discipline of the untampered-with, un-Photoshopped memo, postcard, or photo negative as object (as opposed to illustration) has proved difficult to transmogrify into the popular audiences in the era of the TED talk and Instagram, where the spin, bravura, and filtration of hard information reign supreme because they appeal to a mass audience. In this context, Highrise is unique for its serious architectural historical story line on the one hand and its archival hierarchies on the other and may represent some sort of compromise that both the professional and the general public can access.

The inspiration for the dazzling visual effects (conceived with Helios Design Lab in Adobe After Effects and HTML5) of Highrise is the children’s pop-up book, specifically as it has been reconceived for the iPad.² The obvious challenge of that genre is to re-create the effect of the three-dimensional reading experience. The result is what Cizek has identified as “a user experience somewhere between cinema and reading.”³ As applied to archival materials, this does not necessarily bring history to life, but it does breathe creative life into its sources. That said, one must be comfortable with these artistic liberties to be able to enjoy them.

Cizek was given access by the New York Times to its “morgue”—the resting place of about six million undigitized photographs.⁴ Among those millions were enough photographs of apartment buildings and apartment life from the nineteenth century to the present to provide the large majority of the visual material for the feature. Cizek, who has a background in anthropology, notes that in the spirit of true documentary practice, she came to the material without a prefigured story in mind, letting the archive guide her instead.
While this may be good documentary practice, it makes for a rather North American–centric narrative despite the nod to historical precedents in ancient Rome, Pueblo Arizona, China’s Fujian province, and Yemen (albeit as “Manhattan of the desert”).

The New York Times piece is a sampler of a larger multiyear project called HIGHRISE that Cizek and her team are developing with support from the National Film Board of Canada.1 Due diligence with scholars across the fields of architectural and planning history and geography (Miles Glendinning, University of Warwick; Robin LeBaron, National Home Performance Council; and Deborah Cowen, University of Toronto) has placed the content on sound enough scholarly ground despite the problematic focus on North America. The piece takes too brief notice of more recent developments of the typology in Singapore, for example, which along with references to Hong Kong and the cities of the Persian Gulf would have rounded out the piece’s geographic scope more fully.

What the film lacks in architectural historical criticality it makes up for in the dynamism of its presentation and novel, if unconventional, appropriation of archival materials. The “op-doc” and, possibly, the larger project that it is attached to, would make superb course material for social studies, geography, art and architectural history, and history classrooms with teen-aged students. The key challenge of integrating this genre of documentary film into the field of architectural history will lie less in the challenge of desanctifying the archival artifact than it will in finding the appropriate ways to contextualize the new synthesis, both for mass audiences as well as scholarly applications.

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Notes
3. Ibid.
5. See highrise.nfb.ca. Elements of the project are also published online at Highrise.nfb.ca/outmy window and Highrise.nfb.ca/onemillionfttower.