note that while “the field is the site of investigation, the forum is the place where results of an investigation are presented and contested.”7 Weizman’s observations suggest a working understanding of how we might consider 3-D scanned models not as simple representations of space but instead as places where ideas can be “presented and contested.”

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Notes

Timescape
http://www.timescape.io, free

In recent years, the global perspective has gained ground in the humanities, challenging the prominence of Eurocentric histories and creating a demand for non-Western content to enter, populate, and reform previous normative narratives. Mark Jarzombek and Vikramaditya Prakash’s pioneering 2007 textbook A Global History of Architecture, with drawings by Francis Ching, made possible new fields of historical interrogation and foregrounded previously marginalized histories of architectural production.1 Universities and other educational institutions have since embraced the call for a more inclusive architectural history, issuing new curriculum requirements and offering funding opportunities for research that expands beyond what is known and documented about the Anglo-Saxon world. The new mandate for world cultures courses published by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) in 2009 only reiterated the need for a global perspective to inform teaching and research.2 Institutions such as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation stepped in to provide financial support, advancing the objectives of initiatives such as the Society of Architectural Historians’ SAHARA Travel Fellowships and MIT’s Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative (GAIHTC).3

In architectural history, this turn toward a world history has revealed the limitations of current survey course offerings and research when they are presented to an increasingly global student body, pointing to the methodological constraints of nation- and empire-based historiographies that reinforce the centrality of the West. However, digital humanities tools such as databases and visualization platforms increasingly simplify the task of admitting previously marginalized non-Western actors into architectural history. In fact, scholars can augment their narratives and diversify their teaching with stories of cultural connections, appropriations, tensions, and ruptures that move beyond the geopolitical realm of the West.

Timescape, initially developed by Somnath Ray and Vaibhav Bhawar as an online platform for transmedia storytelling, constitutes such an aid for writing and teaching architectural history. Following a step-by-step process, the open platform guides scholars and educators through the creation and sharing of online maps. Once the user logs in, the interface prompts the addition of “events”—either manually or automatically through Excel sheets. Each new event generates a separate window for information entry: location, date, title and description, images and videos. The platform visualizes the imported events as dots on the centrally featured map on the right while aggregating the events in a scorable timeline column on the left (Figure 1). Each time the user hovers the cursor over a marked point, the imported information is displayed.

Timescape’s compelling visuals and design aesthetic separate it from other online tools. To the satellite views of Google Maps Timescape adds a new three-dimensional option of a rotating, scrollable globe that can potentially expand to multiple layers, revealing the geographic and chronological positions of each event. In combination with the tagging function, the three-dimensional map helps the scholar or teacher to organize networks of items, buildings, institutions, and people thematically and visualize them both temporally and spatially. By clicking on a tag, the user can group all relevant entries in networks that cut across geographic boundaries and historical times, shifting attention from buildings as distinct objects to the connections and crossings that condition them and that they reciprocally condition.

As a tool, Timescape encourages scholars to approach writing and teaching global architectural histories in terms of networks and events dynamically deployed in time and space. In Being and Event, Alain Badiou defines an event as a “point of a situation” and not a solid representation of a system — be it hermeneutic or analytic.4 In placing those events on the map, Timescape promises to render visible the multiplicity of situations that they inhabit without being reductive. For example, a user can visualize the routes through which material and builders traveled, revealing the geopolitical constituents in the production of the built environment. This process requires the researcher to approach the relationship between data sets and master narratives critically, which poses methodological questions pertinent to quantitative historical studies since the time of the Annales group. Departing from this framework, Timescape maintains the visual and structural integrity of each entry, bringing individual objects into productive dialogues with each other and the larger theoretical/thematic frameworks that organize them. In doing so, the platform provides the scholar with a tool for focusing on details while being attentive to the bigger frame — in short, a tool for combining the micro and the macro in the study of architectural history.

The tool, however, does not determine the results. While teaching a 200-level survey course, I assigned a mapping exercise with the aim of encouraging students to illuminate the global elements of architectural projects, compare and contrast them...
with synchronous developments around the world, and delineate the networks of knowledge, expertise, and material transfer in which they participate. The exercise proved challenging, since it forced students to step outside their comfort zones and identify goals and questions that would diversify well-known narratives about architectural production. Although only a minority of the students’ Timescape maps successfully discovered a global perspective, the assignment sparked a thorough class discussion of the subjective role of the cartographer, the limitations of the architectural canon, and the problematics of contextualist approaches in architectural history, proving Timescape a powerful tool for triggering a global sensibility.

Additionally, the platform has the potential to demonstrate the central role of space in the writing of history. As Jo Guldi argues, writing history already demands a dialogue with the material landscape, a requirement that the recent advent of geographic information system (GIS) technology has only reinforced. The argument for a spatial focus in the humanities has its own long history—the work of Fernand Braudel and Lewis Mumford, among others, comes to mind. Mapping the shifting geographies of architectural projects based on questions of materiality, typology, and program might bring forth overlooked similarities and differences and pose new research questions that propose space as a historical agent.

Above all, Timescape calls for a collective model of research and teaching. The scope of a global architectural history surpasses the capacities of the individual scholar; any attempt to navigate this uncharted territory requires expertise exchange and collaboration. The interface developers claim that Timescape aspires to equal Wikipedia models of crowdsourcing and database building, but the architecture of the platform and its proprietary character have yet to accommodate this scale of implementation. The maps are closed projects, built and designed to serve particular tasks and questions. The addition of an open contribution function is planned, but the current platform requires personal invitations to external users, which restricts the potential number of contributors to those known to the map creator. Timescape also faces challenges related to copyright permissions and quality control, for which it will need viable solutions before it can expand its audience and implement the Wikipedia model.

Because it is in a germinal stage of development, the platform presents the historian with a number of technical problems. For example, regardless of the time period conveyed by each layer, the default map utilizes the present-day geopolitical configuration, without the ability to incorporate changing political boundaries and names. From the archives of available Timescape maps, only the AD 1200 map commissioned by GAHTC at MIT is customized and accurately represents the sovereign territories of the period. Although the platform recently integrated an automated presentation option with a “play” button, Timescape has yet to develop plugins for integration into programs such as

Figure 1  AD 1400 map, Timescape (Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative at MIT and Team Timescape, https://www.timescape.io/1400-ad [accessed 5 Aug. 2015]).
Keynote, PowerPoint, and Prezi, which are widely used for lectures and presentations. Implementing these functions would critically enhance Timescape's development and give the platform a definite advantage over other mapping interfaces.

Despite the initial challenges that this small start-up operation faces, Timescape offers an attractive and user-friendly aid to the architectural historian facing the challenges of teaching global architectural history. When introduced in classroom assignments and lectures, Timescape challenges students to think in terms of networks rather than individual objects and professors to deliver content that is inherently linked to other subject matter, demonstrating the complex nature of the production of the built environment. Will Timescape fulfill its potential and offer the architectural historian a method for productive sharing and presentation of information? As with any new tool, it remains to be seen what direction the developers will choose and whether the architectural community will support this effort with the labor necessary to transform Timescape into an essential digital humanities tool for global histories of architecture.

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3. Although initially launched at MIT independently in 2013, GAHTC soon attracted the interest of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and expanded its purposes to offering grants for the creation of new syllabi and development of an online platform. For more information on GAHTC, see Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative, http://gahtc.org (accessed 23 Aug. 2015). For information on SAHARA, see http://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sahara (accessed 23 Aug. 2015).