In this essay, it is my intent to examine the history of architectural history’s intersection with the profession of architecture in the United States. A common lens for viewing this evolving relationship is that of academia—that is, how architectural history has figured within architectural education. Instead, I will take a more arcane object of investigation: the architectural licensing exam. Since its inception in the 1920s, architectural history has been a constituent element of the tests that individuals must pass in order to call themselves architects. Thus, the licensing exam is the profession’s deliberated and institutionalized statement of the status of architectural history, and an examination of the exam reveals the history of architectural history in relation to the profession of architecture.

It is my argument that the mutable nature of this relationship demonstrates architectural history’s sensitive tracking of the profession’s status in the American political economy and, in turn, architectural history’s fluctuation between autonomy and instrumentality within the profession. I will suggest in conclusion that architectural history is now capable of a “speculative turn,” building on Hayden White’s idea of a “practical past.”

At the end of the nineteenth century, architecture professionalized in the United States. At that time, architectural history was an intriguingly material study based on Beaux-Arts training that moved into the offices of architects like H. H. Richardson, whose apprentices studied ornament not just through precedents presented in books but also through plaster casts of sculpture and architectural fragments from antiquity. If books of precedent and architectural drawings constituted a significant part of the libraries in offices like H. H. Richardson’s or McKim, Mead and White, the most likely textbook in schools was Banister Fletcher’s A History of Architecture. It remained a if not the core text through the 1930s, when Joseph Esherick recalled of his education at the University of Pennsylvania: “Th[e] history course was taught (in fact all the history courses were taught) by Professor Gumaer. . . . The text was Banister Fletcher, and the methods followed accordingly.”

Fletcher’s continuous and substantial revisions in successive editions, as Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoglu interrogates, foreshadow the problematic status of history in the testing of an architect’s knowledge of facts.

If architectural history seemed based on common understanding at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the practice of architecture was struggling with a lack of definition. Indeed, anyone could claim the title of architect. This problem was recognized by both the Chicago-based Western Association of Architects (WAA), which wanted to expand its ranks as a means of ensuring public safety and gaining public trust, and the New York–based American Institute of Architects (AIA), which sought to maintain its aristocratic membership. The exclusivity of AIA membership meant not only standing in high society (it is not surprising that the AIA was founded in the discreet luxury of Delmonico’s restaurant) but also knowledge in architectural history that distinguished those with an education from workingmen, those in the building trades, and artisans. Although the two professional organizations merged in 1889, their approaches toward licensure differed, since some saw the requirement of obtaining a license as demeaning—good taste and breeding being superior to uniform standards for certification.
It was not by chance that the first licensing law was passed in Illinois in 1897. After the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the massive rebuilding effort, along with the introduction of new technologies of structural steel and high-rise construction, focused a spotlight on a number of entrepreneurs, quacks, and land sharks who called themselves architects. As the historian Mary Woods notes, only when a construction-related death was attributed to an inexperienced architect did the Illinois legislature decide in favor of licensing for public safety, even if it also served architects’ special interests. 

Early licensure did not have much impact on the cronyism it was intended to overcome. Even modestly experienced architects were grandfathered into licensure, while others gained their licenses through review by a board of examiners. Woods observes that in its first nine years, the Illinois board granted 704 licenses, 501 of which went to grandfathered applicants. Early standards were inconsistent, and the board of examiners had a reputation for political and personal bias. The “examination” began with the presentation of evidence of work experience and education; if that was not convincing, then a written test, dealing primarily with construction, was administered. These practices were formalized when the first test requirements for licensure were proposed around 1920, in the form of the Junior Examination (for those with fewer than ten years of experience). The test was a four-day affair comprising six written and graphic sections to be taken over a total of twenty-nine hours. In the first standardized version of the test, architectural history made its appearance as one of the sections. Setting these standards became the purview of the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB), which also began in 1920 to address the wide discrepancies from state to state, since architectural services increasingly transcended local jurisdictions.

Although the form of the overall test for architectural licensure remains more or less the same today, nearly one hundred years later, architectural history is perhaps the exam’s most volatile element. This is due, in part, to the widening variation in practices among architectural historians. If the registration exam tests knowledge of architectural history, a new currency and understanding of history is evident in the most widely read architecture texts of the 1930s and early 1940s, such as those by Giedion and Pevsner. These are what Manfredo Tafuri called “operative” texts, texts employing a form of operative criticism that does not just “document” history or report facts but also produces new architecture as a kind of manifesto. As a result, the currency of historical knowledge began to displace facticity in the exams.

As such, history and practice became entangled in new ways. This is reflected in the first NCARB “syllabus” intended to apply to all applicants regardless of years of experience. From the 1920 test’s format of six sections over twenty-nine hours, the test grew to nine sections over thirty-four hours by

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1. History became History and Theory, and proportionally the time for this subject was reduced almost by half, to less than 8 percent of the total number of hours. With an increasing emphasis on quantifiable, scientific knowledge, technical subjects now made up about half of the written exams, and this dominance continued to grow over the coming years. The more complex exam reflected ongoing changes within practice. The rise of corporate practices like Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the increasing size of firms, the increasing application of management and administrative sciences to architectural projects and offices, and the growing complexity of regulatory contexts all demanded greater “expertise” from architecture’s practitioners.

The Gamble House by the Greene brothers in Pasadena is most important because of its

1. inventive use of wood on exterior
2. functional-spatial development of interior
3. structural ingenuity
4. anticipation of the ranch house

The form of the architecture of ancient Egypt was in origin

1. spatial
2. sonic
3. thermal
4. climatic

The Unité d’habitation at Marseilles is an example of architecture that is

1. functional
2. New Brutalism
3. contemporary
4. eclectic
These questions are taken from the 1965 test, which featured the first fully developed set of questions for multistate examinations. The date is important, and indicative of history’s special status, since we have to ask ourselves: What was true in 1965? Or what might have been considered true by the architects who invented a standardized test for their prospective peers?

A year after this test was issued, architectural educator Jeffrey Cook published a critique. He argued that the questions were interpretive, ambiguous, dated, and ill informed. He predicted, correctly, that knowledge of architectural history would be far more difficult to test than knowledge of its quantitative, empirical counterparts, such as structural systems. Even as practices among young architects like Michael Graves, who graduated from Harvard in 1959, replicated the Beaux-Arts Grand Tour and reflected more traditional ideas about architectural history, the implications for design, as with Graves’s first architectural commissions and late modernist stylistics, had no overt figurative or iconic connection to the historical objects of study. The 1965 test reflected this disjunction between the growing interest in history and its deployment within the design language of late modernism.

With the incipient rise of postmodern and neohistorical architecture in the 1970s, we might expect to see a new order, if not new confusion, in the licensing exam. In the revised 1970 registration exam, Section C, History and Theory, contained two merged subsections: “Principles of Architectural Theory” and “Principles of Planning and Land Use” (Figure 1). While some traditional history questions remained, others reflected the wider sociopolitical trends articulated by Jacobs and by Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

The obvious metaquestion is: Why mix together these two very different subject matters, history and planning? I would offer a few explanations. First, since the test was increasingly organized to parallel the sequence of steps in designing a project, history and site planning would be starting points. Second, in the context of a growing orientation toward skills and competence, history was a remnant without a logical location. As a precursor to the real work of architecture, history was now homeless.

By 1977, bureaucratization of architectural practice, along with what architectural sociologist Robert Gutman called the “dequalification” of architectural labor, had fully tainted licensure. NCARB undertook a study of architectural practice and found that it could be broken down into 164 services, 128 “knowledges,” and 14 skills. Of those, 29 knowledges and 4 skills were necessary to public health, safety, and welfare; these became the necessary components of what would become the first Architectural Registration Exam, or ARE. Within the necessary knowledge, just 2 of the 29 subcomponents were “social and cultural,” under which category was located History and Theory of Architecture—deeply buried in this absurd deconstruction of architectural practice.

While NCARB was occupied with rationalizing the profession’s claim to its market for services, historians and theorists were moving outside modernist frameworks and sounding a death knell for postmodernism. In the 1988 exhibition Deconstructivist Architecture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, cocurator Mark Wigley looked to Jacques Derrida, semiotics, and literary theory, with only a vague nod to the historic constructivist movement being referenced, to translate the destabilizing force of philosophical deconstruction into architecture. In the 1983 registration exam, history was already dead, a ghost stealthily inhabiting Division A: Predesign. Significant architectural projects such as the 1982 Parc de la Villette entries by Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas, both part of the deconstructivism show, abandoned architecture-as-building to heighten attention to program and process, with Koolhaas calling his work a project “not for a definitive park, but for a method . . . that will eventually generate a park.”

A final review of the ARE from 1990 reveals history’s continued effort to “blend in” with the other competencies.
History questions unrelated to the sections in which they appear are scattered throughout the test, from Predesign to Structural Technology and Mechanical, Plumbing, Electrical (Figure 2). This practice continues today, as all sections of the exam, including those concerning technical subjects, serve as hosts for brief historical interludes. As a result, history is everywhere and nowhere.

Although some may feel themselves liberated by that condition, others, like myself, seek means to strengthen the role of architectural history in practice and in the profession. How can we read the evolution of the licensing exam to find likely points of leverage in the next era?

Let me offer one path. Along with imagining that history is instrumental to architecture, we could instrumentalize architecture for the discipline of history.

Hayden White offers guidance on this point in his recent book *The Practical Past*, in his agreement with Michel de Certeau that “fiction is the repressed other of history.” Historical fact is necessarily wrapped in a particular kind of interpretive storytelling, which lends historical narrative the means to move beyond the facts to grasp the present and invent the near future. While White’s focus is on literature, when considered in relation to architecture, his theory offers a plausible description of design itself. Stories about the past combined with present understanding afford the conception of a future condition. We might tell better stories if we start by determining the kinds of questions that the present can ask of architecture’s history.

The one part of the licensing exam that has consistently eluded history’s infiltration is the section on design. I believe engaging the resonance between architectural design and architectural history by asking questions and telling stories, rather than by giving answers on exams, means returning to the academy, the site of architects’ training. At more than a dozen universities, including the University of California, Los Angeles, the Mellon Foundation has funded an initiative that brings together architecture, urbanism, and the humanities (including history). The UCLA project, which I lead, is called the Urban Humanities Initiative, and it is now in its fourth year of project-based studies of cities on the Pacific Rim. As with White’s practical past, the methods we are developing deeply privilege narrative. From the present, we ask questions of the past and speculate about the implications of both past and present for the future. Along with text-based narrative, students from architecture and other disciplines generate spatial stories through critical cartography, or “thick mapping.” For example, students created a thick map of the Chinese Massacre, a series of violent events that took place in Los Angeles in 1871 (Figure 3). To tell this cartographic story, they used historical accounts, census data, secondary criticism, photographs, newspaper articles, and police records documenting events in space and time.

Historically rich practices like critical cartography are coupled with other representational and investigatory methods, such as spatial ethnography and filmic sensing. All the work is collaborative and project oriented with a public outcome, be that publication in a journal or an exhibition, since the work is intended to open new narratives for a diverse audience.

What might projects like the Urban Humanities Initiative mean for the future of the Architectural Registration Exam and the role of architectural history within the profession? Perhaps their evolving methods of analysis, interpretation, and design could bring architecture and history into mutual speculation. Although impossible to codify into a multiple-choice exam, the urban humanities model could be expanded more specifically into both the architectural academy and the design exam—the one part of the licensing exam that has eluded history’s inroads. In fact, the heart of the pedagogical experiments in architecture, urbanism, and the humanities at UCLA is a humanist studio, a laboratory for engaged scholarship where design and history are mutually dependent. This is what I would call a “speculative turn.” This strategy may give architectural history new questions to ask of the profession, thereby instrumentalizing architecture for the discipline of history.
Notes
1. This essay is based on a plenary talk I gave at the Society of Architectural Historians conference on 7 April 2016 in Pasadena, California.
6. Ibid., 45.
10. The NCARB syllabus in 1954 listed the following nine sections: (A) Education and Experience (board review), (B) Personal Audience (interview), (C) History and Theory of Architecture (three hours written), (D) Site Planning (five hours written/graphic), (E) Architectural Design (twelve hours graphic), (F) Building Construction (three hours written), (G) Structural Design (three hours written), (H) Professional Administration (three hours written), and (I) Building Equipment (five hours written). Chaffee, “Registration Examination Process—Architects,” 180.
12. The expected answers to these questions were, as Jeffrey Cook argues (see note 13 below), not only the “correct” responses. The expected answer to the first question was answer 4, “anticipation of the ranch house,” although answers 1 and 2 also contained some truth. The expected answer to the second question, about Egypt, was answer 4, “climatic,” although answer 1 was also correct according to Giedion’s introduction to the 1962 edition of Space, Time and Architecture. Cook makes his point most clearly in relation to the third question, about the Unité d’Habitation, for which only answer 4 could be absolutely rejected. The expected answer was 2, “New Brutalism,” even though some critics argued that New Brutalism began with the Smithsons in 1954; Le Corbusier himself might have chosen answer 3, and answer 1 was correct according to Banister Fletcher.
14. Dequalification of labor occurs when work is broken down into smaller, less meaningful tasks that require less expertise and are overseen by an increasingly important managerial function. Robert Gorman, “Architecture: The Entrepreneurial Profession,” Progressive Architecture 58, no. 5 (May 1977), 55–58.
17. Beginning in 1983, the divisions of the Architecture Registration Exam were as follows: Division A, Predesign; Division B, Site Design; Division C, Building Design; Divisions D, E, F, G, and H, Building Systems; and Division I, Construction Documents and Services. Chaffee, “Registration Examination Process—Architects,” 181–82.
20. For more on UCLA’s Urban Humanities Initiative, see the fall 2016 special issue of Boom: A Journal of California. See also Todd Presner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano, HyperCities: Thick Mapping in the Digital Humanities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).