

TEACHING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY IN A TIME OF "PERPETUAL WAR"

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I ask how architectural history courses might provoke would-be architects, planners, and civil engineers to think deeply about the ethics and politics of intervening in built environments. Most American students came of age in a post-9/11 world marked by U.S. military aggression around the world. What does it mean to teach architectural history to a generation who has only known the world as it exists in a state of perpetual war? What ethical imperatives must architectural history take on at this contemporary moment marked by rising nationalism and ecological crises? I argue that architectural history must be cognizant of and present a challenge to three assumptions frequently made by architecture students: that geo-politics have no bearing or relevance to built form; that citizenship (how I enact belonging and enfranchisement) is separate from my autonomous expression as a designer; and that the classroom is a space of exception that absolves me from responsibilities to a larger world. I press for new presentations of architectural history, those that develop humanistic imaginations alongside design creativity and empower students to become responsible interlocutors in their contemporary built environments.

A COSMOPOLITANISM OF ESTRANGEMENT

The undergraduates in my classes at the University of Pittsburgh were between three and five years old when the Twin Towers fell on 9/11. They might have started high school when Tahrir Square was the center of a massive revolution, and gone to prom just as historic Aleppo was turned to rubble. Whilst many have never left the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. where they

grew up, cities like Mosul and Pyongyang and exurban places such as Guantanamo Bay and the U.S.-Mexico border are part of their global imaginaries as well as vocabularies. This is a peculiar cosmopolitanism, produced by the aggressive military domination of large parts of the globe by the U.S. It is a knowledge of the other that implicates the self as perpetrator of large and small wars. What does it mean, then, to teach architectural history to a generation that has only known the world as it exists in a state of perpetual war? Do architectural historians in the U.S. have a moral and ethical imperative to respond to the exigencies of this moment in their writing and teaching? If so, how can academics and practitioners recognize our complicity in creating the conditions of such estranged cosmopolitans even as we prepare students to live, work, and play within a complex world shaped by U.S. aggression?¹

My theoretical rudder for this essay is the framework of cosmopolitanism. I borrow the term "perpetual war" in the essay title from philosopher Bruce Robbins, who uses it to critique Immanuel Kant's exegesis on cosmopolitanism. Kant articulated cosmopolitanism as an allegiance to the entire human race as opposed to one's own tribal, ethnic, or national communities—a moral and ethical posture of fraternity that would lead to "perpetual peace" in the world. This early model of global citizenship, and in our contemporary parlance a set of basic human rights, was based on the shared humanity of the world's peoples. Robbins has challenged such rosy Enlightenment thinking, instead arguing that cosmopolitanism today emerges from perpetual war—a paradoxical condition of knowing others intimately but only as a threat to oneself or in the very act of destroying them.^{2,3} Philosopher Martha Nussbaum has articulated cosmopolitanism as the loyalties that an individual owes to humanity as a

whole. She points out, however, that such a capacious worldview is often at odds with, or at least exists in an uneasy relationship with, nationalism—which demands allegiances that are both geographically and historically determined.⁴ Anthony Kwame Appiah has defined cosmopolitanism as the ethics of engagement with difference. He asks: What do we owe those who look, speak, and live differently from us and how do we reconcile such boundless obligations with the demands of our local communities, the nation-states that we carry passports for, or the proscriptions of our religious identity?⁵ These questions have profound ramifications for students who are training to design in unfamiliar environments and for clients and communities who are vastly different from themselves. It has become especially urgent for designers to cultivate responsible imaginations of the past when revanchist nationalisms around the world co-opt both history and space to service their agendas.

In this essay I ask how architectural history courses might provoke would-be architects, planners, and civil engineers to think deeply about the ethics and politics of intervening in built environments. More specifically, I believe that curricular offerings of architectural histories should be mindful of three traps that design students are prone to: that the history of built form and design evolution are entirely separate from geopolitical context and influence; that citizenship (the privilege to receive and enact enfranchisements) is separate from the autonomous expression of a designer; and that the classroom (or architectural firm) is a space of exception that absolves students (and later professionals) from responsibilities to a larger world. I argue for new presentations of architectural history that encourage students to develop humanistic imaginations alongside design creativity, with imaginations that will empower them as responsible interlocutors in their contemporary built environments.

MYTH 1: THE TELEOLOGY OF DESIGN HISTORY

Several recent textbooks have taken up the work of democratizing and globalizing architectural history beyond a Hegelian narrative of progress that proceeds from primitive to civilized and one that locates architectural innovation to a single genius, usually a literate white male.^{6, 7} Yet many other texts in the

discipline perpetuate a specious teleology from past to present, low tech to high tech, vernacular and anonymous to monumental and authored, unfamiliar to familiar. Can students then be blamed for seeing themselves as the torchbearers of the next phase of architectural evolution, or of assuming that innovation and avant-garde design are the only paths to keep the wheels of progress running in the right direction?⁸ Such an understanding of architectural history becomes doubly problematic when seen in the context of contemporary geo-politics, where the very real struggles of First Nations and Indigenous peoples to claim resources and rights are frequently dismissed as atemporal or antagonistic to the universalizing logic of capitalism. How might architectural history curricula encourage students to think of multiple trajectories of building that develop horizontally across disparate temporalities? What sort of narrative imagination is required to hold these chronologies in equal regard and how might professors equip them with such an imagination? I offer a reading of a first-society structure as a beginning to such an understanding.

Beginnings: The Thule Whalebone House

Like all disciplines, architectural history is attached to its origin myths. The 18th-century abbé, Marc-Antoine Laugier, explained that Greek classical architecture, the apogee of built aesthetics, could be traced to the primitive hut, rudimentary shelters erected by early peoples consisting of four supporting columns and a pitched roof (all made with unfinished tree branches). In Laugier's appraisal, while the Parthenon is a sophisticated evolution of the primitive hut, the latter constituted a universal language of rationalism and aesthetics. At the heart of Laugier's discussion in his *Essay on Architecture* (1755) is the prowess of early man [sic] to harness and shape natural resources (tree branches) into a shelter built along the principles of an ideal form (free-standing columns supporting a roof pediment). Such was the articulation of architectural beginnings borne out of European Enlightenment assumptions: the triumph of culture over nature; the universalism of aesthetic and form; and, most importantly, the individual builder who determines the course of architectural history to come. A key motif in this allegory is that of human exceptionalism and the distinction between humans and environments.

The primitive hut becomes one origin of civilization precisely because man [sic] is able to separate himself from his natural environment and exercise control over it.

An alternative to this teleology would be a consideration of the Thule whalebone house within the continuum of design experimentation and building skills. Remnants of semi-subterranean whalebone houses built by the Thule between 1000-1600 CE have been found in various parts of Alaska, Greenland, and the Canadian Arctic Circle (Figure 1). As Peter Dawson and Richard Levy have shown, building with whalebone would require considerable knowledge of engineering, for the material, though strong and light, is not uniform in terms of shape or dimensions.⁹ Whalebone was a precious commodity and the Thule used as much of the mammal's skeleton as possible in the construction of the house.

The distinct shapes of each whalebone, however, made every Thule whalebone house unique in its formal and structural properties. Cranial bones of whales (broad at the base of the head and tapering towards the snout) were similar to tripods and were best used as vertical members, and jaw bones (mandibles) were used as ridgepoles to span across the two lobes. Smaller rib bones could be used for interstitial spans and to support the weight of the hide, sod, and turf that would cover the entire house. The process of building a whalebone house was complex: the pits for the houses could not be dug in advance, as it was not certain that the available whalebones could span the depressions once dug. Instead, the bones were first arranged to achieve the optimal ratio of structural stability and inhabitable space and the areas for the pits were marked out. The skeletal structure was then dismantled for the pits to be dug, and subsequently re-erected over the completed pits.¹⁰



Figure 1: Thule Whalebone House, c. 1000 CE, Greenland; built by ancestors of modern-day Inuit in Northern Alaska who migrated eastward, across the Arctic to Greenland. It is near the community of Resolute and part of remnants from about six other houses. Courtesy: Timkal

Architectural lessons from the Thule whalebone house abound: for one, such building was a collective act requiring sophisticated communication between hunters, tanners, and builders; second, it was premised on specialized knowledge related to accessing and utilizing resources, an understanding of the laws of physics and structural systems, and the skill to arrange available bones to ensure safety and comfort; and third, this architecture arose from a multi-species dialogue between humans, animals, and flora. In its sophistication, the Thule whalebone house dismantles Laugier’s myths of the “primitive” and that of a singular “man” as the first author of an ideal architectural form (Figure 2). In this example, genius—if such exists—is widely distributed and cannot be located in one



Figure 2: Charles Eisen, engraving for the frontispiece of the second edition of *Abbé Laugier’s Essai sur l’architecture*, trans. *Essay on Architecture*, 1753. Courtesy: Public Domain.

temporal moment, much less a single persona. In stark contrast with Laugier’s universalism that divides human and environment, the example of the Thule whalebone house presents an entry into discussions of the Anthropocene and planetary ecology. A critical view of human exceptionalism and natural resource extraction will be vital to future designers of the built environment.¹¹

MYTH 2: CITIZENSHIP AND DESIGN

Everyday undergraduates across campuses in the United States perform quotidian acts of citizenship: they exercise sovereign control over their bodies, participate in free speech, and make choices based on their free will. Many architectural students also enact their role as designers within this larger set of enfranchisements, often without critically understanding the specific privileges that allow them to do so. Needless to say, the diversity of the undergraduate student body at any North American university means that such privilege is fraught with race, gender, and economic status. The persistent absence of minorities such as African-Americans, women, and non-literate subjects in architectural histories only exacerbates the divide between design and citizenship.¹² It is vital for future designers to understand that social enfranchisement and disenfranchisement are spatially reproduced and to calibrate their own interventions within these milieu responsibly.

Building Our Nation: The View from Mulberry Row

Thomas Jefferson’s estate at Monticello is one example of the manner in which design perpetuates an unequal field of power relations (Figure 3). Jefferson is seen as the consummate American innovator and designer. His estate at Monticello, and later his design of the University of Virginia, drew on Greek classical architectural form to communicate his democratic and republic idealism. There is a sufficient amount of mythologizing in these statements to warrant critique. Yet, the founding father’s estate illustrates how sovereign self-determination and dehumanization were both embedded in the design of Monticello.

Dell Upton argues that Jefferson designed his residence and arranged the rooms and décor in



Figure 3: Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's Home and Estate, Charlottesville, Virginia, 1753. Courtesy: Martin Falbisoner.

his house as a way to announce his belief in self-determination and democracy. The vantage of his own house was such that it looked down on Mulberry Row—the slave quarters—and allowed him to survey his property, which included land as well as enslaved human beings. Where the spaces in Jefferson's house were distinguished by function (the salon, the library, or the dining room), the slave quarters accommodated multiple functions: cooking, dressing, sleeping, and tending to children in one undifferentiated space. Where Jefferson's house was designed with an eye towards spaces that were more public and others that were intensely private, the arrangement of the slave quarters further dehumanized the residents, placing women, men, and children in a forced intimacy with little care for prevailing social norms of comfort, privacy, or propriety. In a dazzlingly ingenious, if heartless design, Jefferson invented a system of pulleys and dumbwaiters that fueled the fireplaces in his bedroom. Slaves fed the coal into dumbwaiters in the basement of the house but Jefferson's designs kept them out of his sight and their bodies out of his spaces. Upton articulates it succinctly when he says that plantation houses such as Monticello were "technologies of the self, tools for defining their owners." In contrast, the accommodations on Mulberry Row were the infrastructure by which slaves were turned into technologies of labor and reproduction

that serviced the master's needs.¹³ Monticello's spatial choreography was designed to reproduce the power relations between master and slave, enfranchised and disenfranchised, and literate and laboring. The design of democracy was thus built and maintained on the infrastructure of dehumanization.

The substantial links between racial theories and modern architectural theory and production has provoked an ethical reckoning within the discipline.^{14,15} To operate responsibly as a designer today is to recognize this history of uneven enfranchisements and its persistent ramifications for the built environment. Curricular reform initiated by scholars such as Kathryn Anthony at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign have actively shown how design "naturalizes" the discrimination of women, racial minorities, and persons with atypical bodies.¹⁶ Her 2010 congressional testimony on the restroom gender parity act serves as a model for how designers can bring critical awareness to the politics of the built environment.¹⁷

MYTH 3: STUDIO AS A SPACE OF EXCEPTION

Too often undergraduates see their classrooms and studios as rarefied environments that exist entirely outside a broader socio-political milieu (Figure 4). This fiction is insidiously reproduced by popular rhetoric



Figure 4: Classroom as a space of exception, Undergraduate Studio at the University of Utah, Fall 2018.
Courtesy: Stephanie King.

that the “real world” is fundamentally separate from college life and environments. Studios frequently cultivate an ambience of pure abstraction and creative largesse, encouraging students to ignore histories of place, capitalist networks of profit and loss, or racial and gendered inequities that might be operating on site. Instead, context is defined in terms of “tangible” data such as topography, transportation networks, desirable views, or space management.

As future designers, it is imperative that students be cognizant of their studio and larger campus environments as spaces of production: not simply the production of ideas, but also of social realities. Jonathan Massey, dean of the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, poignantly notes that the structure of architecture studios, with late nights and time-intensive coursework, necessarily excludes non-traditional students such as parents, persons with disabilities, or those who must work to pay for college.¹⁸ Massey rightly points out that such exclusions of class and social rank are further exacerbated in the architectural profession, creating a vicious cycle of elitism. How might architectural history be employed to shed light on such issues?

Learned Forgetting: The al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and Madrasa

We may consider the al-Qarawiyyin mosque, and later madrasa, as an example of how discursive spaces

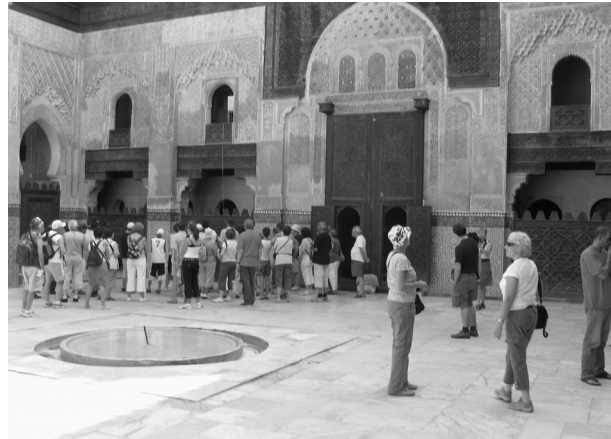


Figure 5: Courtyard of Al-Qarawiyyin mosque and madrasa, Fez, Morocco, established in 859 CE.
Courtesy: Lietmotiv

such as academic campuses actively reproduce the prevailing social order of the time. In 859, a wealthy and educated woman, Fatimah al-Fihri, established the al-Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez, modern-day Morocco (Figure 5). Soon after, the Almoravid and Marinid sultans (12th and 13th centuries) expanded the scholastic program of the al-Qarawiyyin mosque and madrasas to make it the leading center of learning in the medieval Mediterranean world.¹⁹ One way to present this building as a historical case study would be to focus on the hypostyle hall of the mosque, the intricate *muqarnas* over its main *mihrab* (prayer niche), the minaret, and courtyard of the mosque. An equally important history of al-Qarawiyyin, however, focuses on its conflicted nature as producing some of the greatest male thinkers of the time while denying the same opportunities of scholarship to women.

The madrasa would go on to produce a remarkable list of alumni including Maimonides (12th-century Jewish philosopher), Ibn Khaldun (14th-century historian), and Leo Africanus (16th-century geographer). The madrasa even hosted early modern versions of international scholars such as the Flemish Nicolas Cleynaerts who studied the Qoran there in 1540. It is hardly surprising, then, that in addition to making significant discoveries in humanistic and scientific thought, these men also forwarded cosmopolitan principles of ethics and citizenship that continue to guide our contemporary society. Since its founding, however, al-Qarawiyyin was also a space of male authority, one that perpetuated patriarchal power,

belying its establishment by an educated woman patron. In fact, it was only in the 1950s that a woman scholar, Fatima al-Kabbaj, was admitted to the University of al-Qarawiyyin.²⁰ Such are the paradoxical legacies of modern universities as environments that simultaneously inspire cosmopolitan learning and action while actively perpetuating existing social inequities.

How then do we get students to excavate the histories, known and unknown, of their own habitus? Their habitus, which includes not only the university as an institution, but also the space of creativity (the studio or the classroom); as not simply the space of knowledge acquisition or ideation, but also that of social and political agency? Such a critical appraisal might require students to see themselves less as “experts-in-training” but rather as thinkers and experimenters engaged in dialogues with fellow citizens in big and small communities. It might warrant a rethinking of the design studio as more than a space of creative expression, but also of political agency. It might require more honest discussion regarding all creative decisions as being shaped by the biases and prejudices of their authors. Critical architectural histories can help students build such narrative imaginations of their creativity as deliberate interventions in a complex web of histories, social patterns, and political action. A recent publication by Hélène Frichot provides a model here.²¹ In *How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool*, Frichot proposes a feminist methodology for critiquing the surrounding built environment, especially those elements that might seem natural or obvious to the reader. She encourages users of her instruction manual to engage in creatively co-authoring their spaces, thereby exposing the patriarchies embedded in them.²²

TOWARDS A COSMOPOLITAN ARCHITECTURAL CURRICULUM

A gross definition of cosmopolitanism shared by the many philosophers who have spoken and written on the subject might be framed thus: cosmopolitanism refers to the ethical imperative to provide all humans basic rights, dignity, and dialogue. Cosmopolitanism has had a sturdy impact on the humanities and is increasingly being incorporated into undergraduate

curricula, albeit under different titles such as diversity initiatives, ethics courses, requirements for global coverage, and language training. The fields of architecture, landscape, and urban history too have recalibrated themselves along the question of what we owe those who do not share our national, racial, ethnic, or religious affiliations. In the field of design, however, there is still much work to do in terms of critically incorporating humanistic ethics into disciplinary epistemologies. Models of humanitarian design solutions for vulnerable populations suffering from poverty or dispossession as a result of natural disasters (Habitat for Humanity, Architecture for Humanity, Rural Studio, etc.) are still framed within Eurocentric norms of charity—the vulnerable benefitting from the largesse of the privileged and in turn being dependent on or at least beholden to their benefactors. While we would be remiss to diminish the value of a functioning shelter for a family struggling to survive in Alabama or Aceh, we cannot ignore that such models do little to subvert prevailing power structures and might well reinforce them.²³ Cosmopolitanism offers an alternative departure point, one where charity is replaced with dialogue, pity with respectful curiosity, and assimilation to the dominant order with a recognition of difference as meaningful and indeed necessary for a just social system.

To come of age in a time of “perpetual war” is no doubt an ethical burden, but one that might fuel new cosmopolitanisms. It requires that architectural histories—indeed all histories—recognize their complicity in forms of brutalization, oppression, and inequality over time. It demands new forms of design agency from architects built on a deep and engaged humanistic pathos for the other. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Architectural historians have struggled with similar questions for some time now and sought to globalize and democratize the discipline by calling attention to the European and North American biases that have shaped it by dismantling the myth of the “master” architect, and by illuminating the racial, gender, and class limitations of the architectural canon. See, for example: Hosagrahar, J. [2002]. “South Asia: Looking Back, Moving Ahead—History and Modernization.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61(3): 355-69; Baydar, G. [2004]. “The Cultural Burden of Architecture.” *Journal of Architectural Education* 57(4): 19-27; Gürel, M. Ö. and K. H. Anthony [2006]. “The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race,

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6. James-Chakraborty, K. (2013). *Architecture Since 1400*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
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8. Nasser Rabbat has pointed out that architecture as a discipline is mired in the "framework of an uninterrupted and cumulative progression in which each circumscribed historical stage is defined in relation to the sequence of preceding stages, and is in turn influencing the formulation of succeeding ones, down to the present." Rabbat, N. (2011). "The Pedigreed Domain of Architecture: A View from the Cultural Margin." *Perspecta* 44: 6-11, 190-92. pg. 6.
9. Dawson, P. C. and R. M. Levy (2005). "A Three-Dimensional Model of a Thule Whale Bone House." *Journal of Field Archaeology* 30(4): 443-55.
10. *Ibid.*
11. A recent issue of the *Journal of Architectural Education* (2017, Vol 71. Issue 2: *Environments*) was dedicated to the intersection between design and the Anthropocene. See especially, Gannon, T. (2017). "Strange Loops: Toward an Aesthetic for the Anthropocene." *Journal of Architectural Education* 71(2): 142-45, Mans, J. and T. Fisher *ibid.*"The Itinerant Architect: Toward a Land-Based Architectural Practice." 252-60.
12. For more on this, see the commentary regarding the representation of minorities in architectural history text books in Gürel, M. Ö. and K. H. Anthony (2006). "The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race, and Architectural History Texts." *Ibid.* 59(3): 66-76. See also, Weisman, L. K. (1994). *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-made Environment*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
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