Is there a direct relation between historical knowledge and architectural excellence? (Millon, 1960)

When this question was posed in 1960 by the doctoral student Henry A. Millon, who would later go on to become one of the major figures in American architectural historiography, he was sketching out the difficulty of reconciling architectural history’s ‘proper audience’ with the captivated audience provided by the architectural schools’ institutional framework. As we can see in the following paragraphs, Millon’s anxiety was neither eccentric nor short-lived.

Challenges of Teaching Architectural History

In the last five years alone, many articles¹ have expounded on the limits of architectural historiography, and many more hours of debate expended on the same topic at international meetings and conferences². The points of contention have been with the contradictory nature of the two overlapping disciplines—architecture and history—the former with its mandate to boldly invent anew at every possible opportunity, the latter to be more circumspect and critical of patterns of change. Above all, there is also the need to contend with the disciplinary limits of the term ‘architecture’, which architectural historian Andrew Leach explains is “marked by conceptual and technical fluidity” (2010, p. 5), as much as it is subject to what architectural theorist Karen Burns sees as a strict concern for a “history of proper names”, that is, buildings designed by architects of particular repute (Burns, 1996; Upton, 2002).

Yet, architecture can be, and is, much more complicated than buildings alone. Leach (2010) reminds us that “architecture is sometimes studied on its own terms, but it is just as often tabled as evidence for problems that are not architectural in nature” (p. 11). An example may be that when students study the emergence of the apartment block in Haussmann’s nineteenth-century Paris, they also confront issues of class divisions, gendered and social living arrangements, patterns of domestic life, modes of consumption, and get a sense of what was popular then. According to Leach, the questions that consequently emerge from this subject matter may be: Is the apartment block “exemplary, or symptomatic? Is it important architecturally, or historically?”(p. 12). For many theorists, historians and academics, this kind of ambiguity, with its inherited methodological and conceptual problems, is critical for not only keeping architectural history relevant to the discipline and the profession, but more importantly, for cultivating architecture “as a subject (that) sustains perpetual scrutiny from many angles, which in turn feeds back into the knowledge base of architectural historians to the subject’s further enrichment” (pp. 12, 13)³.
Developing the Module: Ensuring Reach and Relevance

I have also been preoccupied with similar questions since 2007, when I was given the responsibility of conducting a survey course in Western architectural history for third year architecture students. What seemed like a straightforward task of imparting specific canons of architecture historical knowledge to an undergraduate cohort became increasingly complex once questions of what to include, how much to include, and how to organise this unwieldy material to fit into the condensed space of twelve weeks, surfaced. While the generally accepted approach was to run the module chronologically, focusing on the sequence of architectural styles and movements changing over time, and to raise certain key architects and their works as exemplars, I decided against this structure because it would only be meaningful if students had experiential access to such kinds of architectural evidence. Barring this, the exercise would be purely academic, thus enacting, on the students’ part, a dutiful regurgitation of the Western architectural canon without them ever internalising its lessons, problems or opportunities.

Two recurring questions kept the module (and me) on its (my) toes.

For one thing, there was the inescapable question of distance—both in time and in space—as we negotiated subjects as distant and as foreign as the Greek Acropolis (dating back to the 50th century BC) and moving only as far forward as the British-inspired Arts and Crafts movement (late 19th century AD). For another, there was always the unspoken but persistent query whether there was substantial relevance—direct or indirect—in offering such academic knowledge to a group of students bent on a professional career, since it was arguable whether lessons from say, the Italian Renaissance, would figure at all in the contemporary dealings of an architectural firm.

Undoubtedly, the twinned difficulties of reach and relevance shaped the whole tenor of the module as it was reworked (and continues to be revised) to engage the Singapore architectural context. The distance of the content from contemporary Singapore, and the proximity of the subject matter—architecture—to the architecture student, proved to be two opposing obstacles—one alien, the other familiar. These polarised qualities provided a certain degree of tension, but I would emphasise, not one that was altogether unproductive. In this short essay, I wish to briefly reiterate the intricacies of the discipline we call architectural history, and to suggest that the problem of organising the past may be conceptualised as a fruitful epistemological struggle, which should be actively shared and experienced, instead of merely consumed, by students.

Teaching Strategy: Placing Architectural History in a Contemporary Context

My first instinct was to ask how this knowledge would be relevant to a third-year architecture student based in Singapore given that “architectural history...shares the question of instrumentality operativity with many branches of history” (Leach, 2010, p. 105). The module and its assignments were structured, unconsciously at first, but on hindsight now, to implicitly address the question of architectural history’s function in the context of contemporary architecture. Would this knowledge not only provide all architecture students with the erudition they required but also help them nurture analytical skill sets, which they could develop on their own, to actively reassess and participate in contemporary architectural critique?

Thus, instead of perceiving Renaissance architecture as simply a foreign historical style, would it be possible to approach it simultaneously from several angles? For instance, the approach may provide the necessary context for seeing architecture as material evidence of its age, bearing similarities in its character to the art and sculpture of its time, thus connecting architecture to the social, economic and political forces of the milieu. It may give students the impetus to understand architecture structurally through its technological limitations and
advances during this period of innovation; or even, to locate, compare and contemplate on Renaissance architecture as a reaction to what went before, and how it provoked what went after. In all these examples, the crucial concept was that of connection—being able to see architecture from within but also outside itself, to be conscious of its ‘exterior’ as it were, and to continually redefine architecture through its complex network of actors, resources, territories, and conventions.

Teaching Strategy: Adopting a Thematic Approach

My strategy was to scramble the lecture content, rejecting a chronological sequence in favour of thematic association. In this, I used the conjunctive subtitle “Architecture & …” to open a series of discussions dealing with the body, spectacle, technology, nature and utopian ambitions. Architectural movements across time were paired and studied for coincidences and divergences: the incorruptible body upheld in Greek and Roman architecture against the humanistic body of the Renaissance; comparing mass-produced Industrial Revolution architecture with the fragile but also mathematical and ‘modular’ Gothic spires; the multiple meanings drawn from the elastic concept of ‘nature’ seen through the gardens of the Picturesque movement, and later in the buildings and goods produced by the Arts and Crafts practitioners; the spectacle of religion in Baroque Rome beside the scale of capitalism in Hausmann’s Paris. Here, the idea was to get the student to see these historical subjects as intentionally suspended between different realms of perception and discourse. In this sense, the students became knowing collaborators in the re-organisation of this history. Debating whether an architectural movement should be classified under one theme or another is only possible when the movement is understood beyond its insular facts.

Module Activities & Student Responses

Such thematic organisation also “demonstrate(s) an interdisciplinary consciousness whereby one understands where architecture sits in relation to its various physical and conceptual settings” (Leach, 2010, p. 72). In other words, students learn to recognise the criticality, influence and value of architecture’s ‘edges’ (Leach, 2010). To reinforce this point, the assignments for this module were structured as a series of writing projects, building up in scale from literature review towards a full-length essay. Students were guided through a series of four seminars, where they were asked to consider similar kinds of connections between architecture and its ‘exterior’ or ‘edge’. In addition, these texts focused on issues pertinent to contemporary architecture, and as such, neither duplicated nor related directly to the material covered in the lecture. However, not all students recognise the critical utility of this approach. Rather than seizing the opportunity to question and reorganise architectural epistemology, students often lament that the lecture content could be reinforced by the assignments, despite being clearly briefed at the start of the module, and then subsequently at different intervals throughout the semester on why different kinds of assessment activities were set, with the specific rationale for each component repeatedly highlighted. Students often described the relationship to Singapore or the local context as being ‘irrelevant’. As one student puts it, “[t]he topics covered during the seminars were not really relevant to what was being taught in the lectures. They were very Singapore-centric and on the surface do not appear at all related to what we’re being taught on Western architecture.’

I have a very different view to this grievance. The large body of knowledge derived from the lecture material is necessarily examined in a more finite situation, that is, through an end-of-year test comprising short-answer and multiple-choice questions. This mode of testing responds to the requirement of a survey module, in which students are supposed to have a broad working knowledge of specific ideas, buildings, techniques, innovations and their influences. The writing projects, on the other hand, enable a more leisurely, in-depth and independent exploration of the kinds of techniques, connections and ‘edges’ sampled during the
lecture sessions. In their assignments, students are also asked to think specifically about how the ideas are relevant to the Singapore context, and to independently suggest a subject matter which they could investigate firsthand to test out their propositions. So while the module is ostensibly about Western architecture, it attempts to question, reorganise and ‘re-situate’ such knowledge within the reach and relevance of the architectural cohort here. The writing projects operate as exploratory vehicles, used to interrogate the ‘functionality’ of architectural history in a context vastly different from the original Western subject matter, and to encourage students to find their own voice amidst the multiple, and often contradicting, opinions and critiques embedded within their chosen subject.

Feedback from students suggest that they have taken away from the classroom something more than just raw historical data. One student thought it was an “[e]xcellent lecture series introducing Western architecture history in an engaging manner with sufficient breadth and depth to give students a working understanding and platform to perform their independent inquiry into a topic of personal interest in the future’. Another commented that “…the content was rich, interesting and thought provoking… [it] pushed … us to think, investigate and research on the leading architectural ideas, as well as [developing] an interest towards a broader range of inter-disciplinary study and was also smartly connected … to the local context’. Finally, yet another student shared that the lecture series ‘… [have] really benefitted us not only in architectural knowledge, but (introduced) an advanced way of thinking about history’.

Concluding Remarks

Architectural history is not only about “facts, impressions, and appreciations of existing large-scale social artifacts – but [should]… also provide an adequate exposure to the range of ideas, aesthetic effects, technical solutions, social formulations, and specialized traditions which constitute an architectural heritage” (Jacobs, 1965, p. 68). In the last decade, the tools and strategies of architecture have been applied by architectural practices such as the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and the Netherlands-based architecture and urban design practice MVRDV, as well as research groups such as the Think Tank studio at the University of Columbia, to shape “governance, capital, consumerism and national and continental identities” (Leach, 2010, p. 132). In this sense, as the boundaries and agendas of architecture change, so too must architectural historiography and the way architectural history is taught and received. Perhaps, the default distance between the Singapore context and the Western architectural tradition is not a weakness after all. The student’s active re-organisation of borrowed ideas, and the persistent need to locate his/her own position in relation to these ideas, ensures that their knowledge of architectural history remains fluid and contingent to their individual contexts. It gives the student agency over this otherwise abstract form of knowledge and enables action with regards to the various ‘ideological, historical and worldly forms’ (Hays, 2007) that architecture may assume.
Endnotes


2. Conferences include those held by the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ), International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE), and the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain (SAHGB).


References:


About the Author

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