

The Case for Survey Eclecticism

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Imagine an architectural history survey course in which the diversity of interpretive approaches takes precedence over any attempted comprehensiveness of content. This paper examines the merits, and possible pitfalls, of such a class. Instead of asking students to work through a single textbook, an “eclectic survey” presents a chapter from a different book every week with each chapter carefully selected to highlight a distinctive interpretive tradition: Sigfried Giedion on Paleolithic Europe, Vibhuti Sachdev on Ancient South Asia, George Kubler on Ancient America . . . and so on. Together with the relevant details of buildings and artifacts, lectures in an “eclectic survey” course unpack the contexts and strategies that shaped each author’s approach to history. Working through such historiographical variety poses challenges for students and instructors alike, but the difficulties created by this “eclectic” approach are worth embracing – or so this paper argues – to the extent that they escape the expansionist mode of today’s global surveys, many of which are fueled by the misguided belief that an ever-more-granular expertise will one day deliver an all-encompassing picture of historical reality. If history has taught us anything, it is that its own interpretation remains perpetually in flux. Historians’ methodologies shift, often seismically, from one generation to the next. Why not equip architectural students to understand such changes and their motivations? Ultimately, an architectural survey guided by an ethos of eclecticism creates a better framework to discuss the consequences of choices historians have made and are still making.

BUILDING AN ECLECTIC SURVEY

Over the past two years an experimental method for survey teaching, best characterized as an “eclectic” approach, has been piloted at the Taubman College of Architecture + Urban Planning, University of Michigan. “ARCH 313 – History of Architecture I” is a required course for undergraduate architecture majors who typically take the survey in the fall semester of their sophomore year.¹ The class covers an array of global monuments and architectural developments beginning with prehistory and stretching to the year 1400. For the past several years, the course was taught using Michael Fazio, Marian Moffett and Lawrence Wodehouse’s *Buildings Across Time: An Introduction to World Architecture* (McGraw-Hill, 2009), supplemented by a robust

collection of primary source documents. Beginning in 2018, the decision was made to test a more eclectic approach – one that might open the syllabus to a more diverse roster of voices while allowing for greater flexibility in the overall structuring of content. Financial considerations also played a role, since the eclectic survey’s “sampling” approach makes it possible to teach the course via a digital course reader at no additional cost to students.²

The resulting course framework, organized by its weekly historiographical variations, poses inevitable challenges for students and instructors alike. Yet one could argue that these difficulties are very much in keeping with the broader challenges of the contemporary moment, an ever-increasing variegation in potential sources of information, many of them formed into closed loops, accompanied by a corresponding erosion in the ability to assess relative veracity. Indeed, we seem to be inhabiting a moment in which survey eclecticism is not merely plausible, it might be essential, especially if we hope to continue teaching the skills of critical reading, source evaluation and factual narration.³ Specific to architectural survey teaching, a glut of information on previously overlooked buildings from across the globe is more readily available today than ever before, but this positive development has exacerbated, exponentially, one of the inherent problems of the survey itself: the challenge of selecting single examples to bear the representational burden of entire oeuvres, regions, or epochs. As Mitchell Schwarzer puts it in the opening lines of his definitive essay on the “Origins of the Art History Survey:”

The survey text is art history at its most grandiose, promising to reveal the complex truths of humanity through art. It is also art history at its most political, reducing cultural and individual differences to questionable hierarchies and generalities.⁴

An “eclectic survey” does not skirt these issues entirely, but attacks them from a new angle. Making a single chapter representative of an author’s - or at most an intellectual school’s - method is still reductive, but less problematically so. In effect, the “eclectic” approach charts a middle path between the thematic organization typically preferred in schools of architecture and the chronological presentation still taught in most art history departments today. An eclectic survey does not completely avoid the “universal and developmental pre-simplifications,” singled out by Schwarzer as pitfalls of any global

survey text, but it does aim to create a space where students are granted agency to identify and discuss these shortcomings.⁵

Put another way, the conceptual difficulties created by the “eclectic” format might be worth embracing to the extent that they escape the expansionist mode of today’s global surveys, many of them fueled by the misguided belief that an ever-more-granular expertise will one day deliver an all-encompassing picture of historical reality. Though the geographical scope of contemporary survey texts has broadened, today’s resources still follow the basic diagram visualized in Thomas Cole’s 1840 painting of *The Architect’s Dream* (see Fig. 1), a radiant vision of a totalizing, rationally-organized presentation of architecture in its historical unfolding.⁶ If history has taught us anything, it is that its own interpretation remains perpetually in flux. Tracking even the most recent shifts in the landscape of survey texts over the past two decades alone, it becomes apparent that techniques and shared standards of interpretation have evolved far more rapidly and dramatically than the basic roster of monuments. Why not equip architectural students to understand such changes and their motivations?

At Michigan, the “eclectic survey” course opens with Nietzsche’s seminal 1874 essay on “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.”⁷ This text is assigned in order to convey some sense of the urgency that the study of history might assume. But also, crucially, it introduces the guiding theory that an eclectic approach might be one defense against the danger of over-cultivating history, of turning it into “a defect and deficiency ... a consuming fever.”⁸ As Nietzsche explains:

Every human ... requires, in accordance with its goals, energies, and needs, a certain kind of knowledge of the past, now in the form of monumental, now of antiquarian, now of critical history: but it does not require it as a host of pure thinkers who only look on at life, of knowledge-thirsty individuals whom knowledge alone will satisfy and to whom the accumulation of knowledge is itself the goal ...⁹

With the tripartite schema of the “monumental,” the “antiquarian,” and the “critical,” Nietzsche begins to sketch the outlines of a possible survey eclecticism, an engagement with history marked by different potential attitudes, or approaches to finding utility in history. The key, he argues, is to keep moving, now trying one mode out, now another, constantly shifting one’s approach to history in order to avoid becoming consumed by it. With these three categories, Nietzsche provides a preliminary system of classification which students can test out on the authors they encounter during the ensuing weeks. At the same time they will expand the system, and add new categories as they go.

As is the case for most activities carried out under an ethos of eclecticism, the creative work resides in the process of selection. To deliver on the conceptual promise of this approach, the teacher of an “eclectic survey” needs to manipulate four separate ‘dials’ in a manner reminiscent of those combination

locks found on many briefcases. The four conceptual dials consist of 1) geography – to ensure a global distribution of architectural projects; 2) chronology – to convey the transformation of architectural traditions over time and their response to major events, or innovations; 3) a menu of themes – determined at the teacher’s discretion and drawing on their interests and areas of expertise; and 4) a range of methods – represented by a suitably diverse cast of authors (See Fig. 2). Unlike the combination lock, there will be no single coordination of dials that suddenly springs open the case, but rather a period of trial and error that should eventually result in a syllabus structured by a series of productive alignments.

To cite an example, in the course taught at Michigan, “gender and space” is pre-selected as one of the constitutive themes. Labelle Prussin’s “Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture” (1974) addresses questions of gender and space-making in a context most students are likely to find productively unfamiliar.¹⁰ By selecting Prussin’s text, the “central African” zone on the “geography” dial snaps into place with the “gender and space” zone on the “thematic dial.” At the same time, Prussin’s piece invites a discussion of methodologies that accompany the study of indigenous, or vernacular architecture, as well as the scholarly “decolonizing” that she identifies as an objective of her text. In this instance, the fourth “chronology” dial remains somewhat loose, given the difficulty of precisely dating the indigenous architectural examples discussed by Prussin (a difficulty which prompts yet another commentary on method). But in this case, the lack of strict temporal placement grants some leeway in deciding where to situate this reading in the roughly chronological sequence of the syllabus.

This inconsistency in the intensity of proposed affinities among the ‘dials’ of geography, theme, method and chronology is to be expected and it allows for a degree of flexibility that enables each instructor to customize their course. Multiple chapters in Spiro Kostof’s *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (1985), for example, admirably engage the theme of “urbanism.” Thus in building an “eclectic” syllabus, one might initially hold Kostof’s text in reserve, allowing other dials to move into alignment. Once the majority of slots have been filled, Kostof can be placed in a remaining gap, bringing the theme/method of “urbanism,” along with him.¹¹

Certainly, this ‘dial spinning’ is an inexact science, or, more aptly, a process reminiscent of Claude Levi-Strauss’s “Science of the Concrete” in which “animals and plants are not known as a result of their usefulness,” but “are deemed to be useful or interesting because they are first of all known.”¹² Levi-Strauss relates this pattern of thought with the contemporary bricoleur, a figure whose practiced eclecticism mirrors the ingenuity required to compose an effective syllabus for the type of survey course under consideration. The “eclectic survey” teacher’s set of means, like those of the bricoleur:

cannot be defined in terms of a project. ... It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and



Figure 1. Though the geographical scope of most contemporary surveys has broadened, they still follow the basic diagram proposed in Thomas Cole's painting, the dream of a totalizing, rationally-organized presentation. Imagine, as an alternative, a survey with a diagram closer to that suggested by Cheval's Palais ideal. What opportunities might this eclecticism contain? ABOVE: Thomas Cole, *The Architect's Dream*, 1840, oil on canvas, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio. BELOW: *Le Palais idéal* (Villa of Cheval the Postman), 1879-1912, constructed by Joseph Ferdinand Cheval, Hauterives, France.

in the language of the 'bricoleur' [them]self, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy'. Such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the 'bricoleur' not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are 'operators' but they can be used for any operations of the same type.¹³

As a result of these conditions, the architectural diagram of the "eclectic survey" departs from the one visualized in Thomas Cole's painting and begins to resemble the work of another of Levi-Strauss's bricoleur's, namely *Le Palais idéal* (or the Villa of Cheval the Postman), constructed between 1879 and 1912 by Joseph Ferdinand Cheval in Hauterives, France (see Fig. 1).

Working with the resources at hand, when one happens to identify an especially productive alignment of the four considerations (geography, chronology, theme, and method), the content often seems to crystalize in a particularly powerful way for students (or so their written feedback suggests). One such crystallization took hold in relation to a chapter assigned for the

Michigan survey from Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1950).¹⁴ The lecture designed to accompany Gombrich's text on "Art for Eternity: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete" took up the theme of "representational systems." More specifically, the lecture aimed to explain the varied ability of representational systems to transport visual content over time and across spaces. This notion is exemplified with particular clarity by the Egyptian canon, i.e. the rule-based system encoded in a gridded armature of 18 (and later 22) modules that ensured the remarkable visual consistency of standing Egyptian figures over thousands of years. This topic dovetails perfectly with a broader discussion of "canon" as the term is conventionally understood today, as well as the significance of a "Western canon" for Gombrich's individual historical project. One can explain to students the importance of expanding, reshuffling, decolonizing, and completing all manner of critical operations on the canon, but this discussion suddenly acquires a new clarity when it emerges in front of Gombrich and his Egyptian examples. The lecture eventually considers a number of Egyptian artifacts, juxtaposed with Gombrich's own self-imposed rules for writing his survey. In this way certain affinities shared by Egyptian representation and Gombrich's own approach to history-writing are teased out, establishing a feedback loop that makes this dual content particularly memorable for students. It also helps that Gombrich's text is one of the most widely translated (and effectively translated) survey texts available. It can be read in at least 30 languages including Chinese, Korean, Turkish, Russian, and Hebrew. In this manner, a conversation about canon, based on a reading of Gombrich in one's native language, achieves a kind of unexpected inclusivity, one that might not have developed outside the eclectic survey's framework.

While it may not be completely perceptible to students, composing a survey syllabus in this manner forces the pedagogical format to confront its nineteenth-century roots. Like the artificial ruins meticulously staged in gardens to provoke conversation, evoke sentiment, and create scenarios for learning, the "eclectic survey" is presented as something already broken, or, broken from the start. It exposes its own flaws, its frayed edges, its gaping incompletions and, like the ruins which so enchanted art historians during the early phases of the academic survey's invention, the voids offer opportunities to continue the work. They invite creative completions, and in this sense, the eclectic survey addresses one of the main criticisms of existing survey resources: their tendency to present the work of architectural history as something that has already been completed, or, is rapidly nearing completion. As David Levine and Larry Silver noted in their 2006 review of the nine most frequently used art history surveys, "the current array of texts does very little to foster the kind of critical thinking and skills acquisition essential to preserving and growing our discipline."¹⁵ Thirteen years later, the available survey texts have improved in many crucial respects, but the modes of presentation do not lend themselves to some of the more practical skills that introductory survey courses might hope to foster, namely, training in "careful, informed looking" and the ability to "frame interpretive questions" in response to specific architectural

WOULD PURCHASE	AUTHOR(S)	TEXT
24%	Ching, Francis D.K., Mark Jarzombek and Vikramaditya Prakash	<i>A Global History of Architecture</i> , 2 nd ed. (2011)
12%	Rudofsky, Bernard	<i>Architecture without Architects</i> (1964)
9%	Fletcher, Banister	<i>A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method</i> , 10 th ed. (1938)
9%	Moffet, Marian, Michael Fazio, and Lawrence Wodehouse	<i>Buildings Across Time: An Introduction to World Architecture</i> (2004)
7%	Kimball, Fiske and George Harold Edgell	<i>A History of Architecture</i> (1918)
5%	Liang Sicheng	<i>A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture</i> (1984)
5%	Scully, Vincent	<i>Architecture: The Natural and the Manmade</i> (1991)
4%	Nietzsche, Friedrich, R. J. Hollingdale, trans.	"On the uses and disadvantages of history for life" (1874)
4%	Prussin, Labelle	"An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture" (1974)
3%	Gombrich, Ernst H.	<i>The Story of Art</i> (1950)
3%	Kostof, Spiro	<i>A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals</i> (1985)
3%	Stokstad, Marilyn	<i>Art History</i> , 2 nd ed., Vol. 1 (2002)
3%	Trachtenberg, Marvin and Isabelle Hyman	<i>Architecture from Prehistory to Post-Modernism: The Western Tradition</i> (1986)
3%	Watkin, David	<i>A History of Western Architecture</i> , 4 th ed. (2005)
1%	Kubler, George	<i>Studies in Ancient American and European Art</i> (1985)
1%	Le Corbusier (Frederick Etchells, trans.)	<i>Towards a new architecture</i> (1927)
1%	Nuttgens, Patrick	<i>The Story of Architecture</i> , 2 nd ed. (1997)
1%	Pevsner, Nikolaus	<i>An Outline of European Architecture</i> (1943)
1%	Roth, Leland M.	<i>Understanding Architecture</i> (1993)
1%	Steinhardt, Nancy	<i>Chinese Architecture: A History</i> (2019)

Figure 2. The diversity of architecture students' interests as reflected in a diversity of historiographical approaches. This table represents 76 responses to the question: "Of all the texts assigned in this course, which would you be most likely to purchase as a resource for your future career?"

examples.¹⁶ Since the "eclectic survey" foregrounds questions of method, it can create a learning environment that verges on the practicum. In the course offered at the University of Michigan, the individual assignments re-emphasize the understanding of history as something constructed and in need of ongoing re-constructions. In one assignment, students extract an artifact from a survey text and propose its installation as a critical addendum to an existing gallery in the university's art museum. In a later assignment, students select an architectural example from their surroundings and insert it in a survey chapter as a critical intervention. In other words, the content of the eclectic survey resonates even more when it is positioned through an eclectic range of learning sites.

Overall, the diversity of methods and thematic focal points contained in an eclectic survey should, in theory, appeal to a wider range of student learning styles, motivations, and interests. While more data still needs to be collected, preliminary results suggest this to be the case. When asked on the final exam, "of all the texts assigned in this course, which would you be most likely to purchase as a resource for your future career?" students responded with a surprisingly even distribution of texts, reflecting, one would hope, the diversity of their own interests and intellectual affinities (see

Fig. 2). Francis D. K. Ching, Mark Jarzombek, and Vikramaditya Prakash's *A Global History of Architecture* (2nd ed., 2011), was the most popular answer, garnering just over 24% of the votes. But nineteen other works resonated with at least one individual student, and no other text exceeded 12% of the vote.

While this particular approach to survey teaching is still relatively new, its potential pitfalls are easily discernable. The most difficult aspect is the extra burden placed on the instructor, requiring them to unpack the distinct strategies and historical contexts for the authors' contrasting approaches to architectural history during the lectures. This is especially onerous when dealing with authors who were once influential to generations of students (not to mention the buildings they went on to design), but who are now recognized as being problematic on multiple levels (writers like Banister Fletcher, James Fergusson, Nikolaus Pevsner and Liang Ssu-ch'eng, among others). Covering this material may not align with student expectations or appetites, especially when it is perceived to take up time that could otherwise profitably be spent on close readings of buildings or urban environments. This is less likely to be the case in smaller group settings. The eclectic format is likely best suited to teaching situations that involve at least one weekly discussion section. At Michigan, the small group

meetings helped win converts to the eclectic method, once students realized that discussions on the history of architectural history naturally raise questions of identity and identity's relation to acts of interpretation – a topic they were eager to discuss, regardless of their previous coursework.¹⁷ That being said, the eclectic survey is more likely to tap into disciplinary discussions that are crucial, but potentially inappropriate, or at least premature, in the context of an introductory course.

From the perspective of the instructor, the challenges may not be as daunting as one would initially assume. A problem often cited by critics of the introductory survey is the tendency to assign these courses to new faculty, or in some cases, graduate students in the final stages of earning their PhD. While it is true that these teachers are emerging from a context which emphasizes scholarly specialization and a depth of knowledge in a narrowly defined subject – an objective that is, on the surface, at odds with the demands of survey-teaching – many have also recently passed through “Methods” seminars and in some cases seminars devoted to historiographical concerns, not to mention the deep methodological considerations that shape most dissertation projects. All of this preparation could feed into the framework of an “eclectic” survey with relative efficiency. For younger and more experienced teachers alike, the opportunity to select organizing themes and devote some time to discussions of method could potentially ease the daunting task of expanding lectures to cover areas and time periods that lie far beyond their well-worn comfort zones.

In theory an “eclectic survey” should be able to adapt and incorporate new knowledge and new methodologies in a way that defies the expansionist tendencies of other contemporary survey models. The admittedly complicated system of the four dials (chronology, geography, theme, and method) creates a framework in which it is easier to identify key gaps that need to be filled by other voices. In a best-case scenario, the goal of achieving productive alignment across the four areas of concern would encourage commissioned translations into English of much-needed history texts from other traditions, especially those originating from indigenous contexts. Ultimately, an architectural survey guided by an ethos of eclecticism can succeed if it distinguishes itself as a *living* survey, one that creates a better framework to discuss the consequences of choices historians have made and are still making.

ENDNOTES

1. ARCH 313 – History of Architecture I at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, typically enrolls between 70 and 80 students, the vast majority of whom are undergraduate architecture majors, though each year a handful of students from other departments enroll. The course is taught in the format of two 50-minute lectures and one 50-minute discussion section over a 15-week semester. The lectures are typically taught by a faculty member and the discussion sections are led by PhD student teaching assistants.
2. For comparison, a one-semester rental of the Fazio, Moffett and Wodehouse text costs a student upwards of fifty dollars. See, for example, the one semester “Rental” option available via amazon prime: https://www.amazon.com/gp/offer-listing/0073379298/ref=dp_olp_all_mbc_mma?ie=UTF8&condition=all (accessed on 01/15/2020).
3. A serious discussion of the goals of survey courses and an exploration of alternative models has a real urgency given the fact that the NAAB is set to present architecture programs with new guidelines for the teaching of architectural history in 2020.
4. Mitchell Schwarzer, “Origins of the Art History Survey Text” in *Art Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Rethinking the Introductory Art History Survey (Autumn, 1995), 24.
5. Schwarzer, 24.
6. Thomas Cole, *The Architect's Dream*, 1840, oil on canvas, collection of the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio. In Cole's “Letter to the Public on the Subject of Architecture,” he remarks that “For architecture to arrive at the perfection which we see in the best examples of Greece, Ages of expression and thought must have been necessary [for] the human mind [to] have traveled by slow degrees from the rude column of unknown stone such as formed the druidical structures through the stupendous portals of Egyptian Art to unsurpassed beauty of the Grecian Temple.” late 1830's, quoted in Ellwood C. Parry, III., *The Art of Thomas Cole* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 206. Despite what Cole's painting might lead us to believe, not all conceptions of architectural history in the nineteenth century were so Eurocentric. In fact, many contemporary Global surveys overstate the novelty of their geographic reach. Two years after the completion of Cole's painting, Franz Kugler's *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 1842) included sections on the art of North and South America, Persia, India, Kabulistan, Ceylon, Nepal and Java, all before any mention of Classical Greece.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” [1874] in *Untimely Meditations*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 58-123. In an end of term survey, a surprising 4% of students in the survey course at the University of Michigan identified this text as the one they would be most likely to purchase as a resource to draw on in their future careers.
8. Nietzsche, 60.
9. Nietzsche, 77.
10. Labelle Prussin, “An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture,” in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (October 1974), 182-205.
11. Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 190-215.
12. Claude Levi-Strauss, “Chapter One: The Science of the Concrete,” in *The Savage Mind* [1962] (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 9.
13. Levi-Strauss, 17-18.
14. Ernst H. Gombrich, “Chapter 2. Art for Eternity: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete,” in *The Story of Art* [1950], 16th ed. (London: Phaidon, 1995), 55-73.
15. Levine, David A. and Larry Silver, “‘Quo Vadis, Hagia Sophia?’ Art History's Survey Texts,” in *caa.reviews.2006.134*, January 25, 2006.
16. Again, these are skills identified by Levine and Silver in their critique of the available survey literature: “There is another way in which the current options fail us: none does a very good job in helping students to identify and develop expertise in the fundamental methods of our discipline.”
17. According to Mitchell Schwarzer, this process of grappling with identity and its relationship to interpretation is one of the things global surveys texts were initially designed to facilitate, though in the nineteenth century, the identity discussions were more likely to be framed in terms of national identities. See Schwarzer, 24.