Writing About Architecture

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"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture."

--Unknown, attributed to Leonard Bernstein, Clara Schumann, Elvis Costello and Frank Zappa, among others.

If writing about music is like dancing about architecture, then why isn't the converse true? Dancing about music seems fairly natural, but writing about architecture is notoriously difficult. Usually, architects are by definition visual thinkers, a group that has well-known problems with the linear nature of thought required by writing.

After a faculty meeting two years ago that focused on the lamentable writing skills of our students, we decided to develop a summer course that would offer architecture students a 'safe haven' in which to practice the art and craft of writing about their discipline. We would see whether our department's frustration with the level writing was inherent, or whether a dedicated workshop could bring out thoughtful, well-crafted written work from students across the curriculum.

In our own experience, writing has been a meaningful part of our educations and careers. One of us has a degree in English and foreign languages, in addition to a professional architectural education, and has worked for several years as a specifications specialist. The other has a more traditional design background but also a modestly successful sideline in history and criticism. Both of us believed that the lack of writing ability in our department was not due to the students, but was instead a shortcoming in the curricular structure and philosophical aims of the program itself. We were convinced that a pilot course would demonstrate that, with a bit of effort and commitment on the part of faculty who believed in the importance of writing to architectural production, students could be coaxed into much better writing skills than they had previously demonstrated.

Part of our interest in pursuing this workshop course has been a fundamental belief that there are, in fact, important links between writing and architecture. We often speak of a narrative "structure" of a plot, for example. Space can be defined by words or walls. The craft of editing is remarkably similar to the discipline of re-designing. Likewise, there is a long tradition of architectural criticism that often rises to the level of literature—the work of Lewis Mumford, Ada Louise Huxtable, or Paul Goldberger, for instance. As we discussed the possibility for such a course, we realized that writing could be taught in a format similar to studio, with time for one-on-one critiques, peer discussions, and a focus on development in addition to product. Our department has long recognized that classroom work in building technology, urbanism, environmental psychology and design theory can be profoundly supplemented by an emphasis in these areas during the creative work of design studio. What if, we wondered, we taught writing not by lecturing on grammar and rhetoric, but rather by simply letting students start to produce right away, and pointing out these technical aspects alongside larger issues of voice, content, and style?

Pedagogy

We developed a pedagogy based on analogy. By making comparisons between writing workshops and design studios, we enabled students to build upon generative, creative processes they routinely engage in traditional architecture curriculum. We also capitalized on work done in the field of teaching writing, in which "workshopping" occupies a common place in many pedagogical approaches. Finally, we considered key differences between the products of these similar generative processes.

Our syllabus began with a definition of "workshop" that highlights both its architectural (a place) and temporal (an event) connotations. We framed the course as a writing "studio" that would rely heavily on interaction, analysis, and iteration. In this way, "writing" moved from a separate, inscrutable, product-oriented activity in the minds of our students into the more familiar, process-rich realm of design. As with the design process, writing requires practice. It requires analysis of good work to understand characteristics of excellence. It requires critical discussion of the work to test the life of the work outside the mind its author. And it requires editing to achieve a state of completion.

The syllabus also formed parallels between the tools of writing and design. Like a designer in studio, a writer keeps a toolbox handy. Instead of X-acto knives, Sobo, and leads, the writer's box holds implements of the trade: writing tools (pens, pencils, legal pads, notebooks, laptops, typewriters, bond paper) and essential references. While architects keep Ching, *Graphic Standards* and the most recent IBC at their desks, writers have Strunk and White, a dictionary, a thesaurus, and the Chicago Manual.

As we developed a series of exercises and assignments, we continued with the analogy, using what design students already know as a starting point for generating writing. These activities took on various scales: in-class exercises were carried out during workshop hours; weekly assignments required response to readings, in-class discussion, and application of analysis to week-long pieces; and a longer, term-length assignment provided opportunity to explore architectural ideas through a format introduced in class.

The in-class exercises occupied much of our time the first few weeks. To illustrate our design studio/writing workshop analogy, these exercises paired pedagogical thoughts from teaching writing with those from art and design. Consider, for instance, the pair of quotes from the first exercise, something we called "contour writing":

"There is only one right way to learn to draw and that is a perfectly natural way. It has nothing to do with artifice or technique. It has nothing to do with aesthetics or conception. It has only to do with the act of correct observation, and by that I mean a physical contact with all sorts of objects through all the senses."[i]

"No student of composition need ever feel at a loss for something to write about if he will rely upon his own direct observation.... In the multitude of specific details which he has thus perceived, and in the multitude of details which he can at any time take in with fresh awareness, is a rich abundance of material for every writer, beginner or professional."[ii]

The first quotation references the well-known ideas of Kimon Nicolaides in *The Natural Way to Draw*. The second comes from a book developed by the English Department at Wayne State University. Both date from the early 1940s, so they already share a relationship within the cultural history of teaching and learning methods. But they also highlight the role of close observation in both drawing and writing. Most of the students in the seminar had done some type of contour drawing before; we did drawings first, and then extrapolated the techniques of careful, focused observation into writing. Other in-class exercises focused on language ("architectural love poems," structure ("building haiku") and diagramming ("diagrams, clusters, outlines"). In every case, we began with the familiar and then exported it into the less familiar context of words.

We used the assigned readings to introduce various forms of verbal expression, giving students an opportunity to analyze established work within the context of the weekly assignments. These ranged from the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, to the canonical historical

work of Vitruvius, Alberti, and Semper, to the analytical work of Colin Rowe, to architecture critics in the popular press from Lewis Mumford to Blair Kamin. These formed a basis for close reading and discussion as they exposed students to a broad range of discipline-related written work. Perhaps more importantly, they began to supply students with a vocabulary and a set of rhetorical tools for writing about architecture.

Finally, the workshop sessions themselves became an analogue to the design studio pin-up. For each weekly assignment, students had to read everyone else's drafts and mark them up prior to class. In class, each student would be responsible for reviewing each other student's work during class discussion. We would then choose one or two pieces for more intense scrutiny, often spending forty-five minutes on one sentence, analyzing the issues, figuring out what wasn't working, and rewriting until it was satisfactory.

In all of these ways, the course built on the students' strengths, while helping them to understand the specific demands of writing. Framing the course in this analogical way allowed them to begin the process with confidence and approach the task of translating their ideas into verbal essays without fear.

Course Structure

As a summer course, Writing About Architecture was offered over eight weeks—a compressed, intensive workshop. We used the first two weeks for warmup exercises, to get the class comfortable with the format, to introduce them to our working method, and to do some preliminary exercises that would get them used to the regular writing they would be required to do over the summer. In our first class, we collectively read, out loud, "The Library of Babel" by Jorge Luis Borges. This, we explained, was a unique selection in its parallels between architecture and narrative structure. But we had an ulterior motive, namely getting students comfortable with speaking in class, and inspiring them with a work of profound emotional impact, dry humor, and expert craft. Borges became a touchstone for the course, a measure of the architectural power of the written or spoken word, and a convenient example to bring up when writing became too dry or technical. We also explored the piece's architectural precedents with a brief lecture on representations of the Tower of Babel in art.

Other preliminary exercises included a class period dedicated to "contour writing." Drawing classes in our curriculum take advantage of our campus' collection of Beaux-Arts buildings. For our exercise, we picked a familiar classical structure and assigned a series of contour sketches followed by timed writing exercises. Students had five, fifteen, and thirty minute periods in which to record their visual and sensory impressions, first using line, then using words. The explicit parallel between a visual mode of thinking/representation and a verbal mode was intentionally challenging, but the resulting prose poems and descriptive lists proved both insightful and provocative. A second in class exercise focused on writing within constraints. Students were assigned to select a recent piece of criticism from *Architectural Record* and, using only words found in the article, compose a short love poem. The results were, predictably, hilarious. Finally, we had students read several pieces of architectural journalism covering Chicago's Millennium Park, a major new urban space familiar to students in our region, and compose several *haikus* using the Park as subject matter. Having thus expanded their mindset with contour exercises, and then encouraged work within very tightly constrained boundaries, we had a set of preliminary experiences that set the tone for the remaining six weeks of disciplined but, we hoped, expansive work.

Each remaining week of the course focused on a particular genre of architectural writing. We began with allegedly simple Descriptive work, pointing out the challenges and potential for writing linear narratives about three-dimensional space. Readings focused on classic treatises, by Vitruvius, Alberti, Semper and Le Corbusier, in which fundamental architectural ideas are described with varying levels of complexity. Our second week emphasized Criticism, discussing how judgments are made about architecture using language, and how writing can be an incisive tool for unearthing both implicit and explicit values within design. Here we used contemporary coverage of Millennium Park in parallel with the *Haiku* exercises, contrasting journalistic standards with the poetic potential of finely honed poetry. In the course's middle

section, we spent one week on Exposition, explaining how architecture is made or how it functions, using classic writings for the public by Lewis Mumford, Ada Louise Huxtable and Paul Goldberger, and another week on analysis, using writings by Colin Rowe and John Summerson to highlight writing as a method of revealing layers of meaning. Finally, we spent one week on professional and technical writing, discussing specifications and design narratives using examples from local firms and from the office of Louis Kahn, and a week on Manifestos, reading examples of perhaps the most notorious mode of architectural writing by Corbusier, Paul Scheerbart, Mies van der Rohe and Robert Venturi.

For each topic, students were required, after reading what we considered good examples of the genre, to write a similarly conceived piece. Assignments were designed to build on the readings, locating topics in students' experience and requiring them to go beyond simple imitation. In particular, our Criticism assignment added real-world considerations. A local newspaper offered us two pages in their Sunday lifestyle section for coverage of a new arena built in the region. Students wrote 500 word critiques, which were then edited and selected by the paper's editors. The process offered students a chance to experience stiff critiques from professionals, to recognize the constraints offered by deadlines and space, and to see their work in a profoundly public context. Other assignments included the "interrogation" of a building (Analysis), a narrative of a building on campus without using its name or obvious identifying features (Description), an explanation of a building's function to a layperson (Exposition) and, finally, a short Manifesto, read aloud in a local coffee shop to an audience. Students took to this last one with a particularly strong sense of irony.

Description of course as presented

We took advantage of the course's summer schedule, which allowed lengthy meeting times—150 minutes--twice a week. This allowed us to draft two basic class templates. Tuesday meetings were devoted primarily to in-class exercises and/or readings. Students were responsible for reading a package of materials, but we generally agreed on one essay or piece on which to focus during each Tuesday class. This allowed us to explore in depth the structure, rhetoric, tone and style of individual essays. Students were required to respond individually, pointing out passages that they thought were particularly strong or weak, and asking about elements that they didn't fully understand. Thursdays were reserved for pure workshop sessions. Using design studio reviews as a model, we set the class up in seminar fashion, and brought each student paper up for discussion in turn. Each student in the class was responsible for a five minute in-class review of each paper in addition to written comments. Students were thus encouraged to engage in the sort of critical discussions that occur in studio, again layering a parallel experience from design onto the activity of writing.

To make this work, Tuesdays were also assignment and due dates for each of the written exercises. That way, students would have the long, four-day 'weekend' to do the readings and review their peers' written work. They could, therefore, draw parallels between the examples and the class' production. Understandably, the first few classes had some awkward moments, as students seemed intimidated by their admittedly flabby writing and editing skills. But as the class wore on, themes in each student's writing emerged that the class recognized—one student consistently relied on metaphor, for example, while another returned several times to domestic themes. As the class became familiar with writing styles and interests, discussions became more in depth—and more technical. As instructors, we used gentle humor to point out writing crutches, grammatical errors, and technical faults; we knew we had achieved something when one student said of another's work "The passive voice is being used way too much" and the entire class got the joke.

Our class took place in a high-tech room, and we decided to experiment with various classroom technologies to dissect readings and assignments. We used Smartboard and an Elmo to present readings in detail, highlighting relevant passages and outlining argument structure. With student assignments, we would often use the last half-hour of class to pick one student's work. With an electronic copy of the essay, we would project a Microsoft Word file on the screen and, using the program's "Track Changes" feature, debate as a class suggestions for

editing. This proved remarkably successful, particularly as we could switch easily back and forth between the original and the edited document, showing the benefits of serious editing.

With their peers' comments in hard copy form, students were graded not on the pieces they presented in class, but rather on a writing portfolio they assembled, edited, and re-wrote throughout the summer. We asked students to turn in final versions of each assignment, along with a longer piece, assigned at the beginning of the summer that adopted one of the six major techniques presented during the course using a topic of their choice. This paper, too, was the subject of an intensive workshop session. We used these portfolios to compare first drafts with final products, noting both the quality of the final essays and the depth of editing that students had done.

Assessment

While summer courses do not have standard course evaluation forms, we requested feedback from our students in the written form, in response to questions we wrote, and in a final, de-briefing dinner. With this small of a group, and as a result of the nature of the course, there was no way for this to be anonymous. Still, because we had developed a course atmosphere of constructive criticism, we expected honesty and straightforward comments.

The results were unanimously supportive of a course of this kind. Some of the overall comments are reprinted below:

"I enjoyed the class very much...I have always been pretty confident about my writing, but not my architectural writing because we never get to see anyone else's when assigned something for studio...I was a little skeptical about having everyone read my writing and then openly discuss it in class, I know we do that for projects by writing it has always been different."

"The class exceeded all of my expectations. I learned something different about my own writing from each of the assignments and also enjoyed the readings."

"I also found the comments that the other students wrote on my papers really pushed me to improve and enhance the original through iteration, something that I had never applied to my writing before..."

"I didn't have major expectations...I just wanted to write about architecture! The class was so much more."

Of course, every student had suggestions for improvement. These ranged from increasing the number of drafts required to expanding the course into two semester-long parts. Some students were more attracted to some types of writing than others; some wished for less reading, while others asked for more discussion and analysis of the reading assignments. All students, however, noted that the course exposed them to facets of the relationship between reading and writing that they were not aware of prior to this course. And all students praised the focus on group critique and iteration, with several noting – as they do in some of the excerpts above – the parallels between this approach to writing and they way they engage design studio.

For us, the results of the summer also exceeded our expectations. We developed the course based on mutual hunches about student abilities and a shared philosophy about the value of writing to architecture. By the end of the summer, we found we had tapped into a relatively unexplored area of architectural education and student potential. Virginia Woolf, when lecturing upon female writers, noted that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."[iii] In a final analogy, we can apply this idea to our architecture students: give them money and a room of their own, and they can write about architecture. "Money" in this case is the currency of students: course credit. "A room of their own" is the figurative time and space in the curriculum. Both of these ideas impart value to the idea of writing as a part of an architectural education.

The question now is this: how might we sustain the enthusiasm and success of this course? We are looking at a few options. One, as suggested by many of our students, involves developing the seminar into a standard semester-long (16-week) course. This would require adjustments to the

schedule and possibly to the structure, since a school year seminar would likely attract larger numbers. A second possibility involves using this as a model for college-wide interdisciplinary writing seminars, based on the same fundamental pedagogy of analogy between the visual processes with which we are so familiar and the verbal constructions we all use to mediate those visual processes in our culture.

Notes

[i] Kimon Nicolaides, "Introduction" to *The Natural Way to Draw. (*Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941) xiii.

[ii] from "...Upon a Principle," *Writing From Observation*. George Peck, Ed..(The Department of English, Wayne University. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951 (1942)) xii.

[iii] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own.* (London: Grafton Books, 1989 (first edition: The Hogarth Press, 1929)) 6.