

# Fix the Car, Save the City: An Alternative Approach to Architectural History

MARK KESSLER

University of California, Davis

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I advance three intertwined ideas. First, while architectural history is somewhat calcified, it is not in its death throes and is still viable and relevant to the education of designers. Second, the typical survey class has encouraged a problematic contemporary architecture that emphasizes personal branding at the expense of local context. The third part of this article proposes an alternative methodology for design history classes that contrasts with the survey format, in which a presumed expert shows slides of great buildings and explains to a large and passive audience the significance of each (what I refer to here as the Great Buildings approach). The alternative is rooted in a group research project--a seminar--that is open-ended, local, and prioritizes context.

## A CRITIQUE OF THE STATUS QUO

Architectural education teaches students to strive for excellence, and history classes contribute by introducing students to a well-known list of examples that have been deemed worthy by historians decades ago. Generally the class format mirrors an assigned text which also presents a finite, pre-ordained set of Great Buildings. The professor presents a narrative of heroic accomplishment based on a Hegelian notion of history as directed, dialectical, and progressive. So, for example, LeCorbusier's work is represented as the victory of a clean, progressive modernism over a decrepit and corrupt academicism.

This narrative is not contingent upon local relationships or first-hand experience; the easily accessibility of digital reproductions facilitates the isolation of Great Buildings from any real context.

In class, the delivery of a lecture that accompanies a sequence of formatted images tends to even out discontinuities in content and faithfully represent the illusion of narrative. The story that is represented is one of aesthetic progress--isolated from real brick and mortar context, the specific political, economic and social factors that influenced the work, and the city. As a result, most architects know much more about LeCorbusier's houses of the 1920's than they do about the contemporaneous neo-classical buildings that line the streets of the cities in which they live and work.

The Great Buildings approach, based on historical determinism, is a dated inheritance. Giedion claimed for himself the ability to recognize the mysterious workings of history through its various determinisms, and the authority to establish threads of continuity that connect the great works. In his forward to the first edition of *Space, Time and Architecture*, he wrote, "I have attempted to establish, both by argument and by objective evidence, that in spite of the seeming confusion there is nevertheless a true, if hidden, unity, a secret synthesis, in our present civilization."<sup>1</sup> While later architectural histories were perhaps more inclusive (Jencks) or scholarly (Jordy), the basic approach--an addiction to greatness--remains.

In the classroom, any young history professor would be vulnerable to the charge of incompetence were he or she to abandon the format. Given the limitations in resources and the economic efficiency of the large survey class, it seems appropriate to familiarize students with the culture's shining examples.

The Great Building approach extends to theory and design studios too, creating a monolithic man-

date. For example, a design studio on residential architecture often begins with an analysis of Great Houses. In another studio, students may be assigned the design of a major civic or institutional building, thus simulating the role of the master architect. While studio and survey may both offer Great Buildings as precedents, the studio is better suited to engage the active participation of the student in the development of critical skills.

Implicitly or explicitly, architecture students are taught to emulate this excellence and ascend into the pantheon of greats, the latest generation of which have attained celebrity status. Students are trained to define success in terms of the reproduction and dissemination of images, to focus relentlessly on the aesthetics of the object, and to relate the architectural product not to its context but to its creator. The method appears to value publicity over substance, figure over ground, the virtual over the spatial, and the global over the local. It encourages, along with countless other cultural influences, an architecture of ego and personal branding.

What's wrong with that? On a humane level, it's misleading--the overwhelming majority will not make it. Academia's representation of the career is unrealistic. I believe we serve our students better by working against notions of success predicated on personal genius, and offer an alternative model based on more responsible and attainable goals, like civic activism and engagement with the design of the city.

#### MUSEUM ADDITIONS AS CELEBRITY FENDER BENDERS

All across America, cultural institutions are hiring "star architects" to expand and renovate their facilities.<sup>2</sup> The roster of architects involved is a *Who's Who* of celebrities: Gehry, Coop Himmelblau, Norten, Silvetti and Machado, Holl, Calatrava, Piano, Libeskind. Most architects would regard these as the plum commissions of our time.

In many cases, the institution's Director and Board hire an architectural luminary in order to create a "destination architecture," a term associated with the wild success of Gehry's Bilbao Museum. Here, the branding of famous architects functions to secure work and augment the legacy of the star,

as measured in the number of images published and/or presented to present and future generations of students. It also pressures the star to rise to the occasion by creating a *splash*.

Robert A.M. Stern, in a lecture to undergraduates at Columbia, once observed that the success of the Guggenheim Museum relies in part on the contrast between Wright's sculptural form and the wall of apartment blocks that line the east side of Fifth Avenue.<sup>3</sup> Only one architect gets to design the exception to the rule, he said, and if you're the one doing it, you had better do a good job of it. Photographs of the building, as presented in history classes and books, tend to focus on the iconoclastic form, and not the contrast that serves to enhance its figural quality. Figure 1, for example, shows the view that appears in *Modern Movements In Architecture*, by Charles Jencks.<sup>4</sup> Its attachment to New York is conditional, circumstantial and even parasitic: Wright's landmark building in the city. (By contrast, the Metropolitan Museum is not so exclusively identified as McKim Mead and White's temple in Central Park.) The Guggenheim is indeed a Great Building that refers to its author more than its site, or rather, exploits the opportunities offered by the site to establish an architectural brand.



Figure 1. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. ©The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Much of today's "destination architecture" employs the same strategy as the Guggenheim, creating "figures" relative to the city "ground." The

work of Gehry, Coop Himmelblau and Libeskind typically employs an aggressive, angular or curvilinear geometry that breaks the grid horizontally and vertically. In a seemingly frantic effort to reify the genius of the designer in a series of visually related buildings, each one sits uncomfortably and symbiotically in its host city, offering the cheap thrill of destination in exchange for an arrogant failure to be a good neighbor. Establishing a narrative better suited to future history lectures than the individual's local experience, these efforts tend to homogenize our cities--a paradoxical result, considering the idiosyncratic nature of each example.

This issue of how these buildings relate to context--in terms of scale, form, material, vocabulary and use--becomes particularly acute when a contemporary addition is situated in close proximity to an existing historicist building. Many of these older institutional structures were built under the aegis of the City Beautiful Movement, designed by the leading architects of their day. Long ago deemed to be regressive, they are not Great Buildings. Dignified and stately (and sometimes pompous), they are often reduced to unsuspecting foils for the ambitious acrobatics of their contemporary new partners.

In my hometown of San Francisco, we eagerly await the completion of the Contemporary Jewish Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind (see Figs. 2, 3). Here, the contemporary and the historical extend beyond adjacency to outright collision, as the new building is impaled on the landmarked PG&E Power Substation, designed by Willis Polk in 1907. Libeskind's solution brings to mind a fragment of Gehry's well-known remark regarding his own house in Santa Monica: "a cube falling out of a box."<sup>5</sup>

Libeskind's inspiration for the form of his design are the Hebrew letters that spell the words *l'chaim*, meaning "to life."<sup>6</sup> This reference to a kind of ideogram is similar to his generation of a distorted Star of David over the site of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, arrived at by drawing lines on a map of the city that connected the addresses of pairs of "admired Jews and Gentiles" who were victimized by the Nazis.<sup>7</sup> Critic Martin Filler, in his review of Libeskind's addition to the Denver Art Museum, noted Libeskind's "penchant for heavy handed



Figure 2. Rendering of the new Contemporary Jewish Museum, as viewed from Yerba Buena Lane. Image courtesy of the Contemporary Jewish Museum, Studio Daniel Libeskind and WRNS Studio.



Figure 3. Rendering of the new Contemporary Jewish Museum, as viewed from Jessie Square. Image courtesy of the Contemporary Jewish Museum, Studio Daniel Libeskind and WRNS Studio.

symbolism [which ] peaked in his 1,776-foot-tall Ground Zero scheme, with its tower topped by an asymmetrical spire echoing the upraised arm of the Statue of Liberty."<sup>8</sup>

All of these metaphors, in their poetry and romanticism, form a closed set of signs that refer to each other and to the architect himself. As if in preparation for induction into the Hall of Great Buildings, Libeskind provides thematic underpinnings that unify the body of his work. I believe these metaphors are devoid of any real contextual significance.

When the design of the Jewish Museum was unveiled in 2000, Libeskind addressed the role of history in his design:

The Jewish Museum San Francisco is an institution that will deal with the continuity of themes through Jewish history, and their impact on the contemporary Jewish identity. My design embraces the building's history, preserving the old Power Substation's industrial character and retaining the skylights and the brick façade. In contrast and complement to this experience of history, the visitor will also experience the reconfigured spatial form of the new extension, showing that history does not come to an end but opens to the future.<sup>9</sup>

Only time will tell whether the design delivers on this tantalizing promise. The alternative was articulated by John King when he said, "The danger is that the jagged spark that made Libeskind's early work so bracing will grow stale--a stylistic tic rather than a fresh revelation."<sup>10</sup> I believe this concern extends to most of the contemporary work that willfully imposes itself onto adjacent historic and historicist buildings.

In *Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism*, Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting cite Marshall McLuhan's distinction between "hot" and "cool" versions of a discipline to explain the distinction between a "critical" and a "projective" architecture: "Critical architecture is hot in the sense that it is preoccupied with separating itself from normative, background or anonymous conditions of production, and with articulating differences."<sup>11</sup> If we apply this distinction to Libeskind's recent work, the results are, well... hot and cold. While it's hot in distinguishing itself from "background" and indeed revels in the articulation of difference, it generates that heat through a cool and casual approach towards history and context.

## A NEW APPROACH

If the discipline of architectural history can hang on for a little while, it just may survive this assault that was brought upon, at least in part, by its own methods and narratives. If there is any aspect of architectural history that appears constant, it is that each new set of ideas climbs over the back of the status quo. If "less is more," can be followed by "less is a bore," it may be time to "show more the door."

The contemporary architecture discussed above is quite vulnerable to criticism and reaction. It is expensive, exclusive, antithetical to the logic of con-

struction technology, and may even be less flexible than the neo-classical boxes that it relieves. Its many facets, forms and articulations suggest a functionalism that is not typically offered as a determinant, and its aspirations for dynamic movement and weightlessness are undercut by its static, tectonic reality.

If the predominant mode of teaching architectural history has contributed to the celebration of an architecture of personal brands and enlarged egos, what methods can be utilized to literally change course? What criteria would we employ to develop an alternative or complementary method that discourages young architects from myopically "reaching for the stars?" I propose a history class that accomplishes the following:

- Celebrates the local, the common and the small contributions made by bit players.
- Scrutinizes architecture *in situ* and not primarily through reproduction and representation.
- Takes root in one real city, rather than several cities, or the abstract notion of "city."
- Uses one city as a laboratory to master the research and analytical skills that are applicable to any city, thus enabling a deeper appreciation for context wherever one goes.
- Instills appreciation for the typical external forces that impact buildings, as opposed to the extraordinary efforts that pave the way for the masterpiece.
- Uses architecture as a springboard to explore the political, social and economic factors that impact the decision to build.
- Embodies a democratic approach in popularizing architecture of the past, making connections between buildings of different scales, types, ages, and styles that share continued participation in the life of the city.
- Creates a context for architects to become local experts of the *design* of the city, as opposed to history buffs or managers of their personal legacies.

While perhaps inconsistent with post-critical theory (students are encouraged to rediscover and learn from the narratives of the past), the pro-

posed methodology is kindred in its determination to be fluid, retrospectively open-ended and projective. Although the class described here is a seminar and not a large survey, the approach to the material holds out the promise of influencing the content of large history classes and redefining the boundaries between the lecture-based class, theory seminar and design studio.

### WHERE TO BEGIN?

I propose that each class be organized around a question, not an answer--one that is plausible, observable, or perhaps suggestive of an inconsistency in the accepted canon. It might be a question the answer to which is sincerely unknown to the instructor, revealing to students a fragility that is human and a confidence in areas more valuable than encyclopedic recall. Conversely, it may be an extension of the instructor's own research, a strategy that certainly has been employed, albeit more commonly in the design studio.

Two precedents come to mind: First, Michael Dennis's 1977 studio class at Cornell, in which students provided the plates and analytical diagrams that accompanied the instructor's text on French hotels.<sup>12</sup> Second, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's 1968 class at Yale, entitled "Learning from Las Vegas, or Form Analysis as Design Research."<sup>13</sup> In both of these efforts we recognize the profound interest of the instructors in the subject matter, the collaborative nature of the group project, and the commitment to collect and analyze a group of existing related structures.

Here, the goal is a little different: to teach architectural history from the bottom up by using local examples as a launching pad to a broader, deeper and interdisciplinary understanding of the city--which in turn, enables a greater appreciation of the *overall* architecture of the city. If there is evidence of a now-discredited *zeitgeist*, it will be revealed in the course of the inquiry, rather than dictated at the beginning. If certain buildings are then deemed to capture the spirit of the age, it will be because the class makes a self-conscious foray into verisimilitude, and not because the buildings are famous. This leaves open the possibility, attractive to left-leaning academics, that many common, good buildings, working unwittingly in

tandem, are more pivotal in creating the unique character of a city than the branded works of genius that appear to be visiting the city. The revised and more realistic message to students is that a successful and satisfying career in architecture is not dependent upon stardom or genius.

### AN EXAMPLE: ELEGANT PIT STOPS

Let's go back to San Francisco in search of a question that will demonstrate the *modus operandi* and efficacy of the alternative methodology proposed.

Willis Polk, the architect of the substation, was one of several young architects who came to San Francisco in the early 1890's imbued with a sense of mission to bring their own brand of academic eclecticism to this "provincial outpost."<sup>14</sup> Combining a good pedigree (connections to McKim Mead and White and early employment with A. Page Brown), an intuitive talent, and a very public (oftentimes abrasive) *persona*, Polk was arguably the most influential architect in San Francisco of his time.

The substation is essentially a box dressed up in historicist clothing (Venturi's decorated shed) that houses electrical equipment. Its merit lies in the imagination and resourcefulness brought to bear on the long, low façade, an improbable feat considering that the program offers virtually nothing to interpret. For the first hundred years of its existence, it was closed to the public and had no "interior" to speak of--at least not in the sense that Polk would use the term. This lends an ironic twist to Libeskind's assertion that his design "embraces the history of the building" (even though the opening up of the building to the public is a given condition of the project that precedes Libeskind's design).

Especially intriguing to me is that this power substation--a utilitarian building--was designed by Willis Polk and is a designated landmark. The write-up for the building that appears in *Splendid Survivors* (a book that catalogs San Francisco's architecture) provides some insights:

The finest and the first of a number of designs by Polk for P. G. & E. substations in northern California. These widely publicized designs served as prototypes for work by other architects for the same

company. Such “beautification” of industrial structures was an aspect of the City Beautiful Movement....<sup>15</sup>

A walk around the city reveals a large inventory of buildings that present this combination of historicist facade over industrial box. I think the most monumental, compelling and humorous of these are car garages, built in the 1910’s and 1920’s, sometimes for parking but more often for repair (Figs. 4, 5). Shifting focus from landmarked substation to garages is more consistent with my criteria for the new history class because the latter are anonymous and far more numerous. Also, the notion that the facade of a building has a civic responsibility that exists independently of use is less expectable in a private garage than in a building constructed by a public utility. Here then is a “dumb” question that I would generate for the class:

#### WHY DO THE OLD GARAGES OF SAN FRANCISCO LOOK SO GOOD?

It would be a difficult question to answer in the context of a traditional history class. These buildings have not generated much attention from historians, and we cannot look up the answer in a book or online. We are therefore left to develop our own methodology; this is where the research background of the instructor comes to the fore.

As a seminar, the class has no more than thirty students. The project begins with a division of the class into groups, each with a distinct mandate. One group locates and documents the garages. A second group visits City Hall and the library in search of old records, maps, photographs, newspapers and architectural journals. A third group looks for original architectural drawings, either in archival collections or in the possession of the designers’ descendants. A fourth group researches the local historical context, and a fifth uncovers possible architectural precedents.

The initial stage of information gathering is followed by one of analysis and speculation. Students divide the buildings into types, assess their architectural merit and draw analytical diagrams over the facades. Groups report on historical context; architectural precedents are identified. Lastly, a booklet is produced that includes a conclusion supported by text, drawings and photos.



Figure 4. Garage building at 1645 Jackson Street, San Francisco. Photo by author.



Figure 5. Garage building at 2405 Bush Street, San Francisco. Photo by author.

In conducting the research necessary to investigate this narrow but open-ended question, students are exposed to a broad nexus of events, topics and themes that are essential to an understanding of the period. For example, the City Beautiful Movement, the impact of the automobile, and the emergence of new building types in the 19th-century, are all unearthed by a consideration of these garage buildings.<sup>16</sup>

A working hypothesis might be that the garages were designed by San Francisco architects who apprenticed with the masters (like Willis Polk) who designed the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915; who succumbed to a late, futile nostalgia for the jeweled, simulated city; and who were supported by a wealthy, socially-

connected clientele imbued with a sense of civic pride regarding their entrepreneurial excursion into the new automotive technology. Whatever we decide, our conclusions will be speculative and indeterminate because we won't have access to external verification or official stamp of approval.

In addition to learning the history of an era, students will learn methods of historical research and will hone their analytical skills in design. Notions of progress that are now thoroughly devoid of meaning are hopefully uncovered with a sense of empathy that is borne out of the distance in time and the sheer scope of human folly. Perhaps this can provoke a class-wide inquiry into comparable mythologies that we subscribe to today--like star architects. Students leaving the class should feel more intimately connected to the fabric of the city, knowledgeable of the mysterious processes by which anonymous buildings connect to one another and to us, modulating like themes in the development section of a classical symphony. If this happens, we are well on our way towards providing an alternative vision of architectural practice that is at once more attainable and substantial. Then, when students encounter the latest opuses by the new maestros--either in survey classes, magazines or television--they have the critical acumen and confidence to resist seduction and judge them on their merits.

In his essay *Looking Beyond Post-Criticality*, Kazys Varnelis defends the legitimacy of history and theory classes and argues against any elimination that is contemplated under the sway of "post critical" theory:

Architecture provides an alternative to the mindless construction of our day and in doing so, is critical, offering us hope that not only the built fabric, but, by implication society, can be transformed. The academy plays an invaluable role in this regard, offering a testing ground within the discipline, a place to freely explore, to transform, to indict failures and to suggest new possibilities.<sup>17</sup>

Varnelis goes on to welcome the research studio as a viable alternative. Described as "labs [that] value the keen analytic skills that architects develop in the course of their education," the methodology that I propose here would engage the city itself as a history lab.

The notion that architectural history is dead im-

plies that older buildings are irrelevant to the present and future of the city. And surely, such an implication would provoke no argument from powerful segments of the real estate community and their pro-business proxies in local government. Older buildings, which contribute to the distinct character of our cities, are everyday threatened by bland new construction and/or the branded work of celebrity architects. If we "go with the flow" and abandon the past, we become complicit in the process by which our cities lose authenticity and all look alike. If we dig our heels in and *investigate* the past, not in a passive reconstruction of a "progress" that never materialized, but in an active exercise of our own judgment, we may paradoxically make some progress.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time And Architecture*, 5th ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), vi.
2. For a comprehensive listing of museum expansion projects in America, see Robin Pogrebin, "Grand Plans and Huge Spending," *New York Times*, March 28, 2007.
3. Robert A.M. Stern's comments, paraphrased here, are the personal recollection of the author, Columbia University, 1975.
4. Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements In Architecture* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973) 136.
5. Frank Gehry's complete statement is contained within the following quote: "The window in the kitchen and its chain-link 'shadow structure' above were meant 'to read as a cube falling out of a box--as if it was trying to escape from the enclosure that was put around the old house.'" As cited in Frank Gehry, *Frank Gehry, Buildings and Projects*, text Mason Andrews, ed. and comp. Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), 134.
6. John King, "Work Begins on Oft-Delayed \$46 million Jewish Museum," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 20, 2006.
7. Daniel Libeskind with Sarah Crichton, *Breaking Ground* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 91-92.
8. Martin Filler, "Manifest Destination," *House and Garden*, November, 2006, 72.
9. "Jewish Museum Unveils New Plan" *Artweek* 31, no. 4, (April 2, 2000). <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/>
10. John King, "Finally the Pieces are Coming Together. Jewish Museum and Mexican Museum A Step Closer to Becoming Reality," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 1, 2006.
11. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33 (May 2002): 76.
12. The author's understanding is that the plates and

diagrams were prepared in the context of Professor Dennis's design studio class at Cornell University; this conjecture was corroborated by Professor Andrew Anker of California State University at Sacramento. For a description of the wide distribution of the resultant manuscript amongst students and the relationship between the 1977 and 1986 versions, see Michael Dennis, *Court & Garden* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), viii-ix.

13. For a description of the studio and its relationship to the original *Learning From Las Vegas*, see Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), xi.

14. Richard Longstreth, *On The Edge of the World: Four Architects in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 72. Citation is to the University of California edition. [The book provides a detailed account of Willis Polk's migration to San Francisco and analysis of his early work.]

15. Michael Corbett and Charles Hall Page & Associates, Inc., *Splendid Survivors: San Francisco's Downtown Architectural Heritage* (San Francisco: California Living Books, 1979), 76.

16. A comprehensive list of events, topics and themes includes the City Beautiful Movement; the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago; the history of San Francisco; the Ecole de Beaux-Arts and its influence in America; academic eclecticism, and historicist façade treatment as a form of "decorated shed;" the architecture of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) of 1915; the transportation exhibits, shows, races and services at the PPIE, including the Ford assembly line housed in the Palace of Transportation; the history of Bay area transportation, including the role of the railroads; 19th-century building types that combine historicist architecture with metal sheds, including railway stations, glass houses, markets and exposition structures; San Francisco buildings with historicist facades over concealed boxes, including banks, libraries, theaters, government; the emerging car culture and the activities of the Automobile Club of San Francisco; and, class anxiety as a theme that underlies the activities of both the City Beautiful Movement and the Automobile Club.

17. Kazys Varnelis, "Looking Beyond Post-Criticality," *Architecture*, September 2006, 78.