

Interpretation Rather Than History

STEPHEN PARCELL
Dalhousie University

SURVEY¹

This conference session invites us to examine the history survey course that all of us attended in university, to question its premises, and to consider alternatives.² During the past few decades the survey course has been criticized for the limits of its canon, then expanded to include some non-Western subjects and a more diverse set of theoretical issues.³ Meanwhile, the basic pedagogical structure and format of the survey course remain the same: a lecturer and a textbook introduce a large number of canonic buildings to a large number of students in a large lecture hall. These buildings, all from distant places and times, are presented in a mediated way: through images and words. The survey course expects students to develop a broad mental map of architectural history, with those canonic buildings as benchmarks. Later, when students do practical work in the design studio, that historical terrain is expected to serve as a background. Within the larger architecture curriculum, the history survey course is the first half of a large arc that attempts to apply lessons from canonic buildings to students, and in turn to the students' new building designs (figure 1). It is up to the students to bridge the gap between their history course and their design course.⁴

As students, some of us may have had fond memories of a particular teacher who brought life to the history survey course by adding personal anecdotes and by pursuing certain topics with extra insight and enthusiasm.⁵ As teachers, some of us may have fond memories of a few students who brought life to our survey course by asking insightful questions and making enthusiastic connections. Perhaps we even

visualized one or two of these students following in our footsteps to teach the history survey to the next generation. Unfortunately, these are exceptional cases. For most of us – both students and teachers – the history survey course can be a rote or remote experience. Instead of blaming most students and most teachers for not being exceptional, it may be more productive to question the pedagogical structure and format of the history survey course itself.

The primary element in a survey course is the body of knowledge called “history” that has been developed from buildings and documents in distant places and times. This body of knowledge has been refined gradually by generations of architectural historians, emphasizing characteristics such as form, construction, settings, rituals, and architects.⁶ The historian’s textbook and the teacher’s lectures present this body of knowledge to the students. In return, the students write essays and tests to show how well they understand it. In this pedagogical structure, “history” is conceived as an independent thing, a noun, and history courses regard our activities and abilities as incidental. “Design,” on the other hand, is both a noun and a verb, and design courses do emphasize our activities and abilities. Because “history” and “design” are neither grammatically nor pedagogically commensurate, it is hard for students and teachers to bridge the gap between these two streams.

The survey course is situated at the beginning of the architecture program. It presumes that architecture is a new subject for students and that the history survey establishes the academic foundation and trajectory for all subsequent humanities courses. Incoming

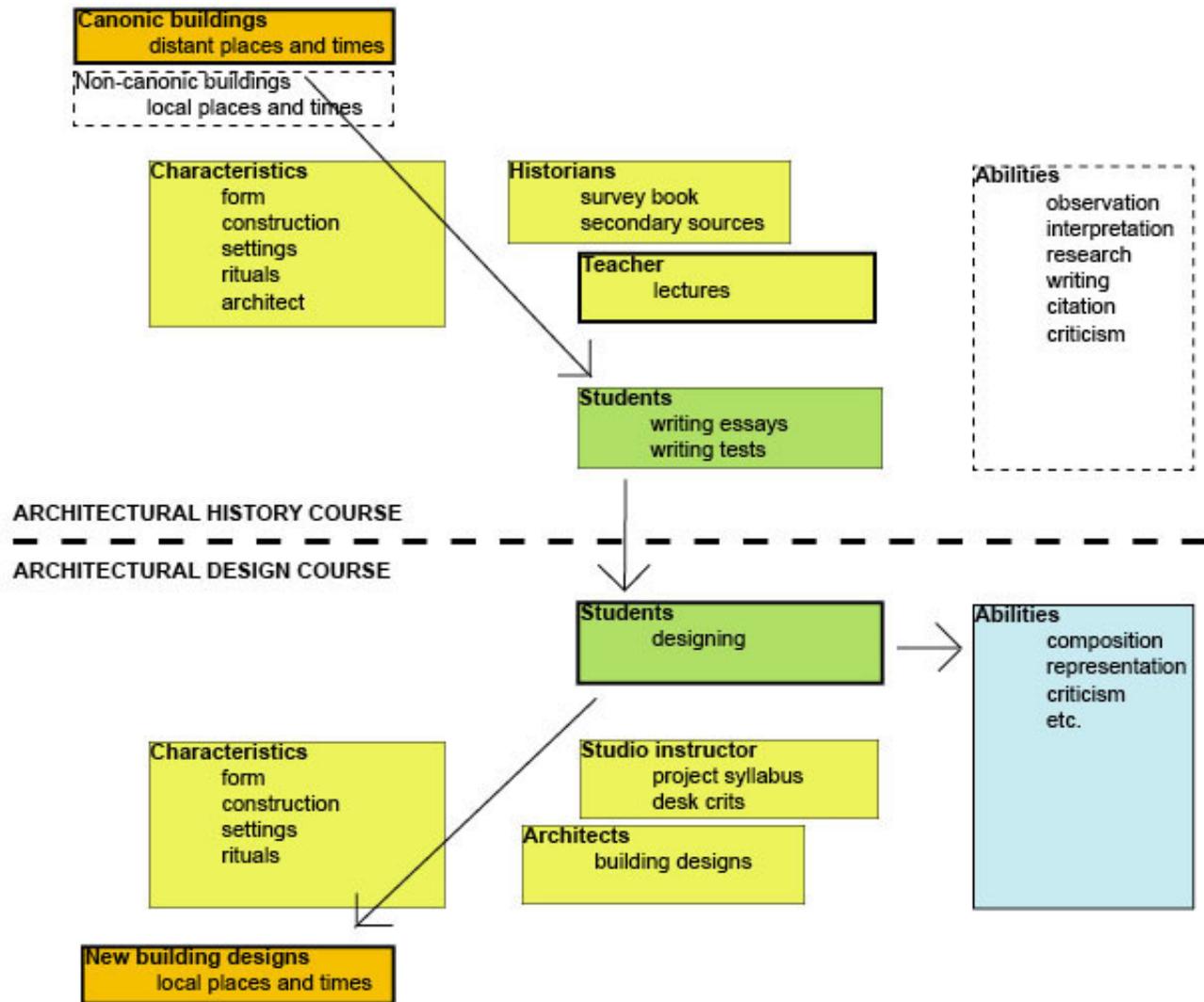


Figure 1: Elements and dynamics of a history course and a design course

students accept the survey course format on faith, but senior students would have less patience with the large lecture hall venue and the passive reception it implies. By now, we are all aware of the educational limits of the lecture hall scenario but alternatives are slow to surface.⁷ Meanwhile, with so many architecture schools and architectural history courses currently operating, it is likely that many individual teachers are pursuing alternatives. Here is one.

FROM HISTORY TO INTERPRETATION

For the past few years I have been teaching the first of four required architectural history and

theory courses in a professional architecture program. Each year there are 65 students and this is their first semester in an architecture school. Unlike a typical survey course, this course has a dual mandate: half architectural history and half architectural interpretation.

The history component retains the usual lecture format, but with a few modifications. It begins not with Mesopotamia and Egypt but with several theoretical lectures on general architectural topics: dwelling (human senses and rituals), building (substance and form), and situating (contexts that an architectural design can engage). These lectures

remind the students of what they already know about architectural subjects after twenty years of empirical experience. They also provide a basic set of topics for recognizing characteristics of historical buildings and new design projects. Rather than briefly introducing a hundred ancient and medieval buildings, the subsequent historical lectures focus on ten buildings in a more well-rounded way and are explicit about the topics that are being used to describe these buildings.

The main innovation in the course is the interpretation component, which focuses on the students' activities and abilities. It includes two projects that require observation, representation, and interpretation, rather than tests, reports, or essays that reinforce or extend what others have written. This pair of projects begins with the "here-and-now": a first-person study of a small local building. Later it moves to the "there-and-then": a study of publications on a noteworthy building that is distant in place and time. This sequence presumes that direct bodily experience is the best way to begin a formal study of architecture.⁸ In the second project, when students rely solely on published material, the absence of direct experience and the mediated nature of publications are noticeable.

HERE AND NOW

In the first project, "Hypothetical Culture for a Local Building," students visit a small local building within a mile of the architecture school and work with it directly, rather than through publications. Habits acquired in previous courses normally would lead most students to do a factual report on the building, but this project throws a wrench into that process. Instead, they must avoid the real program, the real site, and the real history of the building. This project involves creative misinterpretation: The students are asked to look very closely at the building and then imagine a different cultural situation in which the design of the building would make perfect sense. Each student then becomes a detective and the building becomes a loaded field with clues to discover and connect. To proceed, the students must look closely at details and characteristics; for example,

- the external form of the building
- how the walls meet the ground and the roof
- major formal elements and geometries
- organization of interior spaces and routes
- window openings, interior views, and exterior views
- distribution of natural and artificial light



Figure 2: An architectural detective. Credit: Max Ernst, *La femme 100 têtes*, 1929.

- selection and arrangement of materials, textures, and colors
- built-in fixtures and furnishings

This invites a discussion about the dynamics of observation: sensory experience, bodily movement, times of day, weather, the presence of other people, etc. The students record their observations in various modes: physical gestures (drawing in the air), words and phrases, drawings on paper, and photographs that are carefully composed and tightly cropped. In turn, this invites a discussion about the dynamics of representation.

By slowly gathering and linking clues, the students use divination and criticism to develop an integrated hypothesis about the building. They imagine the building in another place and time and consider possible cultural attributes, responding to questions such as:

- who would be appropriate inhabitants?
- how would their social or political order be organized?
- what are the primary activities that would occur there?
- what kinds of furnishings might be brought into the building?
- in what larger surroundings would the building be located?
- what would the climate be like there?
- what forms of speech would they use to communicate?
- what kind of food would they eat?
- what kinds of music would they play?
- what would they do when someone dies?

This project presumes that building features can be interpreted culturally: that associations can be made between the two lists above. Most of the students are surprised that they can do this after only a few weeks in architecture school, realizing that their previous experience and education have provided a partial foundation for more formal architectural studies.

The project results in a booklet with images and words placed side by side. The images present features of the existing building while the words describe the hypothetical culture. The strength of a particular interpretation is evident in the metaphoric resonance between the images and the text. Each year some of these misinterpretations are so

convincing that the hypothetical program and site seem more plausible than their real counterparts, as if we now understand why this building was designed in this way. This project works best when the subjects are small buildings with some quirky features that are unconventional and therefore invite interpretation.⁹

Building designs are inherently ambiguous, so there is always room for interpretation. Different sets of clues can be assembled, and each set can tell different stories. Obviously, there is no right or wrong answer, but being right is not the point. The primary aim is for new architecture students to walk in the shoes of the dweller-architect and engage in practical activities that historians and archaeologists actually do: encounter an unfamiliar building, identify clues, and develop a plausible hypothesis about it. A student's own background and interests are bound to emerge in the interpretation but this is not just a loose, self-reflective exercise. Fiction, like history, demands its own logic and rigor. By temporarily suspending historical responsibility, this project demotes the body of knowledge called "history" in order to promote the development of abilities in observation, representation, and interpretation.

THERE AND THEN

"Mind the Gap," the second project in the course, addresses the interpretive gap between us ("here and now") and a building that is distant in both place and time ("there and then"). Without visiting this building or examining its primary sources, it is available to us in only a mediated way, through publications that have been produced by reporters, writers, photographers, editors, and printers. Publications extend our immediate senses and location, but are also highly selective in their observations and representations, with interpretations that may express more about the author than the subject.

To begin this project, each student is assigned a building from another place and time that he/she has not visited, then conducts a thorough search for publications on it. This treasure hunt through catalogues, periodical indexes, search engines, footnotes, and bibliographies familiarizes students with many architectural sources and research aids. The buildings tend to be canonic and Western because the project requires a bibliography of at least ten publications.

By reading ten or more publications on a single building, a student gains a multi-faceted understanding of it. By comparing what the ten authors have presented, the student also detects different topics and theoretical emphases, and soon appreciates that there is no neutral, timeless, universal way to approach a subject. To analyze each publication, the student writes an annotation that considers questions such as:

- on dwelling, does it invoke the senses? does it describe how humans live in the building?
- on building, does it describe the building's substance? does it describe the building's form?
- on situating, does it present the building as an autonomous object or as an integral part of its place and time?
- does it describe the building's local surroundings, its original time and place, social and political customs, other buildings by the architect, related buildings in history, or ideas from architectural theory?
- does it mention the various characters involved (client, architect, builder, inhabitants)?
- does it mention what was previously on the site or how the building has changed since it was built?
- what is the author's background (position in academia or practice; other publications)?
- do you think the author visited the building or conducted primary research on it?
- does the publication include footnotes or references that offer threads for further research?
- what types of images are included: maps, design drawings, construction drawings, analytical drawings?
- what types of photographs are included: exterior, interior; wide-angle, detail; staged, construction?
- does it provide a map or address that would help someone visit the building?

Analyzing these publications enables their similarities and differences to become more evident. Some publications are derivative, some are eccentric, and some are more enlightening than others. Again, the students tend to be surprised that their previous academic studies have provided a partial foundation for analyzing and evaluating architectural publications.

To respond to these publications and to consider what is most important about the building, each student makes a "graphic essay" of ten interpretive

drawings that illustrate the architectural intentions of the building design and how they were achieved. Interpretive drawings are much more selective and expressive than uniform plans, perspectives, and photographs. They present a particular architectural characteristic clearly and vividly. In this project the drawings may be modified versions of published images (cropped, edited, highlighted, etc.) or may be drawn from scratch to illustrate ideas that came to mind when reading. Making a set of interpretive drawings encourages the students to read the publications closely and to evaluate what they have read.

This second project results in a booklet that follows the conventional structure of an essay, except that the body of the essay contains images rather than words.¹⁰ The graphic presentation of this historical building is comparable to a graphic presentation of a new building project in a design course. This correspondence dissolves one of the practical differences that typically separate the history stream from the design stream. The ten interpretive drawings are followed by ten explanatory endnotes and the annotated bibliography of ten publications on the building. The bibliography is organized not alphabetically but as a "top ten list" that ranks the publications according to how complete, authoritative, and insightful they are. Additional publications that were not good enough to crack the top ten are relegated to a separate discard list.

This project develops some basic research and interpretive abilities that are commonly practiced by historians: conducting a bibliographic search, citing sources, writing annotations, and evaluating publications. In turn, each student's annotated bibliography of the top ten publications becomes a handy reference for other students, with a shelf life that continues after the course is over. Because this project operates within limited guidelines and emphasizes basic academic abilities rather than short-term memory or sophisticated writing, a high level of accomplishment is evident from most of the students, not just the few at the top of the class.

INTERPRETATION¹¹

By emphasizing interpretation rather than history, these two projects emphasize the students' abilities more than the discipline's body of knowledge.¹² The projects invoke history in an incidental way, when

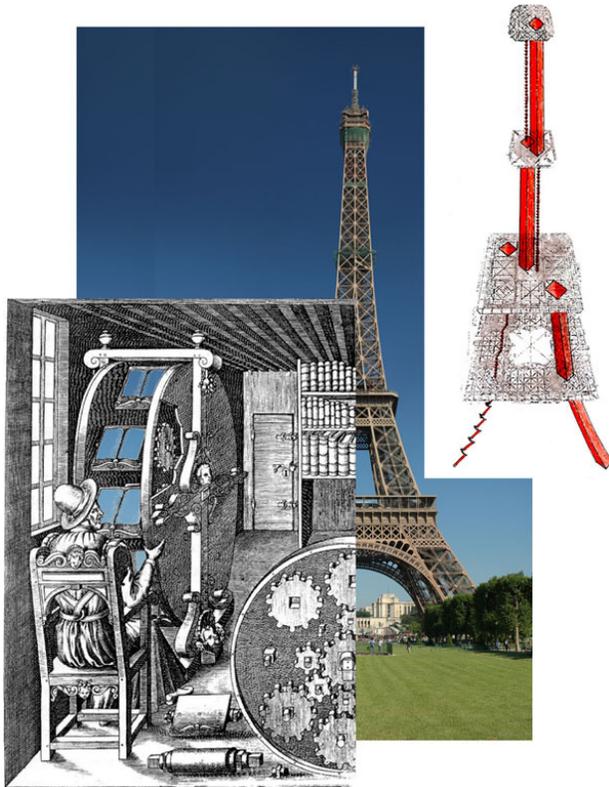


Figure 3: An architectural reader. Credits: Agostino Ramelli, book wheel, 1588; Eiffel Tower (photograph by Benh Lieu Song / Wikipedia, 2009); Eiffel Tower routes (drawing by Richard Gillies, Dalhousie University, 2007)

appropriate. In this first course of the history stream, the aim is to develop strength and agility; precision and refinement can come later.¹³ The teacher's lectures and the historians' writings are presented not as authoritative expositions of the discipline but as previous interpretations by others that can inform what the students are doing. Instead of focusing on particular canonic buildings, emphasis is placed on architectural characteristics such as form, construction, settings, and rituals, which are evident in all buildings: local or distant, published or not.

Reconceiving the history survey course as an interpretation course takes a lesson from the neighboring design stream, in which the development of student abilities takes precedence over particular subjects. In the design course, the studio instructor's project syllabus and desk crits, along with some relevant building designs by other architects, inform what the student is doing. Interpreting an existing building is the obverse of designing a new

building; these two activities are like two sides of the same coin. By employing similar activities and formats in neighboring courses, teachers assume more responsibility for bridging the gap between streams, rather than leaving this up to the student.

Let's compare the elements and dynamics of a history survey course (figure 1) to those of an interpretation course (figure 4). Only canonic buildings are mentioned in a history survey course, since the canon is shared by a worldwide audience and must be small enough to fit into a textbook. By focusing on a highly selective canon, the survey course implicitly creates a blind spot that excludes the vast majority of buildings in the world. An interpretation course, on the other hand, is not so limited in its range of subjects. Ordinary buildings and local buildings can serve quite well as subjects when the emphasis is on architectural characteristics and student abilities, rather than the subjects themselves.

The descriptive writing in a survey course expects both historians and students to use proper arguments, evidence, citations, and references. When students in an interpretation course do projects in other formats – fictions, illustrations, annotations, top ten lists, and interpretive drawings – they are not subject to the same burden of proof. They are also not competing directly – or pretentiously – with historians who are much more experienced. Instead, the students engage in basic practical activities that architectural historians actually do: observe a building, analyze it, represent it, interpret it, and compare it to others; find, analyze, and evaluate secondary sources. Developing basic abilities is a form of apprenticeship. Teachers tend to assume that students already possess these abilities or will acquire them while focusing on history, but we know this is not always the case.

In reconceiving a history survey course as an interpretation course, we should assume that the students are committed to a long-term study of architecture and intend to develop well-rounded architectural abilities. On the other hand, the one-time-only, general-interest survey course that introduces architecture or architectural history to hundreds of non-architecture students is a different creature with a different mandate: to raise public awareness of architecture, to encourage interdisciplinary activities at the university, and perhaps to reap financial benefits to support other courses with a much lower

student-teacher ratio. For academic reasons, these two types of courses probably should be separated.

The course and the projects described above are just one example of how an initial architectural interpretation course might be set up. At a larger scale, a school's entire history stream might be re-conceived as an interpretation stream, with steps between courses that are defined more by student abilities than by historical eras or topics. As a subject, interpretation has its own integrity. It is the obverse of design, and need not be merely a support for design courses. Similarly, history need not be exclusively with interpretation; history can provide a context for design courses, too.

ENDNOTES

1. The etymology of "survey," from medieval Latin *supervidere* 'look over', suggests vision and distance. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "survey."
2. The problematic role of history in the architectural curriculum was noted already in Arthur Clason Weatherhead, "The History of Collegiate Education in Architecture in the United States" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1941): "Since the subject matter may no longer be considered as primarily a storehouse of ready ideas for design, its former chief function has been eliminated. More than in any other division there exists an uncertainty and a general disagreement as to what either the objectives or the approaches to the subject should be" (226-27). In a related field, art history, see *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (1995), an entire issue that questions the content and format of the history survey course and considers alternatives.

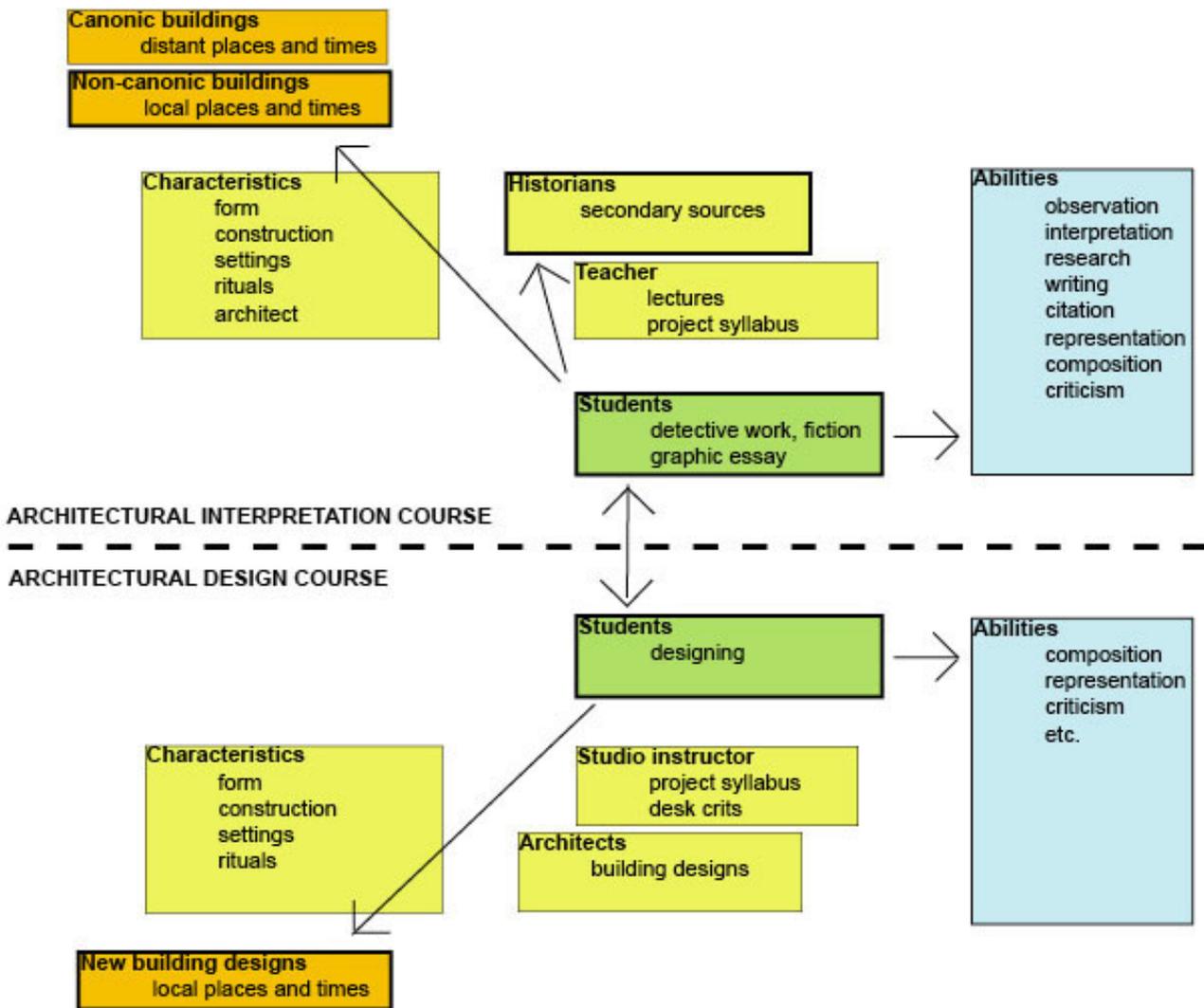


Figure 4: Elements and dynamics of an interpretation course and a design course

3. For a discussion of changes to architectural survey books during the past century, see Christy Anderson, "Writing the Architectural Survey: Collective Authorities and Competing Approaches," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999): 350–55.
4. A similar gap between historians and designers in architecture schools is discussed in Dora Wiebenson, "The Architectural Historian: A Problem of Identity," in John E. Hancock, ed., *History in, of, and for Architecture* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1981), 22–26.
5. For example, Robert Venturi and David Van Zanten offer tributes to Donald Drew Egbert, their history professor at Princeton, in the introduction to Egbert, *The Beaux Arts Tradition in French Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
6. For a brief discussion of architectural historians and emphases in some notable American schools, see Stanford Anderson, "Architectural History in Schools of Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999): 282–90.
7. "The education of students about the scientific, social, aesthetic, political, and environmental foundations of architecture should not be about 'teaching' disembodied skills and facts. The standards should stress active inquiry and learning by doing, rather than the accumulation of facts from texts, required lectures, or design problems handed ready-made to students." Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang, *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996), 72.
8. The importance of first-person experience as a basis for historical interpretation is discussed vividly in Joseph Rykwert, "A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body?" in John E. Hancock, ed., *History in, of, and for Architecture* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1981), 44–48.
9. Unfamiliarity is a precondition for interpretation, as noted in Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne, *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 145.
10. Although the word "essay" has certain connotations, it is appropriate here for its etymological association with the French *essayer*, to try.
11. The etymology of "interpretation" emphasizes transaction: to translate, understand, etc. Its roots are Latin *inter-* 'between' and Sanskrit *prath-* 'to spread abroad'. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "interpret." The concept of interpretation is rooted in hermeneutics, but this is not the place to discuss philosophical writings by Hans-Georg Gadamer and others.
12. A similar intent is expressed in Wiebenson, "The Architectural Historian," 25: "The student needs to be given the tools, the methodology, and the comprehension to enable him to independently understand and interpret the work of his own time, to apply this understanding to his own work, and to broaden his life experience."
13. During their second semester in architecture school, the students study modern architectural history with a different professor. While learning about canonic buildings and theoretical issues, they develop additional interpretive abilities by preparing a DOCOMOMO fiche on a local building. Doing methodical research on the building, its designers, its documents, its history, its significance, etc. extends their disciplinary

apprenticeship and continues to recognize the value of direct experience, primary research, and local subjects. It also develops their desire to travel and experience canonic buildings in the flesh, rather than only through secondary sources.