

"Angelus Novus" On the Utility of Applied History of Contemporary Architecture in Architectural Design



Figure 1. Paul Klee, Angelus Novus, 1920.

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"I must reflect on the circumstances — on the mystery of circumstances which leads the man into paths which he could never anticipate before they happen. This certainly happened to me because I was to be a painter — without questions about it — until my last year in high school when a course given on architecture just hit me so strongly as something that I wanted to be associated with." Louis Kahn (1)

While immersed in an increasingly pluralistic environment, students' imaginary follows different tracks than the ones of an academic culture taught by teachers in classrooms. How can teachers enter the complex life cycle of students' cultural growth? Explicitly, how can they teach the history of contemporary architecture to a generation immersed in the debris of excessive information, with roots in motion over the wreckage of a globalized context?

The course "APH 405 — Applied History of Contemporary Architecture" experiments on new ways to teach Millennials history of contemporary architecture expanding on their "experiences" of history. By completing assignments as design actions instead of taking quizzes, students build awareness on the reasons why design can not disregard its relationship with history. Most architecture students are alienated from the experience of designing architecture: seeing ways architects composed buildings in the past makes history relevant by fostering personal connections. The course's purpose is to show how to design architecture learning from the past; the goal, to develop divergent thinking necessary in design as the ability to process ideas; and the objective, to avoid the multiple-choice quiz in favor of "designing" answers as drawings and movies.

PREMISE ONE: HISTORY HAS A WEIGHT

The course idea originated in 2016 from a general premise: if the discourse of the history of contemporary architecture concerns buildings, it should have not only words but also a "weight." If architecture has gravity, history of architecture must have too. With this premise, the course's format expressively experiments on ways to weave a Cartesian culture to new forms of visual and simultaneous knowledge, building interaction between history and design. A clear educational strategy gives life to the above mentioned experience of history, having in mind that students' architectural culture depends on their capacity to interweave history with design. On the one hand, biweekly lectures illustrate the continuous flow of historical developments of contemporary architecture; on the other hand, a sequence of five assignments helps students to go deep into one point of the continuous surface of history. The two parts elaborate one another to integrate into the form of an analog hybrid course 1) to transmit historical knowledge between generations; 2) to leverage plurality of students and teachers' insights as the necessary condition to promote social intelligence; 3) to improve ways to interpret past projects showing history of architecture — on a par with materials and techniques — as a tool to design future ones.

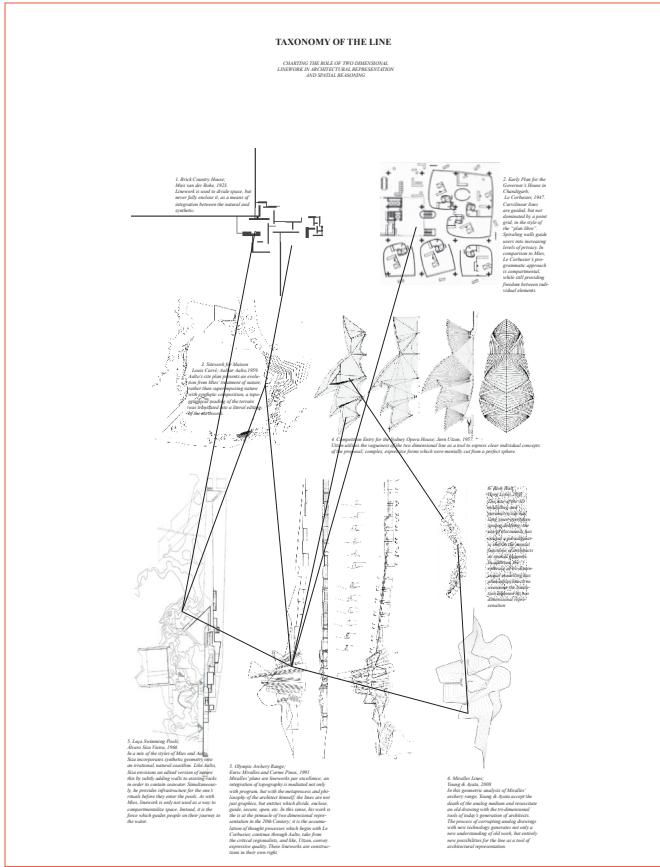


Figure 2. Student Zachary Bundy, Assignment file, Fall 2017.

PREMISE TWO: “RADICANTCY” (2)

The migratory dimension of a project is congenital not only to the nature of architecture but to the one of architects. There is an opportunity to teach the history of contemporary architecture as a peripatetic journey 1) to visit a generation of architects shaken by the cultural and economic circumstances of an era started between the 1980s and 1990s, and 2) to reflect on how to teach history of architecture to students who are born, study, and will work in motion. Students of the XXI century are always somewhere else. Exotic rather than national, they are “radicant” as “those plants that do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves.” (Bourriaud, *The Radicant* 2009: 51). Nomadism— by far the oldest human subsistence method — is, therefore, the category emerging from practice, and a paradigm architectural education should consider as the essential part of students’ identity: their journey, as the future designers’ exodus, is opening up new professional tasks, creating the possibility of leaving tangible signs of migrations as building in new homelands.

A HUNCH: AN IMAGE AS THE COURSE’S FRAMEWORK

To explore the present and future role of teaching practices concerning broader pedagogical contexts, one must draw a map for the journey, without forgetting — before leaving — to include the history

of the past. The map might have not only the resemblance of Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” (1920) but the interpretation Walter Benjamin made in an essay written in 1940, “On the Concept of History.” Benjamin’s description of the painting he bought in 1921 and hung in every apartment he lived, suggests an angel as his vision of history made by fragments, “with a face turned toward the past, wreck-age at his feet, blown toward the future by a storm that caught in his wings.” (3) Placed in between a debris-strewn present and a future as the historical progress that can not be seen, the angel remains as the immediate present to survey the perpetually unsatisfied expectation of a future revelation. Powerless and undefeated, he is still pushing through the endless storm he survived, a storm that, as Benjamin wrote, we call progress.

The union of Benjamin’s interpretation with Klee’s depiction of the angel’s assembled body builds a dialectal image: an eternally hovering angel is dragged away from dust as ruins of history and, at the moment, “his eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread.”(4) It is precisely the simultaneity of continuance (the dust’s movement) and temporariness (the wide-open mouth) what makes the image “dialectal.” Past and present converge through a momentary experience — the emergence of new meanings — letting the visible fragmentation recover its original unity.

The dialectical image is, therefore, the hunch — a method of textual analysis for this course. As Klee’s particles of dust, past projects can be interpreted as ruins of history rumbling around in a sense to wait for an interpretation as an artistic reenactment. A project with a past historical significance has a “present” as a personal translation — a necessary reactivation of history’s waste as the data moving around, the spam, and the debris into which the new generation was born.

THE COURSE

Based on the two premises, the course challenges history as a reference for contemporary design by introducing students to knowledge, methods, and tools essential to analyze and critically interpret designed architecture as a “citation” in personal design; with the assumption of the initial hunch, the essential fulcrum of the course is instead to realize that the past is the other useful face of the present a project generates from inside history. As one of the children looking at the camera of Nigel Henderson in the East End of London in 1960, this course pretends to be real. As a claim for students’ identity and their ideas of history, it is an invitation to consume and to quote history, relating present and past in a new image. Recovering the traditional relationship between architectural project (present) and history (past) means to renounce to study “history” as a sequence of names and dates as an invitation to students to give attention to objects 1) to have a concrete “experience” of history, 2) to learn how to reflect in-depth, 3) to use the quote in a non-distracted way, and 4) to understand personal interests through the making of things.

History of contemporary architecture appears as fragments in books from Gropius to Benevolo. These books report on the dynamics underlying contemporary architecture, full of changes, contradictions, and expressive languages in continuous evolution. The story of history, mostly unrealistically told in a linear path, does not lead students

to understand recent constructions or the ideas behind them, nor the personalities of the architects. In a quandary over whether choosing one or more of these books, the option is to write an essential history of contemporary architecture as a peripatetic journey.

By using multimedia formats, the semester simulates contemporary architects' propensity to travel abroad to reflect on the phenomenon of nomadism in architecture, and the transportability of ideas. During the journey, students "see" stories of expatriate architects forming biographies abroad together with immigrants, tourists, and wanderers. In the process of adaptation, they progressively understand how to be part of an itinerant population of future practitioners, peripatetic nomads of contemporary culture moving in relational contexts to offer services there where they are needed. Following a progressive acceleration of biweekly lectures and a series of five design assignments, as those architects of the 80s and the 90s, they quickly adapt to the unknown regions of the field of history, hunting and gathering things they find available across the middle earth of a physical archive, the library. While attending lectures, they retrace the history of contemporary architecture; and by completing the assignments, they redeem history in the sense of getting more-in-depth in one of its moments. These are the opportunities to find something in themselves using a work of inspiration, to understand their ideas deeper, how to make them happen, and to learn how to use quotation in personal design.

The illustrated lectures show past architecture from 1959 to 2014 to primarily observe generations of architects immediately preceding and following those years of migrations. The lectures scroll history in a chronological sequence but examine trends and works of architects organized in groups of five years approximately as a series of critical moments in their careers in connection with time and space they were living. Using the simultaneous conditions of different times and media, the lectures are organized in three parts: "From Modern to Contemporary (1959-1989): This Is Tomorrow," (twelve lectures); "Toward the present (1989-2007): Architecture is Now," (fifteen lectures); "Conclusions (2007-2014): Fundamentals, an analysis of the 14th Venice Biennial, curator Rem Koolhaas." Adopting Aby Warburg's concept of "Kulturwissenschaft," some lectures' slides show history as a non-chronological narrative — a creative montage of images as traces of additional times students touch in the future now. These slides paraphrase history as a montage of quotations, necessary to reveal new meanings of the past in personal terms, showing simultaneously analog drawings as "ghost stories" and digital videos as virtual time.

Students attend lectures with the task to choose one building of the Seventies or the Eighties as a fragment to be around for a semester, following the sequence of assignments, the means useful to experience a previous design's process. By researching and drawing, they gather information to make a movie "to redeem" the selected project through appropriation. Every assignment generates a dialectical image to experience processes and deep intentionalities that led architects to a construction. In this sense, each assignment is a "door" the present opens on the past to experience it temporally — a real place where precedents meet with personal stories, where to encounter the past in a built form, where temporality and eternity

merge. In this sense, the assignments are necessary steps of the "redemption" process as the opportunity for a symbolic value to manifest as a new design.

In combining lectures and assignments, students get familiar with how changes imposed by globalization on local and traditional cultures lead toward new professional opportunities. Using "mobility" as the most efficient strategy for exploiting the past as a resource, students move around ideas as nomads. While producing images that are dialectical as Klee's "Angelus Novus," they understand that only by casting a relationship to the present the past can survive.



Figure 3. Student Quiara Caguat, Assignment five, Fall 2018.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

The first assignment — a module of active learning built in the lecture's format — is a daily sketch. It helps to construct the classroom's environment as a "scenius" — a collective genius (Eno, 1996). (5) During eight minutes, students draw to learn to quote history, extracting pieces as ruins from lectures to reveal what is lying beyond the threshold of the screen. They draw between the visible and the invisible in the sense of not finding, but still searching. Day after day, the series of sketches compile a "travel sketchbook" as a journey that allows a continuous search during the semester, an encounter, the experimentation, and a search necessary to get closer to the heart of creation, but not close enough. Like the diaries Paul Klee compiled from 1897 to 1918, students' sketchbooks report on their lives as reflections on architecture in the form

of drawings. They are not perspectival but bi-dimensional as orthogonal projections to train technical ability, imagination, and inventiveness that comes out in only eight minutes. Each sketch is a scheme: mostly geometric, the narrative of the lecture does not appear but abstraction, necessary to transcend, to detach, to quickly go beyond the threshold, searching for a hidden mechanism of thinking. The sketch is, therefore, the physical and inner analysis of figures to “see”, the final result of a reflection on one’s thought as a spiritual exercise on history, and the tool to reveal what prevails as a desire to follow to redraw the projects. In fact, once completed, the sketchbook does not only reproduce architecture. On the one hand, in recalling images of major projects made in itinerancy between lectures, it draws the attention on “exodus” not as a forced migration, but as the capacity to export one’s abilities in other contexts. On the other hand, from the systematic recording as students’ results of their studies, a predominant line of recurring elements emerges, useful for the considerations of one’s original way of approaching architecture.



Figure 4. Student Luis Medina, Assignment five, Fall 2017.

Through the fifth assignment, this understanding is transferred in the form of a timeline — the personal interpretation of history as the creative montage of images of past architecture, done without words. With the timeline, students search for designing a movement between fragments. Starting from the arrangement of the elements they have accumulated over time, they look for a “binding” material to fill the space in between, just as in the mosaic technique. Placing

and depositing on paper the memory of a migration made in a situationist way, they form a map of a journey already made to remember it: an experience.

The second assignment shows citation as translation. In the library, students search for an original architectural journal with a significant article about one building. The scope is to explore its relevance concerning broader issues of history. The Journal must be a hard copy and, in this sense, contemporary to the year in which the architect managed the project. Therefore, from the article, students further “extract” a quote and a drawing to reproduce them. Proceeding from the original to the interpretation, they re-contextualize architects’ project as a personal understanding; but in the translation process, a transformation occurs. After all, it is using words that Benjamin “moves” Klee’s painting from inside the physical room beyond the work of art — into a myth. The translation act is necessary for the survival of history, according to Benjamin. In this phase, as the moment of historical knowledge, students start to understand quotation’s fundamental role: being cited, the past is updated in the light of the present.

During the third assignment, done during the second part of the semester, students model the chosen case study as a movie to show its present as life — the coherent movement of a part of the architectural body done with digital tools. More students choose the same building to see its different interpretations and the many ways of reading the story of history. By citing and quoting a past reality through multi-media, students extract it from the historical continuum to know and actualize it, showing that “quoting” can be an updated interpretation.

The fourth assignment is a collaborative lecture on a masterpiece.

By redrawing the project, reporting the architect’s thoughts, and adding movement with the making of a movie, students use their methods to confuse architects’ voices with their own. The acts of rewriting, redesigning, and citing passages — appropriately chosen and re-contextualized in new sequential structures — are, therefore, quotation acts; translations of original literary work; new moments of life as survivals; transformations, changes, and renewals by which the original is transformed into an interpretation necessary to students to learn. In this way, history is not “stranger” anymore. Its “consumption” offers a design experience similar to the one of a personal project, showing translation as a co-creator act, an iteration that occurs while searching.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching applied history of contemporary architecture does not only mean spreading the history of architecture but concretely applying it to the problem of the project with the aspiration to reach a wider audience as students from other disciplines, as well as architecture students who have difficulty with design. The future is unknown, but as Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus,” history is visible as the present caught in the storm of progress one can cross as a field.

Teachers can enter the complex life cycle of students’ cultural growth finding new formats to engage their stories to get deeper in only one particle of the debris as the excessive information in motion. Learning with a generation of expatriate masters means looking at history in their words as recorded in architectural journals, to “make”

a story of one episode in our words. In this educational project, moving from architects to students' identities aims to increase the necessity of awareness of history in general, while the use of different formats than quizzes such as films, drawings, and timelines, to develop divergent thinking necessary in design.

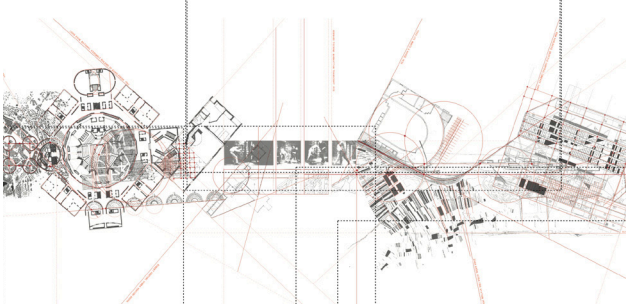


Figure 5. Student Nasreen Chowdhury, Assignment file, Fall 2018.

The necessary step to achieve it is letting students choose something they want to study more in-depth, freely: selecting a moment in time transforms history in a real experience to interpret the past as a race forward.

Course results and evaluations confirm students' awareness on the necessity of history in design as the ability to process complex reasoning, and undoubtedly the achievement of a sense of identity and belonging, showing APH 405 as a model to provide a semester of openness to all, avoiding competition between students, offering a path in which the race is with oneself.

Conclusions address the critical issues related to passing the architectural history exam with tests and multiple choice quiz – a topic on which the academic world remains divided. This current system helps teachers to manage large numbers of students, but not to regain their role to teach starting from the individual: not in terms of data (measuring mnemonic and notional learning) but of ideas and where they come from, taking into consideration complex abilities such as the production of a project using citation.

Activating the passion for what is hidden in personal stories helps to memorize information of history not as names or dates but experiences, necessary to possess history. Teachers must learn from past and present practice how to bring people inside artistic experiences by working in some dynamic excitement.

“Color has taken possession of me; no longer do I have to chase after it, I know that it has hold of me forever... Color and I are one. I am a painter.” (Klee, 1914) 6)

Notes

1. Falkenberg, Paul, and Namuth, Hans, Louis I. Kahn: Architect, Motion Picture, Yale University, A museum at large Ltd, 1972, retrieved at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbE3rmh62x4> on July 31, 2019.
2. With the term “radicantcy” Nicolas Bourriaud (who in 2009 Bourriaud curated the collective exhibition “Altermodern”

at the Tate Britain as the manifesto of the new modernity) identifies globalization in an aesthetic key. The “radicant” is a botanical metaphor, an organization that creates its roots as it grows. Bourriaud’s idea is opposite to that of the “radical” which implies instead the sedentary idea of “root.” For Bourriaud, contemporary artists have the ability to uproot themselves and easily aggregate elsewhere, in a form of continuous nomadism. Looking at the world through the lens of globalization, Bourriaud’s thesis holds that works of art are in constant dialogue with the context from which they come. Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009)

3. “AKlee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” Benjamin, Walter, “On the Concept of History” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938 - 1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003): pp. 389 - 400.
4. Benjamin, Walter, “On the Concept of History” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938 - 1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003): pp. 389 - 400.
5. “Scenius stands for the intelligence and the intuition of a whole cultural scene. It is the communal form of the concept of the genius.” Brian Eno, (1996).
6. Diary-note (Tunisia, 16 April 1914), # 926; as quoted by Suzanne Partsch in *Klee (reissue)*, Benedikt Taschen, Cologne, 2007 - ISBN 978-3-8228-6361-9, p. 20.