

University of M: a Projective Case Study

Recent new faculty hires and other changes in the Department of Architecture at the University of M have opened up possibilities to completely re-imagine the curriculum of the school. The Department of Architecture exists with three other departments: Landscape Design, City Planning, and Interior Design. The four departments collectively exist within the Faculty of Architecture. The restructuring affects each department and covers all aspects of the coursework, from delivery to content. The new proposal for the Department of Architecture emphasizes studio work and implores the students to take a more active role in their education. This attitude carries over into the proposal for the history and theory curriculum. The proposal was generated through discussion with various faculty members and is a direct critique of the previous curriculum in terms of delivery, content, and assessment of students. Underlying all of this was a changed understanding of the relevance of history and theory material and how this might relate to the other courses of the curriculum. This paper will discuss the working proposal for the history and theory curriculum to be implemented for the 2007-08 school year.

Introduction

"In any case I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity."
Goethe, as quoted by Nietzsche

In his seminal essay "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Nietzsche outlines a relationship to history that will lead to a life lived in the fullest sense. The main focus of the essay is to demonstrate that the past is not to be seen and studied as an immutable object of knowledge, but to be experienced as a living thing. He discusses this, and other issues, through a delineation of three types of history.

The three types of history are denominated as Monumental, Antiquarian, and Critical. A Monumental history, according to Nietzsche, is a sympathetic study of a nation's heroes so as to provide the present with encouragement. He gives the example of a series of mountain ranges. Though encouraging, this type of history often only studies the peaks of the mountaintops at the expense of all that supports them. While this perspective teaches us, to our benefit, that the greatness achieved in the past may be attainable again in the future and that it is possible to change the human condition, it dangerously insinuates that historical events may be repeated without an understanding of their causes.

An Antiquarian history involves a look back to uncover and preserve cultural conditions that previously existed. This is positive in that it gives people an identity. There is also a danger, however, which Nietzsche represents by describing a tree that judges the size of its roots despite being unable to see them. Like one who estimates how big a tree's roots are by regard to the strength and size of its branches, the Antiquarian view of history can be seen as quite restrictive for most of what exists, one does not perceive at all. The little that the antiquarian historian does see, he sees too close up and therefore loses perspective. Antiquarian history degenerates from the moment it is no longer animated and inspired by, what Nietzsche terms, the fresh life of the present.

The Critical view attempts to free oneself of the past, but not to ignore or make a complete split from it. Here Nietzsche proposes to break up the past, scrupulously examine it, and finally condemn it so as to release oneself from the past and live fully in the present. This can be dangerous when one attempts to name, a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate as opposed to one in which one did originate. Each of

these three views – the Monumental, Antiquarian, and Critical – is important when realized in certain degrees and not individually. They each may contribute towards a history for life. Nietzsche's essay has been influential in the discussion surrounding and creation of the following proposal for a new history and theory curriculum at the University of M.

Existing Conditions

The history and theory coursework has historically been composed of survey courses to large (75-110) groups of students. The first three years would be spent in general design study under the rubric of "Environmental Design." Discipline-specific content would not be presented until the final three years after which a graduate degree (M.Arch) would be awarded. In both instances, Environmental Design (undergraduate) and Architecture (graduate), the typical format of the history lectures was a presentation of side-by-side slides of canonical projects, given in plan, elevation, and / or section. Within the content of the lectures, there was an insistence on the visual representation of built works, often photographed with an air of objectivity. The purpose of the project or even the world in which the project was conceived was rarely revealed to the student. The work, rather, was intended to be understood within the grand arc of history.

Topics varied from year to year and from instructor to instructor. Though the intention was to provide a comprehensive exposure to images of buildings, content often varied and was developed with relation to specific interests of faculty members. Due to the lack of communication between professors and departments there was very little continuity between topics and very often content would be repeated from year to year. Within the first three years of the Environmental Design program, faculty members from other disciplines (the three departments coexisting alongside the Department of Architecture) felt that the presence of architecture was too heavy or that their own disciplines were not represented well enough. Architects, similarly, often felt that the other disciplines were given too much credit. (No, Palladio was not an Interior Designer!) Theory courses were completely separate from the history lectures

and often involved "edgier" material, like philosophy or art. Younger and presumably more radical members of the faculty taught these courses. In every case, whether history or theory was being taught, secondary source survey texts were privileged over primary source material. Assessment was generally made through final examinations that tested the student's relative ability at memorizing plans and dates. In rare instances, students would produce graphic representations of famous buildings.

The effect of this situation was, at worst, a boring course for students and a huge workload for the faculty member, often an adjunct. Unfortunately, the structure and content became a self-fulfilling cycle. It took a few years to get a history lecture course fully fleshed out and, once this was accomplished, one was leery to rework the syllabus. Too often, the interest in the course was only dependant upon the relative personality of the professor. Other concerns were also present. For example, the history coursework was often seen as having little or nothing to do with studio, which was perceived as the focus of an architectural education. One or two instructors – the "historians on staff" – gave most of the courses though they rarely entered into the realm of the studio. As well, students would often give precedence to studio work at the expense of other course material and deadlines.

One year ago, a radical turnover of staff in the Faculty of Architecture has led to the following proposal for the history and theory curriculum.

Proposal

A graduate from the professional M.Arch program will have completed six years of education. The first two years will be interdisciplinary. The student elects and then is admitted into a discipline in the third and fourth year, either Architecture, Landscape Design, City Planning or Interior Design. Potential future streams will include New Media and Environmental Design. Successful completion of these four years leads to the Bachelor of Environmental Design, a non-professional degree. Students may then apply for admission into a two-year program that will result in a professional M.Arch. The other

departments within the Faculty of Architecture offer similar graduate degrees with comparable requirements. A PhD program in Design and Planning will also be offered for the first time in the 2007-08 school year.

Year 1 and 2

The first year comprises University-wide general humanities and science requirements in which students do not belong to a particular Faculty. Interested students apply into the Faculty of Architecture program in their second year and it is typical that approximately one hundred and ten students will be accepted into year two of the program. The first history course is offered at this time. This mandatory course runs over two terms and will be taught by a range of members from the entire Faculty. Each faculty member, from each of the departments, is asked to present case-study lectures on work that is important to them or that has inspired their own work. The intention is to cover a broad range of topics, scale, and interests as well as to introduce the students to the diversity within the Faculty of Architecture. This interdisciplinary case-study approach supplants the previous course which covered all of history, from mummies to modernism, and which organized that history into a series of movements or, worse, styles, which students tended to either forget or believe too rigidly.

Each semester, students will be required to complete a term-long graphic analysis project as well as a weekly one or two page response paper. The latter requires the student to recount one or two main points of the lecture and to formulate a response to it. In this way, learning will incorporate a variety of skill sets, and history may be understood through the recording and making of ideas as opposed to a merely passive activity. The graphic analysis project will be developed by one of the professors giving a lecture and will rotate from year to year and from department to department. The Faculty will judge the projects collectively and the best will be displayed yearly. There will not be a single text for the courses. Rather, each lecturing professor will supply a short reading list and images to a common E-Reader that will be updated weekly as well as yearly. We will take advantage of the non-Faculty-specific E-

Reader program already developed by the University of M that allows students password access to pdf, image files, as well as web-based material. We have also begun to look at the potential to record and link presentations via Art-Store for the benefit of students as well as other professors.

This second year most closely resembles Nietzsche's description of a Monumental history as it introduces students to history through a structure that is shifting and episodic rather than a smoothed-over grand narrative. Nevertheless, the course structure does not merely show mountain peaks at the expense of their support – i.e., it does not privilege breadth over depth. Lecturers are able to ground their topics within a specific historical framework as opposed to trying to locate each project into a larger narrative that needs to be supported through an entire year. It also removes the belief that all of history can be described and defined within a few semesters. There will be gaps between the presentations and these may be filled by future coursework. Students are also introduced to each of the faculty members and are given a preview of each professor's interests. Historically, many students entered into the Faculty of Architecture with little knowledge of disciplines outside of architecture itself. The interdisciplinary content and delivery structure of the second-year history course allows for a more comprehensive range of voices to be heard and a more educated decision to be made when students elect into a discipline in the following year.

Year 3 and 4

Students then apply and are accepted into disciplinary studies for the third and fourth year. Entry for the Department of Architecture is dependant upon, in descending order of importance, a portfolio review process, interviews, and grade point average. Student numbers are related to Faculty resources. In the 2007-08 year there will be forty-five students accepted into each year, three and four, to total ninety architecture students. This number is expected to remain static as no future plans are in place to hire new architecture faculty. Each discipline has the option to outline courses relating to history and theory, communications, and technology.

Years three and four will include a total of four seminars over the two years. The purpose of each is to uncover and help students begin to understand the intentions underlying the built realm. There will be a focus on the tradition of the Treatise, as understood to embody architectural intentionality. Primary source material will be privileged throughout. Rather than separating history courses from theory courses, the topics of the seminars will approach architectural history as theory. These middle two years build on the previous but align more closely with an Antiquarian history. To continue Nietzsche's analogy, students will look to the roots to uncover the branches. The courses will not only look to built work in plan, section, or elevation, but will attempt to ground built work with the context in which they were conceived and understood. In this way, the curriculum is intended to bridge the divide typically perceived between architectural history and theory as well as to open up to the richness of historical inquiry.

The first course of year three will cover pre-history, Greek and then Roman topics. Here, students will engage in historical work through the reading of Greek and Roman philosophy and rhetoric as well as other sources. The second semester will cover the Gothic through the end of the seventeenth century. This will include a survey of architectural Treatises focusing on the rediscovery of Vitruvius through the radical reading of Vitruvius by Perrault. The first semester in year four will cover the beginning of the eighteenth century through the end of the nineteenth century. Here students will again look to various Treatises as well as other philosophical, literary, and scientific texts. The final semester will cover twentieth century topics through similar sources.

Each course will be composed of a series of ten, four-hour weekly seminars. Each seminar group will be limited to fifteen students and there will be three groups per semester. Students will be responsible for two, hour-long presentations per semester as well as a four thousand word paper based on one of their presentations. The intention is to give students fewer tasks and time to complete the tasks well as opposed to requiring a series of small projects that end up competing for time

with other assignments. Sprinkled within the seminars will be lectures by the seminar professors to all forty-five students. These seminars will last for the first ten weeks of a thirteen-week semester. They will end prior to the final reviews in studio so as to give students the ability to concentrate on studio in the last few weeks of the semester.

The seminar format, in which a student presents primary source material to a small group of fellow students, has the advantage over the traditional lecture format in that students begin to take ownership of the material. Though the professor is always present, the students are responsible to raise the level of the course. As opposed to passively recording factual information, students in a seminar course develop methods of learning history as well as various research skills. Furthermore, it is much more difficult to disappear in a seminar. Everyone begins to know the other faces around the table. Students who present will be given references to begin their research, but it is expected that further research will be conducted. All students will be required to read a shorter text in preparation for each class. This will be supplemented by a four-to-five-page presentation synopsis, which will be required from each student presenting. Rather than a survey textbook – too expensive, too broad, and too often left unread – these synopses will form a working record of the course.

It is intended that the three seminar groups will generally share weekly topics. This will encourage interaction between professors as well as lighten their individual course loads, as they are able to share responsibility for developing some of the course material. The alignment of the weekly topics will also allow for group lectures from invited and local professors. Because the selection of and access to resource material has been an issue in the past, an E-Reader is in the process of construction that draws from personal collections, on-line resources such as J-STOR, and the University Library collection. This will give students equal access to secondary and primary source material in various formats.

Year 5 and 6

Students will again apply for admission into the Graduate Faculty. As in year three,

students will be admitted primarily on the basis of their portfolio, an interview, and lastly, their grade point average. Student numbers, still connected with Faculty resources, will be reduced to thirty students per year, to total sixty students. The 2006-07 academic year is considered a provisional year and we have already been able to implement changes including the graduate seminars proposed below.

These two years will again cover a total of four history and theory courses and will be seminar based. Rather than adhering to pre-defined content, however, as in years one through four, professors in each semester will have the opportunity to propose their own five-week seminars on any topic they may choose. Students will then elect into the various seminars and be required to take two per semester to fulfill the course credit hour requirements. These will be offered concurrent with similar-length technology seminars thereby creating a varied range of topics for students to choose from. In essence, students will be encouraged to choose their course of study from a wide-ranging menu of history, theory, and technology topics. Students will be required to make one presentation in each class, totaling two per semester, and to write one serious paper per semester. At the Faculty level, this curricular structure will encourage and support research agendas and projects that are often left by the wayside to be picked up over the summer break while in solitude. Likewise, the seminars are intended to lead to publications and exhibitions, which have, in fact, already occurred as a result of seminars conducted in this fashion over the past year. There is always the issue of course load. Of the six professors required to run the year three and four seminars, four will be asked to run a five-week graduate seminar in year five and six.

The final two years respond to Nietzsche's description of a Critical history. With the solid base of the first four years, students will be empowered to ask serious questions regarding history and theory. They will be able to take ownership of ideas and begin to actively engage in their work. Ideally, the student will find echoes between the work done in the graduate seminars and their studio projects. It is expected that this structure will foster a more grounded approach to forming a

research question that may then constitute a basis for work to be completed in the final year as a part of the student's thesis.

Agora

The Department of Architecture is uniquely situated in that more than half of the full-time faculty have received post-professional degrees in history and theory. This allows for many people to be able to contribute to the coursework and at a very high level. Unfortunately, the University is located very close to the middle of the continent, but not very close to much else thereby limiting the range of available exterior critics and lecturers. Due to this, there has been a concerted effort made by those teaching in the department to take full advantage of the Cultural Events (the lecture series) and Architecture Gallery exhibitions. The intention is to open up discussion across the entire Faculty and to support the presentation of work. This effort has been termed "the Agora" and is an integral part of the re-working of the history and theory curriculum. There are three parts to the proposal. The first is a Faculty-wide case study lecture course, as described in the first part of this paper. The second is a "Hungry for Thought" lecture series which comprises a bi-monthly series of on-going faculty research. It is intended that the work presented not be fully complete, but that various methods of research as well as questions concerning the research be presented. The final component is a Faculty-wide lecture series designed to bring in people from elsewhere to discuss their work. Though attendance is not mandatory for students, each of these initiatives is aimed at fleshing out the history and theory curriculum.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to present a proposal for the history and theory curriculum at the University of M that replaces one that is perceived to be dysfunctional. Within the proposal, the course content, structure, and student assessment have been organized to promote students to begin to take a more active role in their education. Required material and topics are delivered so that students shall begin to ask their own questions and to recognize that those questions do not exist in a vacuum but almost

always echo earlier work. In this way, students may begin to understand that the relationship with history can be an active dialogue, allowing, as Nietzsche believed, one to live fully and in the present.