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# Introduction

## Beyond Precedent

For centuries, architects, historians, theoreticians and educators have questioned the nature of history and theory's role in the profession and the academy; the debate has not subsided. Some favor Manfredo Tafuri's argument that the aims and methodologies of history are distinct from those of practice, and Stanley Fish's recent assertion that the humanities are an end in themselves.<sup>1</sup> Others lament the possibility of an "irrevocable split in architectural education between studio production and advanced intellectual production."<sup>2</sup>

The composition of architecture school faculties may resolve this split. For much of the previous century, art historians taught the majority of architectural history courses in architecture schools. Beginning in the 1970s, many programs began to hire Ph.D.s trained as architectural historians. Informing this shift was recognition that the methods and interests of architectural historians differ from those of art historians, and that history classes taught by architectural historians could help foster critical, analytical and even creative skills essential to studio work. Recently, architecture schools have further tightened the bonds between history and design through their hiring practices. Whether a result of financial expediency or pedagogical conviction, tenure-track positions for historians who teach design or designers who teach history now outnumber positions for faculty expected to teach history alone. It is not yet clear, however, how this change affects the practice and teaching of history and design, or influences student performance.

Regardless of your opinion of the state of the union between history and design, it is one no one in the academy can put completely asunder as long as it is blessed by the National Architectural Accrediting Board, which stipulates that students must demonstrate understanding of "canons and traditions."<sup>3</sup> Most programs fulfill accreditation criteria with a suite of history courses that begin with a history survey before proceeding to more specialized upper-level classes. While offering a broad knowledge base, the survey sacrifices depth,

and is typically not integrated with design. Precedent studies in studio attempt to connect to existing exemplars and are often understood as part of the design process, but they also hold the potential to instrumentalize the relationship between contemporary production and the past. In this context, one may ask not only what a student is expected to understand by taking a survey course or referencing precedents in studio, but also what it is that a student is expected to study.

It may seem self-evident to assert that fundamental sources for history's narratives are found in buildings and cities, even as we recognize that particular inflections stem from specific cultural contexts. To return *ad fontes* requires acknowledgment of architecture's potential to embody, preserve, evoke and shape memory. In "The Necessity for Ruins," J.B. Jackson reminds us that the connection between the physical and the ephemeral historical event is elusive, and can only be cultivated and discerned with patience and the passage of time.<sup>4</sup> And yet, our own cultural context seems to work against this objective. Walter Benjamin's observation that replication diminishes the aura of the original cannot account for the complexities of production and reception we experience in the digital age, when the distinction between original and reproduction is often difficult, if not impossible, to discern.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is not uncommon that that very correspondence is the creative act's substantive point. The image has, ironically, come to dominate material culture.

More active and intentional integration of history and design necessitates more direct engagement with buildings. Martin Bressani's translation of a letter written in 1844 from Vézelay by Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc to his father articulates the need not just for intellectual engagement, but for bodily contact itself:

When I find myself alone, before my pillars, my walls and my cornices, I cast a loving eye upon those silent stones. I go round them with more

care, more precaution, I seek their diseases, their pains, in short we understand one another better, for very few people understand us, very few know what we tell one another... There is an indefinable charm in this affinity, a charm all the more vivid because it is unknown, secret, intimate, silent. And are not stones akin to books, and don't you feel all the same towards your old silent books? At least the books were copied or printed by men who were strangers to those who had conceived them, but stones! How many old, shiny stones have I looked at with an interest that must have seemed most ridiculous to passers-by. First, I sought their quality, reflecting on the calculation that had placed them there, then understanding how the tool had worked, and consequently the workman who had guided it, his admonitions, the varying degree of care he applied, depending on whether his master was present or not, the small means he took to hasten his labor. Then, dancing before my eyes, like a magic lantern, the astonishment of the passer-by in front of the completed work. Criticism, with the ravages of time in its shadow, an enemy that never ceases its attacks, then the architect's joy, then the dreams of glory, and soon ungratefulness, oblivion, misery even, then the crowd that for centuries rubs against the stones, polishing them, then the demolishers of all ages, and their oversights, so precious to us. In all of that, there are a thousand poems, a thousand novels, and the man, the man who screams, who breaks his work, then regrets it, would like to bring back to life the mutilated body but cannot, because the same goes for human creations as for God's creations; apples will come back to the apple tree, but the apple cut in half cannot be repaired.<sup>6</sup>

The author implicitly condemns a sort of casual and detached relationship to the past, often

expressed today with a formalism that is either derivative or completely idiosyncratic. He advocates instead for a more immediate, personal, and penetrating connection to the past as a means of moving beyond it.

Legal use of precedent offers insight into the result of the engagement Viollet-le-Duc proposes. Both Statutory and Common Law are based on precedent. The Oxford English Dictionary clarifies precedent's legal nature and function as "A judicial decision, which constitutes an authoritative example or rule for subsequent analogous cases; a form of a document which has been found valid or useful in the past and can be copied or adapted."<sup>7</sup> All legal arguments proceed from precedent. However, cases are not decided on the basis of precedent alone. Rather, decisions focus how precedents are understood. The value of precedent is determined by how one uses it to craft an argument. Here, the courts make an important distinction between facts and values. While facts of arguments are rarely similar, values may transcend the case. The principle operates from previous examples, and the case's facts are not sufficient to validate the argument. In architecture, to move *beyond* precedent, then, one may extend the precedent's potential, beyond facts to values.

David Rifkind offers one possible strategy for architects and students by appropriating literary critic Harold Bloom's concept of misprision, intentional misreading, and applying it to the critique and design of buildings and representations. In 1974, Vincent Scully commented on the evolution of a "New Shingle Style" and was the first to translate Bloom's "strong poet" into a "strong architect" who engages the past to create something new.<sup>8</sup> Like Scully, Rifkind applies Bloom's theory of poetry to architectural works of the past, but demonstrates misprision's relevance to the work of Modernists who interpreted historical and contemporary architecture while also rejecting historicism and attempting to generate its antithesis.<sup>9</sup> In this way, misprision may be

understood as a productive way to engage precedent politically, representationally, and formally.

Ana Miljački applies a comparable approach in the design studio. She recognizes that architectural history has always been composed of legitimating narratives, but argues that today's narratives are more dynamic and multifarious than ever. Taking a cue from musical sampling and remixing, the author proposes the active manipulation of architectural sources, not in a "second-rate copy-paste project," but in a self-conscious and rigorous manner, in order to assert a political position in dialogue with contemporary culture.

Developing the capacity to critically and intentionally examine and respond to the past is not a straightforward task. Randall Teal observes that architecture curricula tend to compartmentalize history, theory and design, an approach that suppresses flexibility and fails to prepare students to appreciate and address the complexity of contemporary society and culture that defines professional practice. Teal draws upon Martin Heidegger's concept of *Geschichte* to argue that history is neither fixed nor linear, and that the past and the future converge in the present: students activate and express their understanding of the interconnectedness of historical principles, works and events by situating them in the present through design activities and propositions. The goal is not simply to solve problems but to reveal and even celebrate ambiguity.

Forcing students to acknowledge the complexities inherent in their own cultures is difficult enough. As Mark Jarzombek and Alfred Hwangbo point out, disciplinary, institutional and political obstacles hamper efforts to come to terms with global cultures that are increasingly interconnected with our own. Careful to distinguish between "the global project" and globalization, Jarzombek and Hwangbo identify the design studio as the place where students must come to understand themselves as part of global history. The

authors advocate for assignments that require students to account for contentious religious, political and cultural territories, where they cannot avoid taking a position. Recently, architects' consideration of global issues has focused on ecological responses; Jarzombek and Hwangbo recognize that the intractability of global problems calls for more diverse and less technical solutions.

This position is echoed by Erik Carver's Op Arch article, which asks, is earth the ultimate precedent? Carver sketches the evolution of precedent's role in architecture from the establishment of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts through post-modernism, denouncing contemporary architects who are so mesmerized by the urgent call to save the planet that they have replaced historical awareness with an emphasis on ecological and technical expertise.

This and other political and economical realities have moderated the sense that architects and buildings are or can be agents of change. To address this, Reinhold Martin explicitly advocates for the cultivation of critical, secular historical consciousness. This historical consciousness does not look to history as a justification, but simultaneously recognizes and understands historical conditions and exercises the imagination in order to realize architecture's transformative potential. Here, Sylvia Lavin's Op Arch essay offers a mode of operation for architectural historians and students alike. Lavin proposes that the activation of history and theory may become critical in the staging and production of exhibitions. Lavin sees the exhibition as a vehicle for making history present and specific. The work operates discursively; the curator shapes the narrative.

In an interview focused on the dialogical relationship between history and design, Alberto Pérez-Gómez promotes hermeneutics as a means to an active approach to the relationship between history and making. This approach privileges one's personal questions over the delivery of information. Gabrielle Esperdy's Op Arch essay addresses the nature of the architectural historian's transmissions

in the context of a twenty-four hour buffet of technological advances. She uses the studio's exploitation of technology as a point of comparison, asking how historians may take advantage of such developments.

Each of the Op Arch authors demonstrates that the activities and aims of the historian, architect, critic, and educator overlap; recognition of these elisions was also evidenced in many of the papers submitted for the theme issue. As mentioned above, Tafuri's views on history's role are the leitmotif of this conversation; many authors still frame the conversation in opposition to an operative history. The debates between Tafuri and Bruno Zevi, as discussed in Maurizio Sabini's essay, focus attention on modes of production. From Sabini's analysis, we sense that not all architects completely disregard the historical legacy and can therefore engage the past in a non-operative manner. Carla Keyvanian's piece also extends Tafuri's argument, but frames the discussion in an educational context. Keyvanian argues that history can be a reference, a support, or even an antagonist. Both authors raise questions about current modes of production vis-à-vis our

historical legacy and encourage us to consider differences between practice and design studio.

While none of the issue's authors endorses operative criticism or operative history, we wonder if there is merit in advocating for operative teaching. Although history and design function as separate disciplines, they may still cohabit in the classroom and studio. There, our re-presentations of and engagement with history becomes an operative model of the critical and analytical methods that architects can use to interact with history in meaningful ways. History's narratives should not be constructed with the chief aim of serving designers; instead, they may serve as a foundation from which a multitude of questions can be drawn and posed.

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### Notes

1. See Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Giorgio Verrecchia, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980) and Stanley Fish, "Will the Humanities Save Us?," *Opinionator: Exclusive Online Commentary from the New York Times* (January 6, 2008).
2. NAAB Conditions for Accreditation 2009, p. 22. Mark Jarzombek, "The Disciplinary Dislocations of (Architectural) History," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (September 1999): 488.
3. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Architectural Registration Examinations do not include a section on architectural history and theory.
4. J.B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).
5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1955), pp. 219–53.
6. Charenton-le-Pont, Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Viollet-le-Duc Papers, Letter from Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc to his father, Vézelay, April 28, 1844; translation by Martin Bressani.
7. "precedent, *n.*" The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. October 17, 2010. <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50186436>.
8. See Vincent Scully, *The Shingle Style Today, or The Historian's Revenge* (New York: George Braziller, 1974) and Vincent Joseph Scully and Neil Levine, *Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 27.
9. Mispription is also a now archaic legal term referring to failure to report knowledge of a crime. It is fascinating to consider Rifkind's essay in this way. Are there also crimes of mispription in architecture?