

Building on the Labyrinth's Foundations: A Guided Tour of Cultural History Following Clues From Borges

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To today's undergraduate architecture student, history may appear to be a labyrinth in which no clear orientation guides movement, and there are no clear goals in sight. And yet, to all architectural endeavour the crucial importance of context, site-specificity, tradition and continuity in culture means that strategies that can offer students a sense of being grounded in history are more valuable than ever. History *is* disorienting, the selection of topics is highly subjective, and many students find it difficult to engage. However, framing culture's history as a creative construction requiring constant renewal adorns it with an interest that is harder to resist. This renewal, making present of history, its representation, is a creative homage to culture and its most stable and enduring representations: architecture and literature. As Walter Benjamin wrote in the fifth of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. ... For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."

To begin the descent into the shifting underworld of remembering, a student must be armed with a kind of golden bough, the question mark of inquiry. But the student needs a critical pragmatic framework into which this discourse fits, and to engage the material directly, in order to remember its elements.

For this Renaissance course, this framework is introduced through two stories outside of the historical period, intended to act as a frame for our approach to the historical materials, fictions from Jorge Luis

Borges' book *Labyrinths*: "Funes the Memorious", and "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote". Borges, whose writings were strongly imprinted by the ideas of Nietzsche, offers a forum for discussing how we process history and collective memory in the form of culture, but by a poetic means that is at once digestible and ambiguous. Ireneo Funes, a paralyzed youth, is incapable of forgetting; the crippled prodigy studies the history of prodigious memory, as the narrator marvels at his terrible gift, noting that Funes is unable to reason, to understand the concept of a system, to form new ideas; under history's weight he languishes and quickly dies.

Himself poetically forging this philosophical discourse about remembering, Borges treats the relationship of memory to free speculation, and metaphorically argues that a certain kind of forgetting (abstraction of what is pertinent or beautiful and therefore valuable from a morass of information) is necessary to drive culture forward and out of a stagnation (that can result when all values are equivalent) yet always keep the present anchored in its culture. It is precisely because Borges takes on a central concern of the Early Modern era, the emerging meaning of History, modern man's problem of how to situate himself in the world, that he can be our Virgil.

Both in form and content, "Funes" provides clues to winnowing the historical mass. Borges' story is a caution against wholesale revisionism in favour of the inconsequential, and an argument for the literary canon. It is a model for the axially of metaphor, and for how the poetic is powerfully anchored in the historical and infused by it with vital spirit. Much like the monastic praxis of memory work, it

reads the legible world meditatively as a point of departure for the imaginary and the future.

In "Pierre Menard" we encounter an eccentric novelist who rewrites, with great difficulty and verbatim, fragments of Cervantes' masterwork, lines in which a certain lady perceives 'the influence of Nietzsche', and lines which the narrator finds 'brazenly pragmatic'. Borges explores the significance of an object's afterlife within history's shifting contexts, of anachronism and of the identity of epochs. Here, implications of historicism and postmodernism can be confronted. And finally, the power of a literary idea to change the way the world appears.¹

To begin with creative fiction is to raise problems of the meaning and interpretation of history as open questions to which one may return. Borges' fascination with memory is precisely that it is problematic in operation and in content. Further, the hermeneutic principle that Charles Peirce calls abduction, the creative forging of explanatory narrative, and which is supported by Borges' writings, becomes a way to orient the students within historical material with a view towards poetic work of their own.² From this point of departure, the broadest objective is to have the students become aware or self-conscious about their own creative activities as a form of research. How can we make design a producer of knowledge rather than merely being an instrument of knowledge? Design should not be reduced to a tool for problem solving, but rather become a mode of formulating relations between the known and the unknown. Studying cultural history can provide a model for this strategy.

Having framed the material, attention turns to selecting the content, how the historical materials are introduced, and by what means the students are engaged and evaluated. Following clues from Borges in form and in content, the topics of the course and their examples are selected for their legible *metaphorical* potentialities as far as identifying broad cultural patterns (Zeitgeist) in the relationship of architecture to philosophy and other branches of culture. Again, the poetic is privileged, and I remind the students that all the scientific drawings they view in the slides were produced by artists, that all representations are fictions; all conjectures born of the imagination. The students are practised in abduction (interpretation, hypothesis, imagination, the structuring of an argument) by

means of a quiz concerning their weekly readings. And finally, particular historical investigations are cut loose from their moorings and grafted in new ways in the project of the play.

These concerns, primarily related to *what* is taught, are connected to *how* it is taught, formulating strategic pedagogical goals through a series of questions about the material's deployment. Whereas the answers are (reasonably) quite conventional: slides, readings, quizzes, a group project, the potentials for learning are optimized. Borges directs us back to Nietzsche, who cautions that "We do need history, but quite differently from the jaded idlers in the garden of knowledge, however grandly they may look down on our rude and unpicturesque requirements."³

- What strategies best engage students who may be yet unaware of how history can inform their own design practice?
- What kinds of projects and evaluations motivate students to learn more and best serve the students' formation as architects?
- What kind of pedagogical goals could be more transferable to other classes, particularly Design Studio?

The program can be deepened by considering the short-term needs of the students as individuals and as a group capable of peer-learning:

- What set of skills are the students actively developing, to avoid constraining their engagement to passively memorizing information?
- How can the size of classes be turned into an asset to optimize individual motivation and formation?
- How can diversity within the student body be preserved and enhanced without needing to compromise the curriculum?

On contemplating the problem of what is the essence (or metaphorical pattern) of studying cultural history, it seems that it is a means for students to explore forging innovative (abductive) relations to a rich existing world. If we think of this essence as a metaphor, we can read it as the characteristic activity of an architect approaching a site on which to build. This program goal stands apart from de-

cisions taken regarding content, choices which should act in its support.

While each school answers these questions differently, I reflect here empirically on strategies, partly inherited and partly in development, related to my own teaching experiences in trying to motivate students to engage more deeply with the historical material with the ultimate goal of forging links between history and the creative imagination.

First, a quick overview of the context. *Cultural History IV: Renaissance to Revolution* is a required course in a curriculum that features Cultural History as foundational to the study and practice of architecture. In first year, Cultural History (referred to by all as 'Ico', for Iconography) begins with an introduction to the twentieth century, then moves back to Antiquity, followed by the Middle Ages, so that this course is the fourth, and is followed by Romanticism and Enlightenment, ultimately returning to Modernity in the final years of the degree, in which two more specialized courses are taught. It is a double-weighted course introducing students to the period ranging from the Renaissance through the late Baroque.

The curriculum consists of weekly readings that correspond to a series of quizzes, designed to build skills in constructing arguments, or taking perspectives on the readings. There are six hours of lectures per week, which are typically resolved into a three-hour lecture, a film that interprets or represents themes from the lecture and readings, and a half-hour quiz.

Ico is not specifically on *architectural* history, or even art history. History is approached through an array of cultural forms, including the sciences and even the pseudo-sciences, in order to construct (often by analogy alone) the genetic relationship of a work of architecture to the cultural context in which it is created. This is a particular instance of a more general learning goal: developing the ability to recognize communicative patterns in different media. Slide images vary from paintings and sculpture through historical book illustrations and manuscript illuminations, treating a range of topics from botanical science to alchemy to geology to music.

The required readings form part of a larger 'great books' program within the school, one which en-

courages each student to start building a personal library, and as such the students read only primary sources for their course material.⁴ There are no survey textbooks used. The drawbacks of not using a classic canonical survey are compensated by re-orienting the focus away from the litany of objects and events and towards developing the student's own ability to make sense of original works, whether literary or material culture.

To enable the students to interpret texts (or objects, or images) even in a limited way, in other words, to create new knowledge, is therefore one of the learning goals. The skill being practiced is interpretation of complex cultural data, such as will be pertinent to their careers in practice. Thus there is a focus on hermeneutics, not only as a strategy for reading the texts, but also more importantly as a general thoughtful approach to historical material. The experience of confronting primary texts, and bringing philosophical conjecture as a key with which to unlock history, is one that enhances student research skills and whose hard-won successes create motivation.

Cultural History IV has two modes of evaluation, both of which are traditional within the school and which have been honed over the course of decades. The first, concerned with the course readings and film screenings, is a thirty-minute open-book quiz to be answered in no more than five sentences. The quiz questions, typically broad enough to allow for a wide variety of answers, are to be answered within a precise structure of a thesis, the citation of primary source evidence, and a conclusion. The quiz format produces a kind of active thinking in the students, such that they report learning *during* the writing of the quiz. This 'learning', in fact, constitutes their own production of knowledge. Over the course of the term, competence increases and they master a new skill, not limited to writing a quiz: the rhetorical ability to argue and frame a viewpoint on which to build ideas. Within the larger school curriculum, this is considered a skill vital to the Masters dissertation. However, the habit of thinking both clearly and laterally is of paramount importance in creative design. Taking a spatial metaphorical reading, from within a labyrinth of material, one takes a point of view that organizes the visual field, frames it, and by a process of abstraction foregrounds certain pertinent data, to build something new.

The themes of the lectures, while loosely chronologically structured so as to remain clear to those students initially not familiar with periods and styles, generally take their cue from predominant metaphors which can offer universal symbols or patterns in which the cohesiveness of a cultural era, its *Zeitgeist*, may be read in a way immediately relatable to architecture. (In particular, its stability and establishment of world and horizons, in relation to movement and transformation).

To give a few examples, the second week's reading of Leon Battista Alberti's treatise *On Painting* takes his generative architectural metaphor of the 'picture window' and the nominal idea of perspective as 'seeing through', providing opportunities to examine dematerialization and rematerialization of the architectural surface, transparency, visibility and lucidity, while the students view slides of paintings of the Annunciation and scientific diagrams of the optics of light in relation to space and to architecture. One week we critically read Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals" to observe the careful construction (and meaning) of the essay form as well as within the early Baroque, the theatre (most particularly the proscenium as a plane of reflection between ontological levels) and the museum (and the invention of 'folded' space in relation to the empirical project of classification) both provide spatial models and metaphors with which to interpret cultural phenomena. Similarly, later in the term, with the introduction to seventeenth century empirical sciences, we examine the architectural metaphor of the *camera obscura*, which relates the writings of John Locke to the spectrum experiments of Isaac Newton, and recuperates an underlying fifteenth century metaphor of the mind as a city with gates for the five special senses who act as messengers, introduced by Nicholas of Cusa.

As this course is double-weighted, there is a second project, quite different both in scope and execution from the quizzes, intended to put history's creative and generative potentials into action. For this project, which runs from the first week of term in parallel with all other activities, the students collectively produce and stage a play. Among the many aspects of relevancy to the course of a theatrical production is the idea of re-performing a story and by reinterpreting it, establishing new relationships and confronting its renewed relevance to the present — the same intention which underlies Walter Benjamin's observation quoted earlier, "Pierre Me-

nard", and the selection of movies which re-present central historical ideas of Early Modernity. Theatre provides a powerful vehicle to respond to the set of questions about how the students learn.

Theatre as an activity and a form for the project arises out of Early Modernity, the period of study, since which time it has been the central metaphor for urban public space, indeed for cultural knowledge in general. Taking theatre from a second viewpoint, as a model of interdisciplinary collaboration and spatial invention comparable to the architectural project for which these students are training, my ongoing objective is to discover, expand and refine the pedagogical possibilities of this project. While it is currently rare to find theatre inscribed within an architectural curriculum, there is considerable historical precedent for training architecture students through theatre.⁵ In these historical instances, as in our project, theatre does not mean mainstream public entertainment but investigates directly contemporary realities of architecture and public space at the intersection with the stories we tell about ourselves — the essence of history.

Having run this project for four years, I am attempting to distill where the project is successful and how. Mounting a play as a means of learning is constructively critical of traditional models of training that traditionally dominate professional academic formation, which is often too passive on the part of the student in their reception of knowledge. This style of pedagogy is transformative and empowering for the students, as they shoulder responsibility and devise modes of research and production.

Strategies are drawn from hermeneutics and phenomenology. The idea is to propose a project beyond the scope of the students' academic experience, which uses the hermeneutic principle of distanciation. This arrests any preconceived notion of how to carry out the design of the production and obliges the students to think laterally and invent (discover) relations between architecture, theatre, and other aspects of culture. Having proposed the project as a play, preconceptions of 'what theatre ought to be' are deconstructed and reconstructed in order to guide the investigation towards deploying space and materials to create architectural effects.

The historical resources, however, are to become 'flashes' translated from the past into the present.

Site-specificity of diverse kinds thus continues to be the locus of invention and the foundation of new constructs. For example, and in order to contemplate Canadian experimental theatre as a model or paradigm for architectural and public space, the students are required to mount the production without using a conventional stage, instead using public or semi-public spaces.

This idea is that, at many levels, the students begin to think 'outside of the box'. And yet, for design to qualify as knowledge, it must relate the known and the unknown in a qualitative and procreative way. The design is to expose the group to the spectrum of possible influences within cultural history that could be brought to bear on the project and whose relations to architecture become problematized and showcased in the process: performance art, installation works, site-specific works (art, music), video and film projection, museological artifacts, geometry, ancient and dead languages, initiation rituals, mask-making, and so on.

It is in this sense that cultural history, in distinction to art history or architectural history provides a more complete model of the relations between all aspects of enquiry (including physics, calculus, optics, magic, etc.) and the architectural event. During lectures and through films and readings the class is exposed to such *historical* points of correlation, and they discuss the translatability of the essential components of repeated cultural patterns that form the basis for tradition, continuity, and communication. The structural relationships are materialized and corporealized in architecture, which puts on trial, crystallizes and institutionalizes models for a cultural field of structural relations – for example, vision, and its paradigms in modernity.

The script, in essence a story found in history which is to be made present, is rewritten, edited down in order to render the effects primarily spatially rather than verbally. The translation of a verbal story into a spatial deployment and contemporary event underlies the relation of narrative and history to architecture, and is related from Antiquity both to Aristotle's formulation of *poesis*, and to the art of memory deriving from classical rhetoric.

The plays themselves have been a laboratory: in 2006 we performed a multimedia rendering of August Strindberg's surrealist *A Dream Play* out-

doors in an industrial setting; in 2007 the students chose to use a conventional stage and script for Christopher Marlowe's Renaissance play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*; in 2008 I asked the students to adapt the story of Daedalus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for five sets situated in a furniture warehouse; and in 2009 the class adapted Euripides' *The Bakkhai* and dramatized it throughout the architecture school. Through these, I have reinforced a focus on the students reinterpreting historical material (and specifically with reference to motifs from material culture and philosophical themes from the course lectures) as their main resource for inspiration and invention. History is also a renewable resource.

The goals for architecture students studying Cultural History is to augment their creation of meaning in the present. This meaning necessarily incorporates the collective. In creative disciplines, students flourish where they can transcend formulaic applications of systems, and engage themselves in innovative and inventive processes. Their highest momentum in self-development in relation to others arises when they are able to pursue their individual set of interests from the source material with a view to group goals. Allowing individual students to find their own voices, interests, and positions within a larger group emerges from the resource of having a class of 80. Students are obliged to engage in thoughtful reflection and positioning in order to make choices and alliances, enacting the political aspect of diversity. As an evaluative project this recognizes the value of differentiated individual abilities within a group of students and allows these unique qualities to flourish within an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual support. This is a model prominent not only in contemporary ecology, but also in economics and politics. This model supports the success of the individual and the success of the group project at the same time, and optimizes the quality of the produced work through synergy. Awareness that each individual's contribution benefits the collective, reduces those competitive energies which in the academic setting can become unproductive. Risk-taking is enhanced. It can be observed that each student completes the project with a sense of personal growth, pride, and fulfillment.

To summarize briefly some intentions of the project structure, though not all intrinsically related to the content of the course: To move students *outside of*

their comfort zone in research and making, by assigning a project in another idiom or field of enquiry (e.g. Theatre), in order to make visible the ecology of relations between disciplines. To increase motivation in learning by having students themselves set up the problems to be solved and choose what aspect of the creative work they wish to pursue. To encourage the students to invent their own strategies for learning and creating. To foster horizontal or peer learning in addition to vertical models. To help students see knowledge as a complex ecology in which participation occurs by co-creating. To encourage pride in diversity by foregrounding that one takes up a creative position with respect to knowledge. To optimize both individual experience and collective experience. To enhance risk taking and self-confidence, in countenancing new types of thinking and making.

The first step in privileging the creative act is to locate a ground of affirmation, the moment in which we say yes to the past and ask it to tell us a story. The metamorphic process by which this growth takes place owes its vital spirit to the poetic in its broadest sense, including metaphor, to the recognition of patterns in culture's communicative media, to 'delight in the beautiful' (as per Gadamer), and to the role of *play* in representation. Ultimately, my approach has been (to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche) 'not to become a gravedigger of the past' but rather to spatialize history as Augustine did memory: to thicken the surface or elongate the threshold, as it were, a labyrinth into which one can descend or on whose foundations palaces and towers can be erected from which to review its cosmic order.

ENDNOTES

1. "'The Quixote', clarifies Menard, 'interests me deeply, but it does not seem — how shall I say it? — inevitable. I cannot imagine the universe without Edgar Allan Poe's exclamation: "Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!"'" J. L. Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" in *Labyrinths*,
2. As an example of this, they read Nicolaus Copernicus' *Commentariolus*.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History for Life*, p.3
4. One must select engaging translations of the works, because the readings should flow. However, any student who read Shakespeare in high school can be interested by Pico or Rabelais.
5. The integration of theatrical production to architectural instruction dates back to the famous Bauhaus school Walter Gropius started in Germany in 1919. The theatrical works produced there by students under the guidance of Oskar Schlemmer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

were renowned for the experimental qualities of their Expressionist era sets and costumes, but more than that, even, for the dynamic qualities the choreographic staging and lighting brought to architectural design thinking. In the 1970s, Bernard Tschumi introduced theatre as a medium for the projects of his architecture students at the Architectural Association in London. Dubbed the 'London Conceptualists', they worked with performance theorist RoseLee Goldberg, whose conception of space as an arena for the realization of theory moved the students away from writing and drawing to engage fully in installation and performance in disused buildings. Tschumi later ran similar projects at Princeton University. The idea is still around at Princeton; architect and theorist Jesse Reiser recently ran a graduate studio involved in the production of Pushkin's Boris Godunov. At Syracuse, the school of architecture founded the Warehouse Architecture Theatre (WhAT) in 2006, and stages a play every semester.