

Non-Western Architecture Online

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Architectural history courses in the United States have focused on European and European-American architecture. Much of the rest of the world has been ignored, and many architects practicing today are designing buildings for cultures that they know little about. For example, few American architects know anything about the master of Ottoman architecture, Mimar Sinan. For this reason I began teaching a seminar on non-Western architecture after being awarded a course development grant at University of Illinois in 1993. After moving to University of Idaho in 1996, the course was modified to take advantage of available technologies. This paper will describe the challenges and rewards of teaching two versions of the seminar at two different universities with different resources.

BACKGROUND

In 1993 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign modified the curriculum to require that students each take a course in non-Western culture studies. To insure that an adequate range of courses was available, the University put out a request for course proposals and awarded fourteen faculty members with course development grants. I received one of the grants for a seminar entitled *Non-Western Architecture*. At that time there were three full-time architectural historians at University of Illinois, yet only two courses that went beyond the architectural traditions of Western Civilization.

My course covered traditional Asian, Islamic, and Native American architecture. The selection was made so as to include only architecture that was *not* covered in the other architectural history courses, and architecture that I had experienced first hand. My masters thesis had been on Anasazi architecture (Marshall 1989) and after finishing my studies I had traveled in the Middle East and Asia. These opportunities revealed to me a wider world that I was compelled to share with students.

The primary purpose of the course as I originally taught it in 1994 was to expose students to cultures and built forms outside of their immediate frame of reference. For most of my students this meant the Midwest, primarily Chicago and central Illinois. As I began teaching, I implemented active learning and collaborative learning strategies, and I limited the class size so as to encourage student interaction. The course met once a week for three hours and typically included a lecture followed by a discussion on articles that I had handed out the week before. In addition to reading the articles, students each did a three-part research project on architecture of a specific culture; it included a book report (written and oral), a presentation to the class with slides, and a final paper. Many interim deadlines were established including preliminary drafts, and some class sessions were devoted to peer review of preliminary student work. By the third time I taught the class (1996),

most of the bugs were worked out and I had more information to add to the class from a conference trip to Tunisia and from research-related travel to Turkey and the American Southwest.

University of Illinois has the most extensive library of any public university in the world, so even though my students were researching some subject areas on which little has been published, they were able to find what they needed right on campus. After moving to Idaho in 1996, I taught *Non-Western Architecture* using the same format, same assignments, and similar lectures, however, the results were quite different. I had moved away from the best public university library in the world, and was suddenly confronted by the fact that I was asking students to find obscure publications that our library did not possess. In a perfect world, students would have begun early and procured all of their resources through interlibrary loan. But students are students, most procrastinated and were frustrated when they could not find the literature at the last moment.

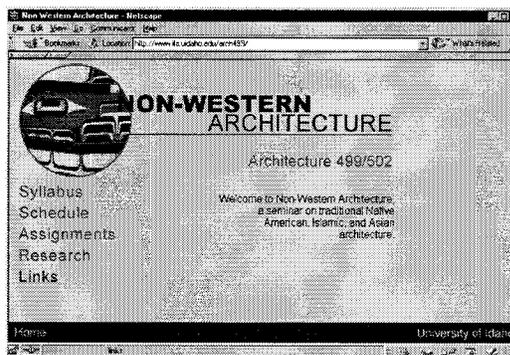


Fig. 1. Non-Western Architecture homepage: www.its.uidaho.edu/arch499/

THE WEB SITE

After this experience I realized that I needed to make drastic changes for the *Non-Western Architecture* seminar to be successful. Also, I became quite conscious of the paucity of information on non-Western and Native American architecture. Many of the publications written in Asia and the Middle East are not available in the U.S. Recent publications such as *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Oliver 1997) and *Traditions in Architecture: Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania* (Crouch and Johnson 2001) are providing more diverse information on architecture than was previously available, however, less information is available today on traditional non-Western and Native American architecture than on high-style Western architecture, especially in forms that are accessible to undergraduate students and the general public. To address

these two issues, I decided to create a web site. The web site has two purposes: (1) to support the *Non-Western Architecture* seminar and (2) to build up an accessible resource on previously inaccessible architecture.

In 1998 I received a grant from University of Idaho to build the web site. By January 1999, the web site was on line—albeit in its infancy—and I began teaching a revised version of the *Non-Western Architecture* seminar. The primary content of the course is the same as it was—lectures, assigned reading, discussion, and three-part student research projects. However, class activities are linked to digital technology because it is emphasized and, for the most part, well supported on the University of Idaho campus. Most of our students are computer savvy, and they appreciate the opportunity to use what they know and learn new skills.

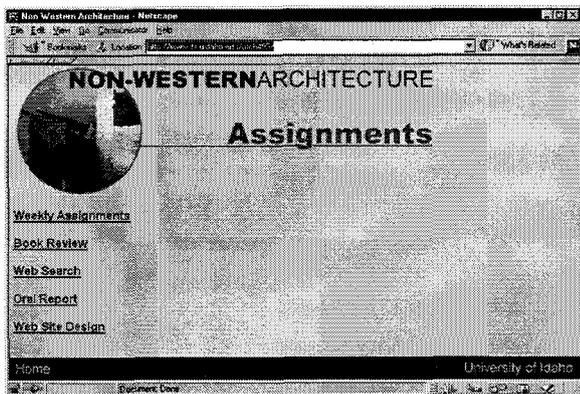


Fig. 2. Assignments web page

The web site includes a syllabus, schedule, and class assignments. The first component of the student research project is to collect information and make an annotated bibliography and an annotated list of links. In class students show each other examples of the most useful links they discover. In many cases students find information relevant to other students' work. I edit the links, then add them to the class web site.

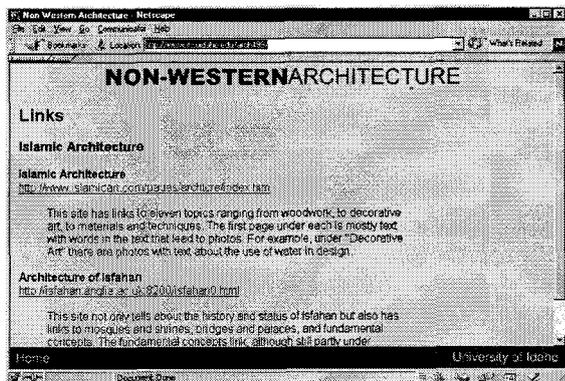


Fig. 3. Links – Islamic Architecture web page

The second activity is a PowerPoint presentation to the class. I give a workshop on the basics of PowerPoint in a demonstration computer lab. For many students this is their first PowerPoint presentation and their first formal presentation that is not of their own designs. Many students have expressed a strong sense of accomplishment after giving their presentations. The final activity is the creation of a web site. For this I provide a workshop on web design and another workshop on FrontPage. In 1999 I had six students—an average seminar size in my department—and all six successfully completed their web sites despite little or no prior knowledge about web site creation.



Fig. 4. Thai Architecture web site by Miranda Anderson

RESEARCH

The student web pages are accessed from the *Research* page of the web site. Miranda Anderson created a web site on traditional Thai architecture that begins with an introduction to the culture, geography, and history of architecture in Thailand. The heart of the web site is an extensive description of the elements of Thai temple architecture illustrated by specific examples. The final section is on Thai housing prototypes.



Fig. 5. Bahá'í Architecture in Israel web site by Bridgette Schneider

Bridgette Schneider created a web site on Bahá'í architecture in Israel. Bridgette had just returned from working at the Bahá'í Bahjí Gardens in Akka, Israel, near the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, so she brought recent, direct observations of the architecture, excellent photographs, and an understanding of architectural expression of the Bahá'í Faith.

Richard Reese's website is on traditional architecture of the Plains Indians. His section on tipis is informed by his experiences of owning a tipi. His site describes the process of erecting a tipi and his adventures of living in a tipi.

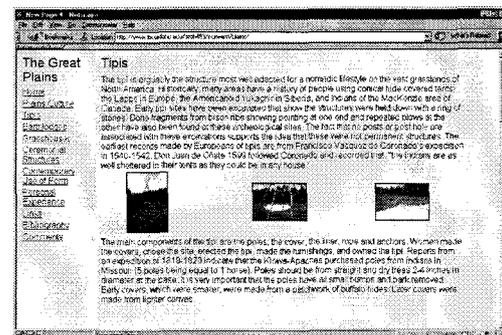


Fig. 6. Richard Reese describes the process of erecting a tipi.

