



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES

SESSION 2D

ROUTES TO THE PAST

**Pedagogy, Policy and Practice: Education,
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and/or Heritage**

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ADVANCING THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

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This paper explores the potential for architectural history to engage more widely and more deeply with the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Through a review of published SoTL from architectural history and related disciplines, as well as interviews with architectural history educators in Australia and New Zealand, the aim is to identify barriers and enablers to SoTL. These educators, each with recent SoTL outputs of their own, represent a nascent subculture within the discipline. Their perspective articulates the valuable contribution of SoTL towards the discipline's wider debates on its relevance. This insight thus provides a basis upon which to build an approach to SoTL tailored to the discipline's cultural norms and contextual demands. Whilst architectural history educators have certainly engaged in discussions regarding what gets taught and how it gets delivered, such discourse is rarely elevated to the level of critical scholarship. SoTL is the mechanism by which educators can evaluate and disseminate their own pedagogical innovations, thus yielding evidence to inform further development across the discipline. Additional opportunities presented by SoTL include deeper engagement with the field's ongoing political projects, such as decolonising the curriculum,¹ as well as ongoing developments across higher education related to changing student demographics, needs and expectations.² Indeed, the SAHANZ community occupies a prime position for elevating the rigour of SoTL activity and providing a platform for engaging in discourse surrounding pedagogical innovation. We might take inspiration from colleagues in art history and the humanities, who recently reflected on the role of SoTL in response to fears and misconceptions within their fields.³ Their reflections further emphasise the essential role that SoTL plays in altering the trajectory of any field towards one that values scholarship-informed teaching as an integral activity.

The field of architectural history has long hosted discussions about teaching and learning-related matters. As far back as 1949, Bannister noted the “formidable implications for teachers of architectural history” to perform the discipline’s primary functions in professional curricula, which in his mind presented “a unique opportunity, but also a grueling assignment.”⁴ And yet, generations later, scholarly discussion focused on learning and teaching matters has yet to achieve the sustained level of rigor evident in other fields. Efforts to effectively gauge the quality of teaching and learning tend to largely remain at the level of individual reflection or the occasional comment in the staff lounge or between conference presentations. Additionally, the ways that students engage with architectural history has received relatively far less critical attention within the community as compared to longstanding debates about which projects, cultures and perspectives to include.⁵ This is understandable in that such curatorial concerns are inherently linked to the primary scholarly activities of architectural historians; debating the selection criteria for curricular content, in other words, transcends the realm of education to discourse in museology, historiography, heritage studies and wherever else cultural representation is confronted. As Hein and van Dooren discovered in a recent review of learning and teaching literature in the field, “[t]he focus of this debate is primarily on the methods of architectural and urban historians, and does not address student experiences and teaching practices.”⁶

This is not to say that architectural history teachers are not concerned with pedagogical matters or challenging conventional teaching methods. The topic of *how* to teach architectural history, and debates surrounding learning outcomes, also traces back decades. Morgenthaler, for instance, opined:

Despite all of the benefits, history is not exploited to its full potential in current architectural education. The blame for this shortcoming should be put on the purely narrative approach and the emphasis on objective facts and events used by many historians...The drawback of traditional history education is that it does not teach us what to do with the facts and events.⁷

He pushes this critique further:

The traditional system of teaching—the professor delivering lectures—is no longer totally adequate to these changed circumstances because the truth of historical facts communicated in this manner is based on the authority of the teacher.⁸

More recently, this topic of how to teach history in ways that can better engage students has received considerable attention in disciplinary venues. Two recent studies, each funded through Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grants, sought to elucidate the current academic context by gathering voices of architectural history educators. In 2017, the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative commissioned an international survey.⁹ The results indicate that, while conventional approaches to history survey subjects remain quite common, alternative approaches are indeed emerging—including innovations in selecting and organising curricular content, as well as more active/immersive learning strategies. More recently, the Society of Architectural Historians has been conducting a study called “The SAH Data Project: Analyzing Architectural History in Higher Education” through extensive questionnaires, surveys and interviews.¹⁰ The mere existence of such funded research projects points to the growing desire to better understand architectural history education and its current challenges. Still, the fact remains that “systematic analysis of the impact that specific formats have on teaching has not been done.”¹¹ In the meantime, relying upon intuitive approaches to evaluate and develop teaching constrains architectural history’s ability to make any evidence-based claims regarding its pedagogical practices.

A number of factors align to make the present moment a particularly apt time to examine SoTL’s potential within architectural history. These include the fact that, under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions, ostensibly all architectural history instructors have now engaged with online modes of teaching—a shared experience upon which to reflect and develop best practices. Meanwhile, the recent foray into SoTL by the associated field of art history can offer valuable and translatable guidance.¹² Finally, SoTL offers a means of engaging more productively with the field’s long-

standing unease around teaching. As Lewis put it, “[t]here is a fair degree of anxiety in architecture schools at present about the teaching of history: we seem to be unsure about what to teach and how to teach it.”¹³ Some of this sense is evidently driven by forces external to architecture, including changing student expectations and cultural norms wrought by technological development. At the same time, an older source of apprehension remains: architectural history’s position within professional schools, including the lack of clarity surrounding the role of history in accreditation requirements and the lack of consensus for how knowledge and skills developed in history subjects ought to inform professional practice. This paper will refrain from delving into the debates surrounding architectural history’s place within the wider discipline, for “discussions of the role of history in architectural education transform themselves rapidly into controversies about architecture itself.”¹⁴

That teaching architectural history in the twenty-first century carries with it certain challenges, central of which is how to make the subject more engaging and relevant to today’s students, has become a widespread claim. At a recent conference of architectural history educators, a session of participants noted:

There is a gap (technological and/or generational etc.) between how students learn and the places from where they draw their information – and how today’s instructors teach. Most professors in architectural history are still using PowerPoint – the same methods established over a century ago. Today’s students, whether it is liked or not, learn in vastly different ways with different ways, means and technologies.¹⁵

This challenge of how to align approaches of teaching architectural history to the expectations and lives of contemporary student cohorts suggests the need for creative pedagogical strategies.¹⁶ In other words, it is less a curatorial matter than a pedagogical matter. As Elgawad writes:

A major challenge of permeating creative teaching into history courses comes from transforming established traditions of how to teach history and what exercises to employ in the process into ones to resonate with youth whose diversity has reached unprecedented levels and for whom technological gadgets are almost second nature. Also infusing history classes with creative and critical thinking that encompasses and responds to pressing social concerns reinforces the meaning of history classes and makes history relevant to students’ lives.¹⁷

Employing student questionnaires in their recent pilot study, Hein and van Dooren found that “Students clearly appreciate engaged teachers and more engaging and participatory pedagogical approaches” to architectural history, and that “a variety of teaching approaches [is] the best pedagogy and that students are eager to engage with critical thinking.”¹⁸ The authors also state: “The most important challenge in teaching architectural history consists of expanding beyond the pure transmission of historical knowledge to teaching students the analytical and methodological elements of historical research.”¹⁹ This final point suggests a more radical transformation to teaching architectural history than improving student engagement; it implies upending the traditional, hierarchical relationship between teacher and student in favour of a co-creation model based on student agency and empowerment.²⁰ In architectural history, this might include considering “how to stimulate a new dynamic and give students the possibility to define the content of the course.”²¹

Whatever the pedagogical innovation, the discourse and studies discussed indicate the pressing need for architectural history to develop their own version of SoTL in order to achieve the level of rigour that such exploratory and evaluative work demands. This includes grounding in relevant educational literature, designing analytical mechanisms for critical self-reflection and ethical conduct, as well as following processes of peer-review and public dissemination. Indeed, these represent the three pillars that define SoTL across sectors.²² It is worth asking, however, whether or not the lack of evidence surrounding architectural history’s teaching methods constitutes a problem. As Bass argues in his seminal essay, the everyday ‘problems’ that teachers encounter in the classroom are indeed “worth pursuing as an ongoing intellectual focus.”²³ As he claims,

Changing the status of the problem in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about. How might we make the problematization of teaching a matter of regular communal discourse? How might we think of teaching practice, and the evidence of student learning, as problems to be investigated, analyzed, represented, and debated?²⁴

SoTL is therefore the mechanism for determining which questions to ask ourselves and then helping select and test the most effective strategies to begin addressing them. Furthermore, it can critically engage with developments across higher education related to changing student demographics, needs and expectations.²⁵ As such, SoTL can function as a form of “subversive activity” through “the creation of a kind of alternative academic community that stands in opposition to many of the dis-integrative, disempowering forces at work in higher education.”²⁶ In this sense, SoTL “invites critical questions about education’s purposes, practices, and underlying assumptions, and in so doing reanimates core values.”²⁷ In addition to these benefits, architectural history’s variety of SoTL could also link to the field’s ongoing political projects, such as decolonising the curriculum.²⁸ Finally, engaging in SoTL can help strengthen disciplinary and departmental communities by providing collaborative or interactive opportunities to celebrate the joys, and reflect on the challenges, of teaching in today’s context.²⁹

We might also look to recent exchanges within art history³⁰ and the humanities³¹ regarding the benefits and challenges of SoTL. As in architectural history, these disciplines identified a widespread desire to engage in pedagogical innovation—but also noted the lack of rigour in such work thus far. They also challenge two widely-perceived hurdles to engaging in SoTL: “a lack of familiarity with how to conduct this type of research and the fear that this work will not be recognized by hiring or tenure and promotion committees.”³² Likewise, a survey within art history confirmed that “although teaching constitutes a major responsibility and ranks as a significant concern among academic art historians, scant research has been done to interrogate the discipline’s pedagogical systems or instructional practices.”³³ A key lesson is that such scholarship must be undertaken and written from a perspective that aligns with each discipline’s own culture, the majority of whom may be hereto forth unfamiliar with SoTL.

It is worth briefly discussing the development of SoTL to better grasp its value for architectural history. Most academics in schools of architecture will be familiar with Ernst Boyer as the co-author of the pivotal report, *Building Community*, which surveyed students, alumni and academics to identify key challenges and opportunities of US architecture programs.³⁴ Boyer typically is credited with spearheading the call for SoTL across higher education. In *Scholarship Reconsidered*, as part of his argument for shifting priorities around promotion/tenure and the relative value placed on scholarly outputs, Boyer advocates for alternative modes, like SoTL, as legitimate forms of scholarship:

We believe the time has come to move beyond the tired old ‘teaching versus research’ debate and give the familiar and honourable term ‘scholarship’ a broader, more capacious meaning, one that brings legitimacy to the full scope of academic work. Surely, scholarship means engaging in original research. But the work of the scholar also means stepping back from one’s investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one’s knowledge effectively to students.³⁵

Despite the undeniable impact of this publication, Boyer’s project remains unfinished so long as the “scholarship of discovery” is uncritically privileged as the most legitimate and preferred form of scholarship.³⁶ Particularly to disciplines like architectural history, Boyer’s critique remains pertinent today, amidst the backdrop of ever-growing departmental dependency on sessional teaching staff. Within such a context arise challenges related to academic development. On this topic, Bass writes:

What if we imagined an entirely different developmental model (or at least one complementary to that of traditional scholarship)? What if you introduced faculty to the scholarship of teaching and learning initially as a foundational professional practice to

improve their own teaching, but secondarily to cultivate a faculty motivated to join collaborative efforts around teaching and learning problems that were key local issues?³⁷

He goes on:

How might that change the ways that faculty think about the scholarship of teaching and learning as an intellectual and professional activity? How might institutions support this work, needing under this model to provide support and recognition for contributions to collaborative efforts to improve the local conditions of successful student learning? Faculty work on local issues might lead to publishing, although in a form that is as collaborative as it individual...There is an aggregated value to the collection of projects and insights.³⁸

The results of the interviews discussed below reveal that this concern for institutional support and recognition can play a major role in whether or not individual architectural history educators elect to engage in SoTL.

As established, despite architectural history's SoTL culture being far from widespread, there are signals that momentum in this area is starting to build. To better understand the current state of the field, including the perceived motivations and aspirations by its members actively producing SoTL, the author recently conducted semi-structured interviews with architectural history scholars to discuss the topic. As a data collection method, interviewing elicits narrative-based responses, thus capturing complexities, contradictions and contextual factors that, for instance, surveys cannot. Moreover, in this case, the aim was to gain insight from a subset of community members as opposed to gauging perceptions across the entire SAHANZ community. Those selected to participate published within the past several years on teaching and learning topics related to architectural history, as identified through online repositories such as SAHANZ conference paper listings, institutional websites, etc. By additionally limiting the focus to academics at institutions in Australia and New Zealand, the scope of potential participants was reduced to roughly ten. Ultimately, four participants agreed to interviews. Held remotely in July and August 2020, each conversation lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. Discussed topics included the academic's identity with respect to the field of architectural history, their experience with SoTL, their views towards conventional architectural history pedagogy, and their predictions for the future of architectural history in terms of content delivery and the student experience. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed to identify passages that expressed shared/divergent themes and positions across the four participants. Interviewing proved to be an effective means of situating, at least partially, each participant's perspectives towards conducting teaching and learning scholarship within their own life histories and academic careers.

All four participants expressed a certain mindset that can be described as a "critical curiosity" towards the teaching of architectural history. This compels them to tinker with their own approach to teaching, to consider unconventional ways for students to engage with architectural history. However, this drive towards pedagogical innovation was not for the sake of innovation. As one participant put it: "For me...it's never been about trying to be innovative or advanced, even if it appears that way. It's just simply been a pragmatic response to delivering education with the constraints that I've been faced with." Likewise, referring to recent shifts in student numbers and expectations, another described their engagement with SoTL as being "born out of necessity."

Three of the four participants noted institutional support as the initial impetus behind their direct engagement with SoTL. This support came in the form of required teacher training workshops that offered opportunities for critical self-reflection. Indeed, tertiary academia across Australia and New Zealand enjoys a rich culture of participation in global scholarship of teaching and learning. A key reason that the region punches above its weight in this area is due to the "variety of well-established provisions, programmes and activities in place that are explicitly intended to encourage and support staff engagement in SoTL," including the existence of "enabling" central teaching development services.³⁹ Over time, participants began to refer to their approach towards SoTL engagement as "intuitive", "organic" or "less explicit." Meanwhile, collaborators (often from other disciplines and/or institutions) as well as their institutional learning and teaching groups

provide continued grounding and scholarly points of reference. Otherwise, their interest in SoTL is not reflected within their own departments or the discipline more widely:

There's not a lot of talk about pedagogy and particularly history pedagogy in schools of architecture. It's just kind of one of those things that seems to be just taught. And that's fine if it's all working. But I'm quite interested in looking at other ways of doing stuff.

Likewise, another noted the typical distinction between research and teaching as an impediment:

That's what we do—we teach—but we don't necessarily talk about it very much. You know, you put your teaching over here in one compartment and then you speak about your research in another way. And so I think trying to bring them together, I think it's really valuable. I think that's where innovation is going to happen, where the younger generation of scholars who are doing new things in terms of...teaching can really...be able to actually lead in that way.

Three of the four participants remain active in SoTL, seeking further opportunities. Whilst the fourth participant's engagement with SoTL continues to inform their pedagogical approach, it now occupies what could be called a dormant facet of their research profile. For the three SoTL-active educators, SoTL projects are tangentially related to their primary research areas and present opportunities to grapple with contemporary challenges facing the discipline. One participant described how treating their SoTL work as genuine research, and not just as part of their ongoing efforts as a teacher, was a way of acknowledging the investment required to undertake such work and contribute to a scholarly body of evidence.

"The bid for relevance," as one participant described it, was articulated by all four participants as the key challenge they face as educators. As, "[w]e have to navigate a way of making what we're teaching seem relevant to the students." Another described the situation thus:

I think one of the key things at the moment with architectural history is making it relevant to students. The old kind of canonical way of teaching year-by-year—starting with Stonehenge and moving forward to Zaha Hadid or something like that—I don't think students understand the relevance of that. They're not interested in the content for content's sake. They want to know how that content can be instrumental in what they are interested in doing, which is a whole variety of things...As soon as you do something where they can see the relevance, or that there is a final outcome that's an actual, tangible something-or-other, they're just much more enthusiastic. And I can understand that. Because there's an awful lot of content that they're expected to learn...And what students are looking for is much more about understanding how their present day situation can be informed by history.

This concern regarding relevance is largely what inspired the participants to engage in SoTL, to test and evaluate strategies for making architectural history relevant.

This discussion of relevance raised another common, though less explicit, theme across all four participants: each evoked a sense of empathy towards today's student. To rigorously engage with the question of architectural history's relevance, they started by testing ways of making history and theory relevant to students' daily lives and the motivation with which many students enter university, to effect meaningful, positive change in the built environment. Through this process, each of these educators discovered that student engagement improves under a more complex (or at least more varied) pedagogical model than one that relies solely on a didactic format of delivering lectures in a dark, windowless room. When it came to engaging students more actively in architectural history, all four participants described their attempts at implementing experiential learning activities, such as visits to local heritage sites under threat or neglect. By connecting concepts to tangible places and local politics, this became a valuable approach to making history both more engaging, and thus more relevant, to students. Such an approach also provides an alternative avenue for students who find engaging in architectural history through reading a less than appealing pursuit. As one participant put it:

When students first arrive, they come from the public perspective. That's who they arrive as, that's their persona...And a lot of architectural history and theory is *really* convoluted in the way it's written. It's hard to read. It's self-referential. You have to have a whole background to understand what is trying to be said. And so I think that's a real barrier to students.

If empathising with students is indeed a pre-condition for SoTL, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the discipline to develop an authentically student-centred mindset. In other words, once the “deficit model,” historically pervasive across higher education, has been rejected in a teacher’s mind, SoTL becomes a way of manifesting this counteraction, through a mode of praxis that builds from the perspectives of students. After all, “Students are never who we may wish them to be, so we have to learn to honor and work with who they are.”⁴⁰

Despite the clear interest in discussing teaching matters informally, such as at SAHANZ conferences, one participant noted that academics may be disincentivized from initially engaging in SoTL due to the cultural gap between architectural history and the field of education. The expectation, whether perceived or real, is that SoTL requires employing theories and language foreign to the architectural history community. This presents a situation where they may believe the work will not be accepted by SoTL journals (due to lacking grounding in particular educational theories) nor valued by architectural history journals (due to falling outside the bounds of historical research). Breaking this impasse, therefore, may require that the version and venues for SoTL within architectural history develops a basis and a language tailored to the discipline and its cultural norms. Although the approach ultimately taken can obviously borrow from other disciplines, including education, the point is that such work needs to be valued from within architectural history rather than its merit judged against external criteria. What will guide architectural history’s learning and teaching scholarship is precisely what was identified through the interviews with SAHANZ educators: the challenges they face in the classroom, in this case the bid for relevance and innovative ways of engaging students.

Endnotes

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³ Denise Baxter and Kelly Donahue-Wallace, “Getting Beyond the Anecdote: Research and Art History Pedagogy,” *Art History Teaching Resources e-Journal*. (2016); Virginia B. Spivey and Renee McGarry, “Advancing SoTL-AH,” *Art History Pedagogy & Practice*, 1 no. 1 (2016); Stephen Bloch-Schulman and Sherry Lee Linkon, “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the Arts and Humanities: Moving the Conversation Forward,” *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 4 no. 1 (2016).

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¹⁰ More details available at the [SAH website](https://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sah-data-project): <https://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sah-data-project>

¹¹ Hein & van Dooren, “Teaching history for design”.

¹² Baxter & Donahue-Wallace, “Getting Beyond the Anecdote”; Spivey & McGarry, “Advancing SoTL-AH”.

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