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**The Re-writing Hi-story Project; or  
Running a Studio for a History Course**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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**Abstract**

Engaging the example of the *Re-writing Hi-story* project, a design studio for a lecture-based history course at McGill University, this paper discusses a different way of dealing with the teaching of history in Schools of Architecture. Challenging the common pedagogical assumption that studio and history courses are usually unrelated, the project focused on activating the relationship between the way the students perceive and contemplate history and the way they deal with the contemporary architectural reality.

Following from Flusser's understanding that man's historical consciousness emerged with the invention of writing, the students were asked to write a short essay after every week's lecture, foregrounding connections between the lecture's historical material and contemporary architectural matters. After the production of seven different essays and individual weekly tutorials for feedback on their writings, they were asked to choose one of the essays and think of a way to communicate its message, always in writing, to the broader audience of the School or the people of Montreal. They had to think where and how to write this message, in a way that was appropriate for the content of the message itself, in terms of scale, medium, and location. The exploration they were asked to do was therefore spatial, engaging issues of site-specificity and materiality. The physical rendering of these writing in space was understood in architectural terms (Abram), and also a means for the future architects to develop a language of their own and tell their *stories*, realizing where they stand historically.

**Keywords:**

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According to the on-line *Oxford English Dictionary* all the different definitions attributed to the word history<sup>1</sup> connect its meaning either with the study of the past and specific past events, or with something that has taken place and was completed in the past time. The everyday phrase ‘to be history’ is used to describe something that is perceived as no longer relevant to the present (OED, 2013). It is thus not a surprise that despite few exceptions, history courses and studio work are usually regarded as two separate and independent fields in the Departments of Architecture around the world. History courses typically deal with the historical material in an attempt to enrich the students’ knowledge but are rarely related explicitly to contemporary design questions, while studio courses care mainly for architectural issues at the present and future time.

Influential theoreticians of the past have argued in favor of this division. Manfredo Tafuri’s (1968) *Theories and Histories of Architecture* stated that history’s task was not to point the way to designers. In his later writings Tafuri demarcated history and design as independent disciplines and insisted on the autonomy of history, a discipline with its own methodological aims and tools and not a practice ancillary to design (Keyvanian, 2011). Counter-positions to such a point of view were present even at Tafuri’s time, most of them understanding history as a guide for the choice of the ‘correct’ future architectural language, ‘style’ or ‘typological precedent.’ As Calra Keyvanian (2011) has shown in her recent article *Teaching History to Architects*, Bruno Zevi’s *Architettura e storiografia* published in 1951 supported the belief that the study of past phases of history enabled the identification of the following ‘logical’ phase, which could then be offered to designers as the new ‘correct’ model for architectural practice. Zevi’s ideas influenced historians such as Reyner Banham and Colin Rowe (Keyvanian, 2011). The issue was never resolved and in recent years the discussion regarding possible ways of connecting the two fields and making architectural historical background more relevant for contemporary students still attracts the interest of scholars and professors. The ACSA conference in Montreal in March 2011 and the 2011 issue of the *Journal of Architectural Education* titled *Beyond Precedent* are only two of the latest occasions where the question of a creative connection between history and design was discussed in detail.

This paper presents a different way of dealing with the teaching of history, through the specific example of the *Re-writing Hi-story* project; a design studio for the history course *Architectural Intentions from Vitruvius to the Renaissance*, in the School of Architecture at McGill University. It begins by explaining the general content of the history course in which the project took place. The paper then moves on to the description of the project itself,

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<sup>1</sup>**history** (noun, plural histories): 1. [mass noun] the study of past events, particularly in human affairs (ex. medieval European history) 2. the whole series of past events connected with a particular person or thing (ex. the history of Empire) – 2b. an eventful past (ex. the group has quite a history) 2c. a past characterized by a particular thing (ex. his family had a history of insanity) 3. a continuous, typically chronological, record of important or public events of a particular trend or institution (ex. a history of the labor movement). (OED, 2013)

elaborating on specific assignments and reflecting on the premises of its suggested approach. Selected student projects are offered as examples.

### **The Context**

The history course *Architectural Intentions from Vitruvius to the Renaissance* has been taught by Professor Alberto Pérez-Gómez in the School of Architecture at McGill University since the fall of 1987. The historical material is presented through a hermeneutic approach to the Western architectural tradition (Pérez-Gómez, 2003) and is constantly connected with present architectural questions in an attempt to offer guidelines, set precedents, and demonstrate how things are not as new as they seem to be. History is seen as providing a framework of orientation that we can use to situate our own experience and understand it more fully (Weddle & Neveu, 2011).

The philosophy of the course is also motivated by a Nietzschean understanding of history. According to the author of *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*,

*‘we certainly need history, but we need it for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it. We need it for the sake of life and action, and not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action. We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate.’*  
(Hollingdale, 1997)

Therefore the weekly lectures deal with the historical material by systematically connecting it with present architectural questions (Weddle & Neveu, 2011).

This is why the students are encouraged to depart from the usual option of writing a history paper on a relevant subject and are invited to participate instead in a design project. Doctoral students in the area of History and Theory run the projects, which have a different subject every semester. Typically the projects explore one of the many notions and concepts discussed during the weekly lectures in further depth. Students are immediately assigned a design exercise,<sup>1</sup> for example the design of an urn (as a way to better understand and contemplate the metaphysical dimensions of architecture), the design of a timepiece (as a way to consider issues of temporality and the cosmological associations of the built environment), and so on.

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<sup>1</sup>As an undergraduate student myself, I first encountered such an educational approach in the Department of Architecture at University of Thessaly in Greece in the history courses taught by Professor Philipos Oreopoulos.

## **The Project's Topic**

During the fall semester of 2011, I wrote and ran the *Re-writing Hi-story* project as one of the teachers of this class. Instead of exploring only one of the many notions and concepts presented in the class through the design of an object, the project was directed towards an open and constant activation of the relationship between each student's perception and contemplation of history and their engagement of contemporary architectural reality as architects-to-be. The project aimed to make the historical background more relevant to actual architectural questions that the students are interested in. It provided them with a context to express their personal thoughts on these issues after every lecture, and always in relation to every lecture's material. The purpose was to develop the critical thinking of these future architects: encouraging their personal interpretation; helping them develop a language of their own to tell their own *stories* as they act architecturally and realize where they stand historically. Following from Vilem Flusser's (2011) understanding that man's historical consciousness emerged with the invention of writing, the students' *stories* had to be expressed in a written form.<sup>1</sup>

## **The First Assignment**

For the project's first part the students were asked to write a short (single-page) essay after each week's lecture. They had to focus their attention on their own personal and architecture-related thoughts - as inspired during the lectures - and elaborate on how their ideas on history could be connected with contemporary architectural concerns. If, for example, a historical event or condition brought up during a lecture made them reflect on decisions they took while designing, on the architectural magazines and books they read, on specific pieces of architecture they visited, or even on the dreams they had for the architecture they wanted to create in the future, etc., they needed to write down their thoughts and elaborate on them. They were encouraged to think on any possible topic that interested them personally (among the many different topics that are presented in each lecture) and apart from their thoughts, they were encouraged to include in their texts interpretations, suggestions or even recommendations. The only constraint was to always foreground the possible connections between the lectures' material and contemporary architectural matters, under a personal critical light, in a well thought-out and properly justified argument. A statement like 'I wish we could still build like the Ancient Greeks' wouldn't of course suffice, unless it was supported by arguments that demonstrated their beliefs regarding for example the advantages of ancient Greek architecture (or any of its aspects: program, social relevance, material presence, questions of representation, etc) as compared to

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<sup>1</sup>According to Flusser (2011), before the invention of writing man was outside history in the area which we -justly- call *prehistory*.



contemporary practices.

The students were given a week after every lecture in order to work on their writings. Subsequently, we would meet in individual tutorials to read and discuss the writing. Given that the project's premise was to create a context for the students to express and communicate their ideas and understanding of the historical material, guests were invited in these weekly meetings to participate in the conversations. Professor Alberto Pérez-Gómez, and History and Theory Ph.D. Candidates participated in them. According to each discussion's outcome, the students were sometimes asked to rework and resubmit their texts. Although this structure doesn't seem to differ from a mainstream pedagogical structure of an academic undergraduate course (lecture, meetings in seminars with professor or assistant, short assignments to test comprehension) the qualitative difference lies in the tremendous latitude given to the students in what they could choose to explore; a freedom that allowed them to engage with the historical material in a very personal way.

### **The Second Assignment**

After the production of seven different short essays during the first seven weeks of the semester and the seven subsequent tutorials and discussions, the students were asked to choose one of their essays, and think of a way to communicate its message, to a broader audience. Given the length of their texts, they needed to rework them, focusing on the most important elements, the strongest arguments and the best-articulated thoughts. They were asked to create a summary, a distilled version of their writing; even in some cases ending up with a single sentence or aphorism. Their thoughts were once more to be communicated in written form, but this time the students had to contemplate where and how to write their message, in a way that was appropriate for the content of the message itself, in terms of scale, medium, and location. Keeping constantly in mind that a text is a space by itself and that the words bear meaning, which presented in an appropriate and compelling way may make it resonant to other people, they had as architects to **design that very writing**. In this part of the project, the course's lectures served additionally as a source of inspiration, as in many of them students were presented with examples of texts written in or around drawings or on the covers of treatises, inscribed on marble plates, painted on temples' or churches' walls, placed on the facades of buildings.

Writing and its products were of central importance, as the students were encouraged to experiment with various methods and means of writing in order to find the appropriate way to communicate their thoughts in the appropriately chosen space. As philosopher David Abram (2010) has pointed out

*'there is something eerie about the ability of the written word to shrink the elemental power of a place. Something bizarre about the power of printed letters, even a few painted words on a metal sign, to*

*domesticate the bursting-at-the-seams agency of the wild. It is a uniquely efficacious magic, this alchemic ability of printed words to gather in the expansive mana of the place, concentrating it within themselves.'*

Therefore, an understanding of the significance of place was foregrounded during the tutorials of the last part of the semester. This included an understanding of the political implications of the student's interventions, seen as explorations of Hanna Arendt's (1958) '*space of appearance*.'

### **The Examples**

Given the fact that each student's writing dealt with a different topic and consequently the message that needed to be communicated required a different approach in terms of location, scale and means of representation, the project's outcomes were varied. Among the eighteen students that participated (third year undergraduate and first year master students), the majority of them decided to address their meaning to the students of the School, a significant number addressed their message to the city's dwellers and dealt with the challenge of designing a 'writing' in urban space, while some preferred to open the discussion to the internet community, designing blogs and web-sites. Some of the most characteristic and innovative approaches are presented here in some detail.

### **Writing in the School of Architecture**

Maya Orzechowska was particularly inspired by the lecture on Giordano Bruno<sup>1</sup> and his 16<sup>th</sup> century work *De vinculis in genere* (1591). The parts of his treatise that refer to the power of seduction and define that '*for this seduction to be ethical, the seducer must first love the object of seduction,*' (Orzechowska, 2011) triggered her thoughts on what it means for architecture to be seductive as opposed to influential. Looking up the definitions of the words, she developed an argument on how '*influence seems to refer to a more passive, consistent and logical effect of an (architectural) built environment while in contrast seduction seems a more active, and more emotionally based experience*' (Orzechowska, 2011). These thoughts raised questions as to the effects and ethics of architecture, and Ms. Orzechowska speculated on the ethical dangers that may be implicit in architects' intention to either influence or seduce with their architecture.

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<sup>1</sup>Giordano Bruno (1548 - 1600) was an Italian Dominican friar, mathematician and astronomer, with extensive writings on cosmological theories (that went beyond the Copernican model), but also on many other topics like magic. His work *De vinculis in genere*, it explains how the masses can be manipulated through magic, and how one can escape these traps.

Strongly believing that this is an issue that all the students of the School should contemplate, Maya decided to address her message to them. She summarized her text in the following short paragraph:

*‘The Latin roots of the words: influential, meaning “stellar emanation” and seducer, meaning “to lead astray” clarify the effects of architecture on human beings that experience it. Influence refers to a more passive, consistent and rational effect of an (architectural) built environment. In contrast, seduction is a more active, less predictable (on behalf of the seduced), and more emotionally based experience’ (Orzechowska, 2011).*

She then worked on the creation of a five-story tall and airy banner made of three superimposed layers of yellow tulle, to be vertically hung outside the windows of the School’s central staircase. The choice of place was based on the fact that the staircase, connecting all the different floors and used daily by students and professors, turns to be one of the building’s most public areas. The banner was hung loosely to allow the air to sensually undulate its three different layers. The message was split in parts so that different sentences (Figure 1) could be read on the different landings. Maya wanted to challenge the students to active participate in the work of art: to comprehend the writing in its totality, observers (or participants) had to walk up and down the staircase and reconstruct its message.

**Figure 1.** *Maya Orzechowska’s installation in McGill’s School of Architecture, December 2011*



photographs credit: Angeliki Sioli

### **Writing in the City**

After the third week's lecture and its focus on Vitruvius<sup>1</sup> and the origins of architecture, Hedvig Skjerdingsstad, in her text entitled, *Fire and Architecture; from Vitruvius to Lloyd Wright and today*, focused on the connections between the element of fire and architecture. Beginning with the Vitruvian claim that '*it was the discovery of fire that originally gave rise to the coming together of men, to the deliberate assembly, and to social intercourse,*' (Schofield, 2009) Hedvig contemplated the minor role that fire plays in today's architecture, limited mainly to fireplaces (in the rare cases these are included in house designs). She developed some thoughts around the predominance of electricity in our built environment (both for heating and visual purposes). She elaborated on the unquestionable advantages of this contemporary situation but also questioned the constant use of electricity and pointed out the spatial qualities that have been lost in our contemporary experience of space. Inspired by a visit to Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater*, she finished her text by constructing an argument on how Wright used the fireplace as the hearth of the home and particularly as the focal point of the living room. She tried to imagine the lived experience of this space in relation to the presence of the fire.

These were the thoughts she decided to revisit during the semester's second assignment. After a number of attempts to summarize her own words, she finally decided to focus on the Vitruvian sentence '*it was the discovery of fire that originally gave rise to the coming together of men*' (Schofield, 2009). Being well aware that this message had an architectural but also a deep social significance, she decided to address it to the people of the city. During the process of specifying, firstly the appropriate public space to write the particular sentence, and secondly the appropriate means for a message like that to be written, Hedvig underwent a meticulous study of the history of important public spaces of the city. Through her research she found out that the well know *Place d'Youville* in Montreal's Old Port was known for a big fire outbreak that took place during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1833, the market building *Sainte-Anne* was built in order to accommodate the fruit and vegetable sellers of the area. The Georgian building was soon occupied by the Parliament of the Province of Canada, which moved into it in 1844 and five years later, the building was burnt down because of political turmoil (Wikipedia, 2013). It was on the surface of this very square that Hedvig decided to write her message; wishing to point towards the place's very history, and remind the inhabitants of our secular modern world, the poetic and social dimension of fire. As a writing material she used ashes of wood she had collected from a farm near Montreal; and she wrote the sentence in a scale appropriate to be read by passersby. Hedvig organized a short performance during which she poured the ashes on

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<sup>1</sup>Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, best known as Vitruvius, (c. 80–70 BC - after c. 15 BC) was the author of the first architectural treatise ever written, entitled *De Architectura* (nowadays mostly know as Vitruvius' *Ten Books of Architecture*) a work of great historical importance for the discipline and of tremendous influence in the future architectural writings.

the square's paving in order to create the letters and therefore the words of the sentence (Figure 2): but also allowed for the wind to *extinguish* her writing. The ephemeral writing dwelled *in situ* for a couple of hours, during which time many passersby stopped to read and also to discuss with Hedvig. To those interested, the student explained the architectural significance of her writing, and the political nature of her performance.

**Figure 2.** Hedvig Skjerdingsstad writing with ashes on Place d'Youville, Old Port, Montreal, December 2011



photograph credit: Hedvig Skjerdingsstad

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Kenny Chan was enthusiastically interested in the metaphysical dimension of ancient and medieval architecture, as presented in the lectures. He was particularly intrigued by the fact that the building of medieval cathedrals was driven by the firm conviction that the end of the world was unavoidable and death was the only certitude. He systematically wrote about his concern that most contemporary building facilitates an incessant dwelling in the present and a perpetual forgetting of our human mortality.

Meticulously reworking his essay for the project's second assignment, he summarized its main intention in the following short paragraph:

*'I hereby pronounce the death of death, vanquished by a society who failed to ascribe its meaning. As we seek out fatality from our framework with redundant fail-safes, we dare to live blindfolded, as if dying were an afterthought, or some inconvenience to the workings of the world. Death has been torn out of the heart of the city, and never before has our relationship with it been even more awkward, our existential questioning thereof more aloof, and our representation thereof more taboo. Without a doubt, we are stuck on a path of perpetual present with no beginning, no end; it is a true labyrinth whose exits we have forsaken ourselves'* (Chan, 2011).

The choice to depart from a strictly architectural content and deal with a more existential message, lead him to the decision to write his message in the city's environment; *the heart of the city*, as the text itself dictated. After exploring different public spaces in downtown Montreal, he decided to write his paragraph on the corner of de Maisonnaive and Mackay: one of the most popular and commercial crossroads of the city, immediately adjacent to one of Concordia University's biggest buildings. Given that the message of the text was of a provocative nature and that its content dealt with the issue of death, Kenny imagined his text as the outline of a person who had (hypothetically) fallen from a building and died. It was to resemble the outlines drawn by the police in cases of accident and murder. Interested in provoking the public's attention, he thought that the presence of such an outline in the city's center would make hasty passersby stop and contemplate the fragility and ephemerality of life. Using a chalk-based spray, he used his paragraph to form an outline at the scale of an adult body (Figure 3); and then he let the text be wiped out by the pedestrians' footsteps.

**Figure 3.** *Kenny Chan's writing on Maisonnaive and Mackey, Downtown Montreal, December 2011*



photograph credit: Angeliki Sioli

### ***Writing on the Internet***

Chana Haouzi was among the students that were intrigued by the importance of *topos* in the Greco-Roman spatiality, as presented and analyzed in the first lectures of the semester on antiquity. The concept of *topos*, (Gr.) and *locus* (Lat.) as a qualitative place, site and strategic position and the careful choice of places for the erection of the ancient temples, influenced her first writings. These notions inspired thoughts regarding the importance of place in contemporary architectural practice. Adopting from the very beginning a critical stance toward contemporary architects who build without taking into consideration each place's particular character, and who ignore the need to

create a dialogue between place and building, she started looking the buildings of the city and its suburbs from a new perspective.

When asked to work on the project's second part, she condensed her writing in the very simple but provocative sentence '*architecture must be site responsive*,' (Haouzi, 2011) and she decided to communicate this architectural command to as many people as possible. Inspired by artists who work with projections and writings on building's facades, Chana projected her message on buildings of the city (Figure 4) that, according to a number of criteria she defined, were not site specific. Her projections (which only lasted a few minutes) were documented photographically and were uploaded on a blog she created specifically for this project; an interesting irony; given that Internet itself is placeless. In the blog, each photograph was further accompanied by a detailed explanatory text regarding the contextual mismatch of each edifice on which the message was projected. Given the potential for comments to be added to the blog, the Internet space worked as a platform where a public dialogue on the topic could take place. This was actually

**Figure 4. Chana Haouzi, Projection on Wal-Mart building, Montreal suburbs, December 2011**



photograph credit: Chana Haouzi

photograph source: <http://siteresponsiveness.blogspot.ca/>

## **Conclusion**

In his book *Inside the Endless House; Art, People and Architecture: A Journal*, architect Frederick Kiesler (1966) included his answer to a young architect who sent him a letter inquiring for a possible job position at his office. Kiesler's reply focused on the way the letter was written.

‘Seeing your writing and your way of organizing your page and your sentences, I should think that you have a talent for architecture. You know, a talent for architecture does not express itself only in buildings: it is the whole sense for organizing a space, which is a deciding factor.’

Having looked closer at these examples of writing, and their associations with historical material, contemporary architectural questions and issues of public and urban space, one question still needs to be answered. Why do these projects constitute an appropriate alternative approach for a History course? Heidegger’s distinction between two different understandings of history, *Historie* and *Geschichte*<sup>1</sup> provides possibly the most substantial answer on that issue. While *Historie* is characterized by scientific recording, analysis of, and debate about past events, *Geschichte* presents for the philosopher a view of history that is distinguished by the suddenness and coming to presence of a past that has not really passed. It is presently influential, a history that forms the basis for certain possibilities in a given moment, which significance is found in the complexity of our existence as such (P.Emad & T. Kalary, 2006). In those terms, the students’ projects constitute definitely paradigmatic case-studies of *Geschichte*.

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<sup>1</sup>The German term *Geschichte* is closer to the English words story or tale.



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