Architectural History Around the World: its Teaching Across Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programmes

Interview with Professor Emerita Caroline Bruzelius (Duke University, Durham NC)

GIULIA CERIANI SEBREGONDI
Università degli Studi della Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli"

GIANMARIO GUIDARELLI
Università degli Studi Padova

A members of the Aistarch's Internationalisation Group, in early 2023 we launched a survey on the teaching of architectural history in universities around the world. Our aim was to collect information on the ways in which the history of architecture is taught, with which topics and which methodological approaches, and to compare the Italian teaching system to that of other contexts.

The participation of many colleagues from a number of countries with different educational systems has made it possible to draw up an initial analysis that became the platform for discussion with Caroline Bruzelius. Participants in the survey come from several countries, making it statistically significant from a geographical point of view; the majority (74%) teach in architecture schools, while most of the others (19%) in art history. At least one third teach three classes. Thematically, many modules (especially those aimed at undergraduate students) deal with the history of architecture in relation to design theory and almost two-thirds are general surveys rather than monographic courses. In both cases, about one-fifth of the classes deal with the modern period (19th-20th century), while almost half covers the early modern period. These aspects were discussed with Prof. Bruzelius, who, as part of her research, has been experimenting with innovative forms of teaching.

GCS and **GG**: Starting from the last available analysis of the teaching of architectural history in the Italian context edited by the Centro di Studi per la Storia dell'Architettura in 2018 (*La Storia dell'Architettura nel sistema universitario nazionale*) and from our direct experience, we became interested in comparing the Italian context with that of others around the world, and we thought you were the perfect person to compare the European or Italian academic systems with yours in the US, having worked for many years in Italy as Director of the American Academy in Rome and as Co-Director of the *Visualizing Venice* project in Venice. We would like to reflect with you on the role of architectural history in the US academic system, and we are interested in your experience and the changes in your teaching strategy over the years.

CB: I would start by saying that architectural history in the United States has had a long and distinguished tradition. You can think of individuals such as James Ackerman, Richard Krautheimer – of course he was an importation from Germany – and many others, such as Spiro Kostoff, Vincent Scully, Hank Millon, as well as Joseph Connors and Howard Burns, and in an earlier generation at Harvard,

scholars such as Kenneth John Conant and John P. Coolidge. I should also mention younger scholars such as John Pinto, formerly at Princeton. Jean Bony arrived from post-war France to teach at Berkeley and had a profound impact on the study of Medieval architecture. These individuals, and many others, trained generations of students, and their scholarly impact has been profound.

As a result, there has been a strong tradition of American teaching and scholarship in architectural history. Not only were those people important scholars, but they also trained the next generation, such as Marvin Trachtenberg, for instance. Our graduate programs benefited from the diaspora of World War II: Krautheimer went to New York University, and Henri Focillon to Yale, where he had a profound impact on two of my teachers, Sumner McKnight Crosby, and Charles Seymour, both important figures for the study of Medieval architecture. In some sense the study of architectural history in the United States starts with the Gothic Revival. There were individuals, such as the architect Ralph Adams Cram, who were both analysts and practitioners of Gothic architecture. The tradition of study thus goes way back to, I would say, the 1890s and probably earlier. Cram wrote the introduction to Henry Adams' famous book, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904), a book that is still interesting and important, and which had a role in creating architectural history as a discipline.

Architectural history is taught in both architecture schools and in art history departments in the United States. It has flourished as a field of study until perhaps the last ten years or so, when, in the United States, at least, we had a serious decline in the number of students interested in the humanities and therefore even in this important field. This may also be occurring, to some extent, in Europe. This phenomenon is a great pity because it means that people are not learning to look at the world and to think critically about the making and shaping of man-made space, either in the past or towards the future, in the way that we must do, especially in an ever more crowded planet. As a result of this diminished interest in the humanities, it has also become more difficult for scholars to obtain teaching positions in our field. Furthermore, many graduate programs in Art and Architectural History, as well as in many architecture schools, tend to focus on early modern and contemporary.

GCS and **GG**: At least early modern! Because in Italy we are moving very fast to just contemporary.

CB: Yes, interest in the past has become somewhat attenuated because of the loss of interest in the humanities in general. And that is a shame, because if you think about the teaching of art and architectural history in the United States, as

I suggested before, it was with the Medieval that it started, for example, with Henry Adams' important book of 1904. This tradition is now certainly in decline. The shift in the intellectual climate towards "presentism" was one of the reasons why I began to seriously engage in working with, and teaching the digital technologies that could be useful for the study of art and architecture. It seemed to me that new modeling and visualisation technologies presented a way to prepare graduate students to work in a variety of settings, not only in research on works of art or architecture, but also, for example, in civic governments, planning offices, the development of apps, the creation of maps, 3D modelling of historic sites, and many other things. An important consideration is the way in which technologies help us answer our own research questions: making a model is critical to the analytic process for destroyed or modified structures. That is why, at Duke, my colleagues and I created a laboratory within the Art History and Visual Studies Department for integrating digital visualisation tools in teaching and long-term research initiatives in art and architectural history. We also created graduate training programs in Venice, at Venice International University, and continue to offer regular workshops on various types of tools, such as mapping technologies.

GCS and **GG**: Yes, and what about the use of digital technologies in graduate and undergraduate courses, for example, in your course called "Gothic Cathedrals".

CB: I did not plan this, but it turned out that I was a pioneer in this matter. I had always taught a course on Gothic cathedrals, and long ago realised that it was difficult to make this topic engaging to American undergraduates, for whom there is no "original" Gothic. Here it is important to understand the nature of the liberal arts education as defined in the United States: students do not specialise in an area of study until their last year or two of their four-year undergraduate programs. The principle is that a student should be exposed to a wide range of subjects chosen from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. As a result, students in political science, in biology, or economics would often take my course with no previous background in art or architectural history and no reading knowledge of French, Italian or German. How could I help these students do something meaningful as a term project? Years and years ago I decided that I would not ask them to write a research paper, but instead to work in teams of three or even four to design a Gothic cathedral: a fictional building, of course. But it had to be located in a precise geographic location with access to appropriate raw materials, such as limestone, rivers and roads and forests.

This fictional cathedral was to be embedded in an accurate historical context and designed in the right style for a particular time and geographic location. The project included not only creating the architectural design (plan, elevation, section, and façade), but also the sculptural decoration of portals and the stained glass, as well as an historical narrative on the foundation of the site and its history over time. There had to be a relic, and an explicit demonstration of how the new cathedral related to a pre-existing, presumably early Christian, foundation. And the economics! The students had to create a budget, with expenditures for labour and materials, and develop a plan to raise money for their cathedral: taxing peasants, taxing roads, taxing rivers.

GCS and **GG**: A complex task, maybe more than making a paper.
CB: Yes, it was demanding, but very creative. In 2009, my colleagues (Mark Olson, Victoria Sabo, Rachel Brady, Sheila Dillon) and I decided to experiment with a series of other digital visualisation technologies to see which might be best suited to investigate art, architectural and archaeological questions. Which tools would be affordable (we had no special funding), and which would have an "easy learning curve"? We wanted to know whether the use of digital technologies as part of the teaching and research process could or would affect our understanding and interpretation of the evidence.
This experience, over an experimental course of one semester, was revolutionary for us. We decided we could not turn back. We could not stop. We had to continue and develop this way of working, for both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as ourselves. I was convinced that these technologies represented the future of our discipline. That first experience saw the birth, as it were, of the Digital Technology Laboratory in our department at Duke (https://dahvc.org/), where we integrated technologies into teaching, as well as creating two-week yearly training seminars for graduate students and young professionals at VIU in Venice. At that time, we also developed multi-year research initiatives, such as Visualising Venice, and "The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database" (https://koseodiah.org/index.php), where students could engage at any level and be part of an on-going multi-year team. All these projects often entailed collaborations with other departments (Engineering, Computer Science, Environmental Studies, for example), as well as with colleagues in other universities, most notably at the Universities of Padua and Venice.
In retrospect, I realise that all this was quite radical in art history, a field which had usually entailed individual research. We were integrating historical research with visualisation technologies and engaging undergraduate students

in team-based and multi-year research initiatives, very much like a science laboratory – always a team working in collaboration. And I want to emphasise the long-term aspect of these initiatives – that they continued for multiple years, with students entering, contributing, and then (hopefully!) graduating. It seemed to me important that our students understand that learning does not just last a semester but is rather a long (life-long!) experience. I am proud of that, I must say, and suspect that our Digital Visualisation Laboratory at Duke University may still be the only one that is embedded in an art history department.

Aside from the Gothic Cathedrals course, I also taught the Introduction to Art History course. There I decided that, instead of having students memorize dates and styles, they could instead select an object and engage with it by creating a timeline (the "life-story of an object") and a map that would show where the raw materials came from, or how they might have been transported to the place of the creation of the object (for example, tin and copper brought to Athens to create bronze sculpture). The assignment included a timeline for the afterlife of the object: where it was found, and how it was acquired by a museum or collection, and under what circumstances. This made my students think about international trade in raw materials and works of art in antiquity, but also about museums and collections, about colonial appropriation… Art exists within a geography of making, trading, and collecting.

GCS and **GG**: This is also connected to the question of Geography, which is now more and more topical. It is a trendy topic to combine history and geography, at least in Italy or Europe. Moreover, this connection with the space and the physicality of things, we think is very interesting. Talking about digital technologies, what is the relative weight of the "tools" versus the "content" in the choice of PhD topics? For instance, is priority given to the testing of new tools or are there other priorities in your view?

CB: Well, it depends on the topic. I mean if you are working on 18th century paintings, these remarks of mine are probably irrelevant. But if, like my former student, Joe Williams, who wrote his dissertation on the cathedral of Molfetta, technologies (in his case, photogrammetry) turned out to be essential for his understanding of the chronological phases of construction. In other cases, laser scanning and ground penetrating radar (GPR) have been central to answering a research question. For example, we used GPR at Santa Chiara in Naples to find the foundations of the choir screen and then reconstruct a hypothetical model with the help of young architects and art historians, all working together. Certain questions now require technologies, and in my field, which is Medieval architecture, this is of critical importance.

GCS and **GG**: In many schools of architecture there is this idea of coupling history with theory; in the USA too, there are many modules called "history and theory of architecture". Could you say something about this approach, this idea of having a history much more applied to design, or looking very much toward the contemporary world?

CB: I am not convinced that this is useful. If students do not know some history, how can they develop a significant understanding of theory? You must know something before you can engage with theory. Theory is important for people who have knowledge.

GCS and **GG**: Thank you so much Caroline!

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

Adams Henry, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (New York, NY: The New American Library, 1961 [1904])
MacDougall Elisabeth B. (ed.), "The architectural historian in America: a symposium in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Society of Architectural Historians National Gallery of Art (U.S.)", *Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 35 (1990)
Bruzelius Caroline, "Teaching with visualization technologies: how does information become knowledge?", *Material Religion*, 9, 2 (2013), 246–253. doi: 10.2752/175183413X13703410896654
Bruzelius Caroline, "Digital Technologies and New Evidence in Architectural History", *"Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians"*, 76, 4 (December 2017), 436-439
Bruzelius Caroline, Jacobs Hannah L., "The Living Syllabus: Rethinking the Introductory Course to Art. History with Interactive Visualization", *Art History Pedagogy & Practice*, 2, 1 (2017), 1-18
Bruzelius Caroline, "Visualizing Venice: teaching, training, and imagining a new kind of urban and architectural history", in *Visualizing Venice, mapping and modeling time and change in a city*, edited by Kristin L. Huffman, Andrea Giordano and Caroline Bruzelius (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 15-19

Centro di Studi per la Storia dell'Architettura, "La Storia dell'Architettura nel sistema universitario nazionale", *Bollettino del Centro di Studi per la Storia dell'Architettura*, N.S. 2 (2018) http://www.cssar-casadeicrescenzi.it/parte-i-articoli/

SITOGRAPHY
Duke's Digital Art History & Visual Culture Research Lab
https://dahvc.org/

The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database
https://koseodiah.org/index.php