

On Teaching History Of Architecture In Higher Education

Or How To Use Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History Of Architecture* For A 21st Century Course In Architectural History – An Overview

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Abstract

Teaching history of architecture to young students may be the most challenging duty for a member of the teaching staff within an educational institution that prepares future architects, in (for) the 21st century. An explanation would be the fact that *History of Architecture*, as a compulsory subject of the educational curriculum is often regarded as being obsolete and useless. Nowadays generations regard the present as the only conditioning matter for future. Therefore, with few exceptions, the history of architecture is completely forgotten, despite the fact that the theory of architecture sets certain turning points or counterpoints, related to the past – e.g. *genius loci* (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). Usually the design studios, where they “knead” and collate lines, textures, colours, materials, and images, attract students a lot. They work with space and they create space. But what happens beyond the drawings? What is behind rules and regulations, building-types and facilities, walls and windows? Architecture is *where people dwell...* (Heidegger, 1975, pp. 221-229). On the other side of the present and future of architecture, lay centuries of history of architecture that usually remain unrevealed – covered in oblivion or totally neglected. That is why, the role of innovation and originality is highly recommended when teaching history, the history of architecture in particular. Thus, this paper focuses on new approaches in architectural higher education, as the result of the courses and seminar classes implemented by the author at the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning of Cluj-Napoca.

Keywords: Architectural higher education, new practices, courses, seminar classes

Refusal of History in Contemporary Romania

Despite the devotion of the academic teacher to his students or to his professorship, there is this great distance set between past and present, measured in time: this distance makes the difference and draws a final break line – quite thick and scarcely dashed.

Things become harder when you have to do with students that accumulated certain gaps during their high school formation – and this is a cruel reality, common in contemporary Romania, after the 1989 Revolution. The fall of Communism brought dozens of important changes in the political, economic, social, cultural and religious life, with strong impact on the Romanian society.

Particularly, the Romanian educational system and the national educational curriculum have suffered enormous changes – successive reforms were undertaken (for more information see: Ministry of Education and Research, 2001; Ministry of National Education, 2014; Romanian Government, 2015). On one hand, an explanation would be the continuous endeavour to create a new, different, and better democratic educational system, trying to replace the strict, subjective, and unilateral one, subordinated to the ruling politics of the Communist party, with the teaching staff being highly supervised by the local Party Committees. On the other hand, there is *the repulsion to learn history*, because for almost 45 years, Romanians, as in other countries under the Iron Curtain, had to learn a highly controlled and imposed history, according to the history and vision of the Communist Party, pointing out the role and glory of the *beloved leader* and of *the Party*.

Since the downfall of the Communist regime, the allegiance to the head of state and Communist Party leader Nicolae Ceaușescu, as well as the allegiance to the ruling Romanian Communist Party became a matter of hate and disgust. It still dominates the contemporary Romanian society that continues “to investigate”, after more than 25 years, *the crimes of the communism* and *the enigma of the 1989 Revolution* – everyone can watch this, maybe more than three times a year, on their own TV. Therefore, the public disgust and accentuated carelessness over the history of Communism in Romania, doubled by the sad ignorance of the young people to the recent history, turns into a general sense of unconcern, which makes Romanian teenagers highly unmotivated in the process of their intellectual formation. Unfortunately, to this effect, the national curriculum for pre-university education and the official manuals have a significant impact. Particularly, recent history is treated superficially: the Communism in Romania represents only a small chapter that links the end of the Second World War with the post-revolutionary period. In this way, about 45 to 50 essential years are “missing” from the high school graduates’ knowledge. Moreover, only

recently, the Baccalaureate exam curriculum included a chapter on ideologies and political practices in Romania, during the 20th century, including concepts on Stalinism, national-communism, and anti-communist dissidence, also with a view on Romania's position during the Cold War. Therefore, we are not speaking at all about school dropout, but on the contrary, during a long period of state supported education, many pupils and then students accumulate and manifest a crass lack of attitude, in the broader context of a lack of knowledge on their selves, as individuals with personality. Not surprisingly, this attitude is in fact also a result of the rejection of the idea of the controlled social and educational Communist politics, reflected in their parents' formation.

Consequently, *the refusal of history* means *the refusal of everything connected to the past*: events, personalities, architecture, etc. Life in the communist block has ejected the *usages du monde* (Staffe, la baronne, 2012 [1891]), proper to capitalist democracy and great expectations of the bourgeois life. *Savoir-vivre* has become an uncertainty. Despite all these, lately, it seems that the Romanian society highly esteems the old values and their exponents (old-fashioned intellectuals, aristocrats or other former *class enemies* that survived Communism), generally trying to re-evaluate its position and to reconnect to its roots. Moreover, it should be underlined that, on a scientific level, there has been an abundance of research done regarding the subject of “corrected” history, architectural history, and even Communist architectural history, although a gap remains between the scholarly perception and the view of the common society. Nowadays, this issue has been highly debated in the mass media. Recent approaches, like the campaign entitled “The right to access memory. The museum of Communism in Romania” (“Dreptul la memorie. Muzeul comunismului din România”), try to find out how teenagers and young people can be motivated to be interested in the history of communism. The campaign, produced by the Romanian Television Company and the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism and the Memory of Romanian Exile (IICCMER – Institutul de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului și Memoria Exilului Românesc), was active between 8th of May and 26th of June 2015 and had a great public impact.

In the recent years, the role of *continuous education* and the need of *national youth policies* has been highly emphasized (Marinescu, 2010). The young are especially vulnerable, when, after the end of puberty (between the age of 12 to 14), the gradual maturation of physical and mental functions of the body develop and teenagers prepare to become adults, responsible for the consequences of their actions (psychological maturity ends at the age of 25-26 – Groza, Vaina, Marcu & Ștef, 2010). To this effect, *the state policies* are very important – currently, in Romania, there are a series of new strategies

and laws, which support the national priorities in the education system (Ministerul Educației Naționale, 2016).

Nowadays, young Romanians confront a challenge. They seem to be swimming between two waters. On one side, there are the waters of past regarded as something to forget, because they are supposed to do so – apparently, there are things which nobody is interested in. On the other side, there are the waters of the past regarded as something to forgive and most of all to accept – in doing so, they have to admit and assume a history that has many things to say and, as well, to recover. In addition, the perspective on *old architecture*, seen as a remnant of the past, is also twofold. One reflects the obsolete image of the past, which thus can be ignored – it is the musty architecture that has fallen into disuse, due to its outdated character – its artistic, cultural or historic value is not important – it means nothing. The other reflects the values of the past, which have to be understood and recovered – it is the architecture that has to be restored, rehabilitated and / or reconverted, enhanced and promoted; it represents testimonies of a past which has to be re-acknowledged. Therefore, in the light of all these, teaching history of architecture in higher education is quite a challenge, most of all if we are speaking about *ancient or medieval architecture*.

Challenges of Teaching History of Architecture in Higher Education:

In the broader context of contemporary education, the *permanent education* reflects a *continuous character*, a *formative character*, an *overall character*, a *dynamic character*, and a *flexible character*, looking to adapt, evolve, and integrate parallel to the development of society (Ionescu, 2003, p. 405). In Romania, architectural studies in higher education extend over a six-year period. At the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning from Cluj-Napoca students study the history of architecture in the first four years: ancient and medieval (1st year), Renaissance and Baroque (2nd year), nineteenth century and twentieth century (3rd year), history of architecture in Romania (4th year). On this line, as titular of the courses of *History of Ancient Architecture* and *History of Medieval Architecture*, for the first-year architecture students, I have a serious responsibility, which involves their future affinity both with architectural theory and with architectural practice. My own experience, as an alumnus of the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning from Cluj-Napoca, has challenged me to create a different view over the contents of these two courses in the history of architecture, trying to emphasize more the practical side of the subjects, rather than the theoretical one. Hereunder, I present the result of my endeavor, taking into account that Sir Banister Fletcher's *A history of architecture* represents a metaphorical extent of the theoretical approaches in relationship to the applied exercises.

The structure of both courses follows *the same approach*. The *theoretical subject* (two-hour course per week, fourteen weeks per semester) proposes to emphasize the diversity of the architectural phenomenon related to its geographical, historical, political, economic, cultural and religious context. At the same time, it argues the necessity of understanding the meanings and interpretations of the architectural phenomenon (practically and didactically, using technical and specific terms / notions), focusing on the reality of its applicability. Thus, each course is followed by *practical work* – on the field (two-hour “detective sightseeing” every two weeks), at school (two-hour seminar every two weeks), and at home (one-hour study every two weeks). For each individual work / project, a student has two seminar classes. While presence at the courses is recommended, presence at the seminars is mandatory. Students are permitted to make up only one missed seminar at the end of the semester. The preparation for the final exam needs about twenty-four hours of individual study. The final exam consists of a one-hour test, with fourteen questions, with a table-layout in A3 paper size.

The History of Architecture is a basic discipline for future architects, being formative, as well as informative. The study of the evolution of architecture throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages, pointing out important moments in the history of the civilization, is seeking to explain the different manifestations, expressions, and representations of the architectural and artistic instances, in accordance with the economical means, the technical development, the forms of social organization, religious beliefs, and life philosophy.

The main goal of the disciplines is to develop competences and knowledge specific to the architectural profession. They do so by understanding the phenomenon and the architectural process, which unfolds starting from Prehistory up to the end of the 15th century. The issues of the discipline are contextualized, a fact which is essential for *understanding the following periods of the history of architecture*. *The specific goals of the disciplines* are both theoretical and practical, following the content of each course.

The *History of Ancient Architecture* is a course structured into four main parts, pointing out:

- an introduction to the study of the history of architecture;
- the prehistory (the rupestral art – Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic; the megalithic civilization);
- civilizations of the Ancient Near East (the architecture of Ancient Egypt and the architecture of Mesopotamia – Sumero-Akkadian, Babylonian, Hittite, Assyrian, New Babylonian, and the Achaemenid Persian Empire);

- Mediterranean civilizations (Minoan and Mycenaean, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman).

This course emphasizes the importance of various aspects of the classical inheritance of the Greco-Roman world and its characteristic contributions transferred to the modern European civilization.

The *History of Medieval Architecture* is a course structured into four main parts, pointing out:

- the premises of medieval art and architecture
- the Early Christian art in the Roman Empire;
- the Eastern Roman Empire; the Byzantine Empire (the byzantine style; the inheritance of the Byzantine Empire);
- the Middle Ages in Central and Western Europe subdivided into two parts: art and architecture of early feudalism or Early Middle Ages (5th to 10th century – the fall of Rome and the Pre-Romanesque *style*) and the art and architecture of the developed form of the feudal society – High Middle Ages and Late Middle Ages – the Romanesque *style* (11th to 13th century) and the Gothic *style* (12th to 16th century).

The exposé is both theoretical and practical, by which it means to reveal the importance of every architectural achievement as a step forward for the evolution of the modern man. Therefore, using the video projector, each presentation is structured according to a *recurring lesson plan*, showing, if it is relevant some *contextual generalities*, *time line / periodization*, the study and analysis of *specific architectural forms and building types*. This helps the students to get used to a structured way of thinking, encouraging each of them to develop a particular / individual attitude / opinion / definition, toward each architectural notion, object, building type, etc. Put in this light, it also enhances a preliminary spatial perception and the challenge of working with proportions, while drawing at the seminar classes or preparing for the final exam.

Accordingly, the course emphasizes the idea of the permanent evolvement of architecture according to the general development of politics and society, pointing out the differences or similarities, and the most important steps achieved in each period, determining the specific architectural typologies and building types, elements of technical language, cultural notions, specific architectural forms, architectural layouts, materials and building techniques.

All these being said, one should notice that that each student has the opportunity to form / elaborate the optimum visual “synopsis” of the presented material. This ensures the future architects also draw up layouts or other technical architectural designs, with a view to make the most of the resources provided (books from the University Library, drawings and other scanned digital material, etc.). The practical work does not encourage

meticulously accurate representations / drawings, but rather sees that students find out that the study of the history of architecture can be challenging, sometimes like a mystery investigation, being rather a tool for planning, sketching, and designing, both theoretical constructs and abstract depictions. The recommended bibliography list includes Romanian specialized dictionaries (Popescu, 1995, 1998), architectural or cultural history books (Curinschi Vorona, 1976, 1982, 1986; Lăzărescu, Săsărman & Voiculescu, 1971; Drimba, 1997; Fleming 1983), together with foreign works like Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (Fletcher, 1896), Wilfried Koch's *Baustilkunde* (Koch, 1994), John Mansbridge's *Graphic History of Architecture* (Mansbridge, 1999), and Rolf Toman's albums on *The Art of Gothic* (Toman, 2004) and on the *Romanesque : Architecture. Sculpture. Painting* (Toman, 1997).

The practical work, conducted during the seminar classes, divided in three units, supposes that each student will elaborate individually a three-part illustrated personal vocabulary, with professional terms – about thirty per unit. Through this approach, students will assimilate basic and key concepts or notions – be they specific to the history of architecture or to the profession of architect. Each unit is composed by a two-hour study visit and a two-hour drafting session at the Faculty. The task for each session is presented during the first seminar class – respectively the first study visit. Study visits focus on small-scale architectural objects (*e.g.* tombs and family vaults in the Central Graveyard of Cluj-Napoca) and on medieval buildings accessible to the public on various levels (like the remnants of the city defensive system or the Reformed Church on Kogălniceanu Street). Thus, students can literally touch the architecture notions they are learning. Then, they have to find and photograph other examples, on their own – preferably, they have to identify the buildings which concentrate most of the given elements / terms. For each drafting session students have to prepare a collage with their own study photographs and to consult the specialized dictionaries (about one hour home study). At the Faculty, they draw and write detailed explanations as requested. The drafting layout is a A4 size notebook containing hand-made drawings, technical explanations, and personal observations. Therefore, the practical works aim at an applicative goal, namely identifying and detailing, for each term, an example of historical architecture in Cluj-Napoca, possible comparative studies or, as is the case, personal observations on the matter. The final target is *to understand the applicative and formative role of studying the history of architecture*.

Eventually, the courses and the seminar classes aim to establish *elements of a specific professional knowledge*, which will offer the students the possibility / ability:

- to recognise the main monuments of the studied period;

- to identify specific architectural features of the studied period, respectively to group various buildings according to specific criteria (historical period, cultural and geographical area, and stylistic aspects);
- to understand the evolution of the architectural phenomenon of the studied period (relating it to shape, structure, material, ornamentation, meaning, symbol, image, social-political-cultural-religious context);
- to establish comparisons among different architectures of the studied period, regarding construction materials, construction methods, architectural forms, and building types;
- to use professional notions and terms in an adequate context;
- to anchor, generally, architecture and, in particular, the architectural object in the adequate social-cultural-political-economic-geographical context.

Conclusion

Both disciplines offer a broad perspective upon the context of the evolution of the civilization and society throughout the specific centuries, thus essentially contributing to the development of *a professional cultural and evaluative filter*, and *to the understanding of the transdisciplinary nature of architecture*. The process of teaching provides student-centered learning experiences. The process of evaluation (final exam + seminars) is objective and concentrates on the students' ability to synthesize the information gained (through schematic drawings with concise explanations).

Following these courses and preparing their own hand-illustrated vocabulary notebook, students acquire a series of skills, meaning that they will know how to use professional terms, a personal cultural filter of professional values, specialized books or documents, plans, sections or other architectural details not only specific to the studied period or to a certain geographical-cultural environment, but globally applicable.

Transversal key competences for lifelong learning include understanding the transdisciplinary nature of architecture, the development of a professional conduct related to architectural monuments and other cultural testimonies of the studied period. Thus, understanding and respecting the (cultural, artistic, architectural) values and even the development of some elementary forms of a professional ethics (particularly relevant regarding restoration, rehabilitation or reconstruction works) are provided. This is the result of the applied *in situ* learning and of the systematic process to get accustomed with the historic city, in which students live at least during their six-year study. However, maybe, the main achievements are the shaping of oral and especially graphic communication skills (through professional dialogue, respectively, drawings and sketches focused on form, materials, structure, substance, content, symbol, image).

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