

GAHTC

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University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

Breakout Session: “Bringing the Global into the Curriculum”

Moderator: Gail Fenske

In their discussion of “Bringing the Global into the Curriculum,” the group focused on three main topics: 1) how a professor of architecture, art, and urban history might bring the global into the curriculum; 2) the methods of teaching the global history of architecture, art, and settlements/towns/cities; and 3) existing issues and problems with teaching such a global history.

1) How to bring the global into the curriculum?

- Assuming a “global survey of the built environment,” exactly how this is done depends on three important criteria: 1) where one teaches (in a school of architecture or a department of art history, for example); 2) the level at which one is teaching the course (undergraduate freshmen in general studies versus master’s level students in a program in architecture); and 3) whether the course is taught in one, two, or three semesters. If taught in a single semester, structuring of the course around a powerful theme is essential.
- When introducing the course, it is important to place the student—depending on where he or she is situated locally—within a global framework. Emphasize that their “world” matters in relation to the global world: any place local can be knit into the global in a compelling way.
- Exploring the students’ own current understanding of the global at a course’s outset will establish the local/global connection: for instance, in Mississippi, one could explain the plantation system as part of the global production of cotton.
- The use social media such as a Facebook page (formatted for a “closed group”) has the potential to inspire curiosity and critical thought in students. Such a page could include clips from television (PBS’s Nova) or articles from accessible journals such as the *Smithsonian Magazine*. Professors might post photographs of themselves at distant, intriguing sites, e.g. Borobodur, as a way of drawing students into their narrative of a global perspective.

2) Which methods should be considered in teaching a global history of architecture, art, and the larger built environment?

Exploring the connectivity among cultures and civilizations is a very different matter today than a generation ago, given the great strides being made in archaeology and scholarship, among them recent excavations on the eastern coast of India showing evidence of Rome having colonized Egypt during Augustus’s reign.

The new global narrative draws greater attention to this connectivity, as opposed to the previous generation’s construct of “style centers and diffusion.” To challenge students’ thinking about connectivity, it is important to introduce a certain type of material, e.g. the Armenians’ strategic relation to trade routes during the Middle Ages.

Examining how resources circulated within global networks can be especially telling of previously unexplored global connections. The use of Indian teak in British ships, for example, illuminates a type of resource extraction as well as the scope of that extraction, and along with it the empire's administration and requisite paperwork.

Certain key works in the older canon, e.g. the Parthenon and Hagia Sophia, might be explored in terms of larger flows, translations, networks, and connections.

In considering historic preservation, it is important to view the aims of preservation through the lens of how world civilizations interacted through history: whose past and which past is to be preserved? For example, the Greek Parthenon, a chestnut of western civilization, was once a mosque, and pieces of it are now housed in the British Museum in London (it served as a kind of imperial treasure chest).

It is important to emphasize cross-cultural dialogs. Teaching the "global" is a powerful means navigating unique cultures, times, and places. One might explore, for example, the German craze for re-enacting native American customs and ways of building.

For modern architecture, it would be worthwhile to take a certain pivotal concept, e.g. "modernity," and to examine it as a phenomenon through a global lens. Otto Wagner deeply understood the temporal notion of "modernity": he was horrified by the architecture of Vienna's recent past, given that the city's larger culture and society has at the turn of the century raced ahead.

3) Existing issues and problems?

"Global" does not just refer to including previously underrepresented populations, but rather to the navigation of world territory as part of a larger human story.

"Global" is not nationalistic. It is important to avoid falling back on today's existing geopolitical categories. In using "Ming" instead of "China" it is possible to speak about a specific historical and geographical entity, the border of which may have crossed into today's Korea. "National" refers to the current political order: Argentina, for example, is a relatively new political entity.

In Asia, certain curriculums are showing a reactionary response to the still existing "Eurocentrism" in scholarship, which is unfortunately leading to a new "nation-centric" curriculum and along with it, the development of a nationalistic "counter-canon." Some schools in India, for instance, have recently developed an "insanely" nationalistic narrative.

Provincialism can be global. Today's internet is a good example: some people continue to communicate within the confines of small interest groups.

"Western Civilization" is a recent invention, a historical category that came into broad use only during the recent postwar period, but still functions as an overarching construct that in some ways impedes the development of a global perspective.