

***Beginning Scribes: Architecture Through Genre Writing***  
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ABSTRACT (FOR CONFERENCE PACKET)

The Second Year undergraduate writing seminar at UNC Charlotte has enjoyed a 20-year history in the College of Architecture. Originally administered as a pair of courses in support of the sophomore design curricula, the present course offers new strategies for understanding the shared relationship between design and ideas by focusing on specific writing genres important to architecture. The course fulfills the University's requirement for an intensive undergraduate writing experience. It also serves to foster a better balance between design activities and literary modes of expressing ideas about architecture.

The result was a totally reconceived course, focused on facilitating student learning through the use of various writing forms. Six genres are identified as common to architectural writing – i.e., typical ways in which architects and critics express ideas about buildings – these include: *observation, analysis, reflection, criticism, manifestoes, and narrative* over the course of the semester. These six genres are introduced sequentially beginning with the most objective writing position, and progressing to the most biased. Emphasis is given to the complementary nature of the genres as one moves from observation and analysis toward reflection and criticism, with manifesto and narrative as expressing the mostly strongly held and personal beliefs of the author.

Writing examples for the class include readings from Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nicholson Baker (observation), Peter Zumthor (reflection writing), and Adolf Loos and Rem Koolhaas (manifestoes). After reading selected examples of each genre, students are asked to complete three-part writing assignments. At the end of the course, students participate in a small symposium that allows them to share their writing with others in the class.

This essay outlines the pedagogical approach taken. It also opens a parallel discussion regarding the shared relationship between written types, architectural types and contemporary ideas.

## Introduction

Of what value to designers is writing well? What roles might it fulfill for the student of design? What roles must it play in the practice of design? How best to foster both an awareness of, and an appreciation for, the scope and depth of written expression concerning both the design process, and the ends to which design is enacted? And how can we best instruct students in learning to communicate across the broad range of genres encountered and employed in the disciplines of design?

These are the primary questions that have guided us as instructors in developing the pedagogy for a writing course for beginning design students. Specifically, these questions emerged out of an ongoing search for methods and content for a course in writing that is required of second year students enrolled in the undergraduate program at the College of Architecture (CoA) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

## History

The Second Year undergraduate writing seminar has enjoyed a 20-year history in the CoA. In 2005, the Chair of Instruction asked the faculty teaching this course to review its structure and content. Student evaluations and feedback revealed an appreciation for the course, however it was often criticized for its esoteric content and the amount of time it took from studio. Moreover, the students were asked to analyze architectural essays that were often idiosyncratic and too jargon-riddled to provide consistent results with all 60+ students in the Second Year curriculum.

Since that time, members of the Core Curriculum faculty have developed a new pedagogical model for the writing seminar that addresses the concerns of previous iterations of the course:

- Readings are selected that exhibit lucid reasoning and structural clarity.
- Assignments are aligned with the pedagogy and schedule of design studio.
- Lectures, Readings, Assignments are structured through a set of six genres of writing.

## Pedagogy

Above all, the focus of the new approach has been to foster an appreciation by students to recognize, to analyze, and ultimately to utilize, various writing forms which they will encounter throughout their education in design, and that they are likely to call upon in their own practices, both critical and professional. Exposure to, and close reading of, distinct genres of writing are designed to not only better enable students to appreciate such texts on their own terms, but to enable them to communicate through the practice of these same genres.

A total of six genres were identified as common to architectural writing – i.e., typical ways in which architects and critics express ideas about buildings – these include: *observation*, *analysis*, *reflection*, *criticism*, *manifesto*, and *narrative*. Over the course of the semester, these six genres are introduced sequentially beginning with the most inherently ‘objective’ mode of written

expression (observation) and moving through genres of increasing degrees of critical faculties. Emphasis is given to the complementary nature of the genres as one moves from observation and analysis toward reflection and criticism, with the Manifesto expressing the most strongly held beliefs of the author, and Narrative embodying the most universalizing context.

### Methodology

At the outset of each of the six sections of the course, faculty delivered an introductory lecture devoted to one of the six genres under examination. Lectures were delivered to the Second Year class as a whole, whereas discussions on the assigned readings and writing assignments were conducted in a seminar setting, with the class divided into four sections, each led by one of the course instructors. For each of the six genres, exemplary readings were assigned that included: Robbe-Grillet (Observation), Colin Rowe (Analysis), Jennifer Bloomer (Reflection), Michael Sorkin (Criticism), David Leatherbarrow (Manifesto) and Borges (Narrative). Writing assignments were structured as three-part exercises which called for writing within strict boundaries defined by genre, and emphasized the practice of revision and editing.

Below are the definitions of the six genres as given to students, followed by a brief description of the specific focus of the readings and each of the tri-partite writing assignments:

### **Genre 1: Observation and Description**

#### *Observation*

n.

- 1 a The act or faculty of observing.  
b The fact of being observed.
- 2 a The act of noting and recording something, such as a phenomenon, with instruments.  
b The result or record of such notation: a meteorological observation.
- 3 An inference or a judgment that is acquired from or based on seeing or perceiving.

#### *Description*

n.

- 1 The act, process, or technique of describing.
- 2 A statement or an account describing something: published a description of the journey; gave a vivid description of the game.

Observation and description saturate the process of architecture. In order to "design well" we must first take into consideration the flood of visual stimuli that shape our objects, lend reason to our actions, and provide a sense of our surroundings. Observation requires the careful recording of things, people and places, while description takes note of the various qualities and circumstances of these experiences. On the one hand, we observe in very objective ways - for example, making an inventory of the various objects in a scene. On the other hand, what our gaze captures may be quite subjective, creating a mood or sensation (the eyes of a *voyeur* for

instance). Observation allows us to stand in a privileged position, bringing us closer to our subject, yet seldom asking us to participate.

The first writing assignment had two primary objectives. First, the students were asked to think of their writing similar to that of “a sketch.” Like still life drawings in a sketchbook, the task was to portray in words the qualities of a place or scene. Second, writing craft was directed away from subjective characterizations, expressive plots, and elaborate narration. Instead, we instructed the students to offer observations absent of personal conjecture and interpretation, methods common to high school or entry-level college composition classes. Hence, this first lesson encouraged writing as an alternative way of “seeing,” analogous to drawing and photographic techniques encountered in the design studios.

Students were asked to select an object or place of their choosing to record written observations. They made overall and detailed investigations by mapping the scene as a *list of words*. This list was to be exhaustive, allowing a topographic reading of the scene via objects, textures, atmospheric effects, etc. The words were then sorted into four groups: things, actions, positions and qualities. The students chose a word from each of these categories to build a simple sentence. This sentence was evaluated for grammar, syntax, and style.<sup>1</sup> Using the same set of words, four additional sentences were created. These revised descriptions were developed as lateral investigations, similar to drawing a still life object from multiple points of view.

Alain Robbe-Grillet's short piece, "The Dressmaker's Dummy," was offered as an example of how the eye (or pen) may roam the intricacies of a scene in objective fashion; uncovering light, color and the hidden forms of objects. This example illustrated how one might wander through an image by emphasizing description over explanation; lending a view that is, in essence, suggestive of something more universal. Such "describing" recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections about Cézanne still-life work. The philosopher often criticized art historians for intertwining Cézanne's biography with his paintings. For Merleau-Ponty conjecture was not an option; the power of the painter's work is in that "he could look at nature [by way of painting] as only a human being can," and that "his work cannot be determined from his life."<sup>2</sup>

The follow-up part of the assignment asked the students to place one of their five sentences with in the context of a paragraph. Though introduced as a simple introductory assignment, the exercise of describing devoid of opinion was a challenge for most of the writers in the course. And like the beginnings of architectural design itself, there is the tendency to decorate or be overly analytical. These and other writing habits helped set-up the next series of assignments.

## Genre 2: Analysis

### *Analysis*

n.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the course's reference texts is Strunk and White's, *The Elements of Style*, which continues to offer concise and easy to understand way of addressing basic student writing issues. Moreover, introducing writing simplicity and clarity at the beginning of the course helped with student confidence during the remainder of the semester.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern, 1964), 11.

- 1 The separation of an intellectual or material whole into its constituent parts for individual study.
- 2 The study of such constituent parts and their interrelationships in making up a whole.
- 3 A form of literary criticism in which the structure of a piece of writing is analyzed
- 4 A spoken or written presentation of such study: published an analysis of poetic meter.

When we design or create something, such as a building or a written essay, we are often engaged in an act of synthesis, putting different parts or ideas together to create a new whole. Analysis, on the other hand involves dissecting something that exists, in order to examine a specific aspect of our subject. One may compare analysis to the act of looking through a particular kind of lens that isolates one characteristic of a subject; we focus our attention on a particular thing, rather than the whole. Consequently, analysis requires that we choose a significant and relevant lens. Two questions can guide the way:

What aspect of our subject do we wish to know more about?

What salient features of our subject present themselves for analysis?

Through analysis, a greater depth of knowledge or understanding about a subject is created. As architects, we regularly analyze buildings in order to understand different qualities or characteristics of them, such as their formal ordering principals, their functional organization, their materiality, or their typology. The forms of our analysis are diverse as well, from numerical data, to descriptive language, to visually communicative drawings. Each has a different capacity to describe and convey something specific and relevant about an architectural subject.

Analysis assignments follow from the notion that breaking down and strategically re-constituting information gives light to new understanding about a particular subject. Students take a local and accessible architecture site – Colvard Arcade, a pedestrian route situated between two buildings on UNCC’s campus – and break down information analytically, beginning with their own observations. With this idea of a lens that gives greater focus to analysis, student choose a *framework* by which they may filter a set of written observations. Frameworks include those most prominently considered in the design of the arcade: lighting, circulation, sound, partitioning of space, among others. The first portion of the assignment strives to retrieve raw data from an actual architectural artifact; student submit a comprehensive list of observations about framework with a set of bolded terms extracted to call attention to sub-points that emerge from the exercise.

The second portion of the assignment begins with an in-class exercise where student groups break-down the structure of Colin Rowe’s writing in *Mathematics of an Ideal Villa*. Because the article serves as a valid example of the act of analyzing as well as the act of re-assembling points into a hierarchical verbal structure, students are exposed to a clear example of analytical thinking *and* writing. Following the group work and a section-wide discussion of the article, students individually draft an outline and 350-word essay from their observations about Colvard Arcade. Students are encouraged to work empirically, grouping their findings into points, and organizing points under the overall idea behind their framework. This method, of mining data from a ‘primary’ source and building information from more specific to more synthetic points promotes substantive and planned written pieces as opposed to rambling essays propped up on redundant

or vapid thoughts. The final portion of the assignment is a revised essay, refined in light of professor feedback.

Analysis provides a logical and important extension of the first unit; here, the objectivity of observation begins to take on qualities of subjectivity necessary for reflection or criticism. Several strategies serve to elucidate the act of analyzing as an act of taking apart and putting back together. First, the analogy of diagramming and mapping used in introductory lecture capitalizes on the visual capacity of design students specifically. Also, the use of observational methods taken from a physical architectural reality, building on the first Observation exercise - helps harvest original thoughts from the students for more substantive writing. In addition, the focus on hierarchical structure with an in-depth look at seminal example of architectural analytical writing gives students a written precedent to emulate.

### Genre 3: Reflection

#### *Reflection*

n.

- 1 a An image given back by a reflecting surface.  
b An effect produced by an influence <the crime rate is a *reflection* of our violent society>.
- 2 A thought, idea, or opinion formed or a remark made as a result of meditation.
- 3 Consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose.

To reflect is to ponder and to *weigh*: to sift in order to discern. Reflection seeks to establish the value of information within contexts determined by circumstance. For this class, reflection represents a further step beyond observation and analysis, requiring as it does the essential element of time: as with contemplation or rumination, reflection is a process of incremental scrutiny and speculation. It aims to connect the isolated facts of observation, and the focused processes of analysis, within a broader framework of references in order to evaluate the potential significance of the specific within the general.

The writing assignment was based upon a passage from one of the assigned readings for this genre: Peter Zumthor's *Thinking Architecture*. In the selected passage, Zumthor describes an initial visit to a coffee house in detail, remarking upon the ambient qualities of the room in some detail. Upon a return visit, he discovers that his subsequent sense of the space are at odds with his initial impressions. The first two parts of the written assignment in this genre challenge students to test the notion that memory and experience can affect our judgment: In the first exercise, students are asked to recall a significant architectural memory of a place that has the possibility of being re-visited. Memory is called upon to describe both specific detail, and overall ambience. In the follow-up exercise, students are asked to physically re-visit this same place, and account for differences in impression. Particular attention is directed towards the potential evolution of their powers of observation, given their nascent status as students of design.

The third part of the written assignment builds on this trajectory at the same time that it serves in part to prepare students for their impending field trip to Chicago. The exercise adds the notion of pre-conceptions in addition to Reflection: students are asked to engage in a close reading of

Michael Sorkin's "The City Grey", that author's history of the campus of the University of Chicago. Prior to their visit, students are asked to describe and illustrate what they expect to encounter during their visit. Upon their arrival, students are asked to make real-time entries in their journals documenting their initial impressions. Finally, students are asked upon return to write a concise account about the expectations and disparities encountered in their visit. Thus, in all three segments of this writing assignment, students are confronted with the significance of Reflection as a summative extension of the powers of Observation and Analysis in thinking and writing about the built environment.

## **Genre 4: Criticism and Critique**

### *Critique*

n.

- 1 A critical review or commentary, especially one dealing with works of art or literature.
- 2 A critical discussion of a specified topic.
- 3 The art of criticism.

Perhaps it is better to define what a critique is not: (1) it is not about inflicting intellectual injury, (2) it is not a groundless opinion, and (3) its initial purpose is not always to expose fault or error. Rather, a critique is a well-reasoned and well-researched judgment about the quality or merits of something.

With this genre we introduced the students to the issue of subjectivity and opinion in writing about architecture, but were careful to warn them to substantiate their claims through observation and analysis. In this way we allowed our discussion of criticism to build on and incorporate earlier genres the students had already mastered. Although architectural criticism can be journalistic or scholarly, and though it can be written for a general audience or specifically for the architectural community, all well-written and well-argued critiques are comprehensive in nature, relying on observations, multiple viewpoints and analyses in order to offer a coherent, lucid, and convincing evaluation.

The series of criticism assignments followed the students' field trip to Chicago, where they visited Rem Koolhaas' McCormick Tribune Campus Center (2003) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Commons Building (1956) at the IIT campus. We carefully developed the assignments to align with their studio focus on Chicago's architecture, and to reinforce what they experienced and learned on their field trip.

The students were first asked to draft a 300-word critique of Koolhaas' Center as an addition to Mies' Commons, and to explore and analyze the connections and shared elements between the two structures. The students were asked not to simply describe the buildings and give them a simple "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" for either of them, but rather to articulate their opinions by focusing on the interactions between the buildings and evaluating Koolhaas as a response to Mies van der Rohe's. We reminded the students of the often journalistic nature of architectural criticism, and suggested they pay special attention to crafting a gripping first sentence. Along the same lines, we also asked students to suggest three creative or clever working titles that would

set the tone for their critique, and similarly draw in the reader. We asked the students to read their titles aloud in class and discussed the possibilities as a group.

In the second part of the assignment we introduced the idea of critique as participating in a wider, well-informed discourse by asking them to read six short critical reviews of Koolhaas' McCormick center, written by various critics and architect, including Koolhaas himself. In order to better inform themselves on issues about the project as discussed in both trade and general media, students were asked to prepare an annotated bibliography that identified the key points made by each author.

The third part of the assignment asked the students to return to their own critique, but to better situate themselves within the discourse, now that they were more familiar with it. Students revised and expanded their critique, and incorporated direct references to the issues raised by authors and other players participating in the public debate about the McCormick Center and the Commons Building at IIT. At this time students were also asked to select one of their working titles that best served as an opening to their revised essay by indicating the central ideas or giving a clue as to the position they were taking in their critique.

## **Genre 5: Manifestoes**

### *Manifesto*

*n.*

1 A public declaration of principles, policies, or intentions, especially of a political nature.

If a great building, like a picture, is worth a thousand words, then it has some capacity to represent the priorities and motivations of an architect. But perhaps more directly and concisely, a written manifesto is launched upon the world to profess the most deeply held convictions of its author. In politics and architecture alike, manifestoes often emerge at times of dramatic upheaval, as scathing critiques of dangerously misguided views or works, or as fervent pleas or directives for the higher and truer course. They are programs of passion and opinion, and often fact, and as passions and opinion can conflict, so too manifestoes can represent diametrically opposed views of the world, or the world of architecture. Manifestoes are profoundly opinionated, often moralistically colored, always intended to persuade the reader to embrace the author's point of view.

An effective manifesto is built upon the architect's contempt for architecture. To define such a position demands experience and a critical perspective that is lacking in most beginning design students. Thus, to introduce this genre creates a particular challenge for us as teachers. How does one create the context with which to devise an ethics of design? Can beginning students comprehend the weight of their beliefs given the abbreviated nature of their design experience? In other words, to strike "a position" in architecture requires a certain degree of confidence as well as maturity. To ask second year design students to embark on this task had inherent problems.

So we began with problems. In the first part of this series of assignments we asked the students to outline a series of problems that plague contemporary architecture. In defining these issues, we hoped to draw out a set of working conditions upon which they could offer architectural solutions that would take on a political magnitude. The first drafts were interesting, as we became aware that in fact the students were equipped with a wide range of popular architectural concerns – such as the promise of digital methods, the concerns over the environment, and the problems of suburban sprawl. At the same time, we presented a number of lectures on how architects develop their beliefs, referring to distant and recent manifestoes, and how each varied according to the context of their social and technological milieu.

Simultaneously, we unpacked for the students the particular way recent manifesto writing has cleverly borrowed from many of the genres previously encountered in the course. They readily recognized the heroic efforts of Le Corbusier when he cited the problem of "eyes which do not see" as those of an architect who had passed over the accomplishments of modern engineers.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, they were taken with Adolf Loos' "Ornament and Crime". Both examples represented the orthodoxy of a movement they could easily connect to a stylistic claim for building. However it was also enlightening to contrast how current architectural movements could be a product of genre writing itself. Is Peter Zumthor's architecture laying claim to an architectural minimalism that aims to return us to a state of sobriety, given the chaos and carelessness rampant in the built environment? Or is Zumthor's work generated by his ability to internalize and translate his *reflective* observations of places, materials, and the poetics of inhabitation? Does Rem Koolhaas's "retroactive manifesto" offer new directions that lead us to salvation, or is his writing merely an extended analysis and critique about "congestion" and "junkspace" that attempts not only to illuminate architecture's problems, but serves simultaneously as a solution (or embrace) for the future of cities and buildings?

Armed with these varied notions of the manifesto, the students were asked to craft a statement complete with directives or "points" to announce a plan of action. In the final revision, they were asked to design a frontispiece as well as to script a credo or slogan that would story their vision of a new architecture.

## Genre 6: Narrative

### *Narrative*

n.

- 1 Something that is narrated: STORY, ACCOUNT.
- 2 The art or practice of narration.
- 3 The representation in art of an event or story; *also*: an example of such a representation.

To tell a tale is to spin a yarn. The human mind is particularly adept at both conveying and comprehending knowledge through the act of storytelling. Whether fable, parable, or fairy tale, narrative attempts to illustrate and *give shape* to the world through analogy and anecdote, and seeks to demonstrate what might otherwise remain hidden by establishing connections to that which is familiar.

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<sup>3</sup> The students read 16 early-20<sup>th</sup> century selections from Ulrich Conrads', *Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup>-century Architecture*.

Traditional narrative has usually taken the form of a chronicle, or *chronology*, i.e., through a temporally linear thread. More recent modes of narrative have sought to weave such thread(s) into a lattice or matrix, spinning yarns, as it were, into rich tapestries of experience and explication.

In the final set of assignments, students are asked to develop short narratives that are deliberately aligned with their projects in design studio that are nearing completion at this late point in the Fall semester. Set partly or wholly within the space of their building projects as they near completion in the studio, the assignments adopt three sub-genres within the broad horizons of narrative. The exercises are designed not only to examine and explore varying proclivities among traditional types of storytelling, they are also intended to encourage students to imaginatively inhabit the spaces they are designing, in order to plumb them for nuances which may transcend the normal limitations of representation as practiced in the design studio. Students are required to post the written narratives alongside their drawings in their final studio reviews at the end of semester.

In the first assignment, students are asked to write a scene set within or nearby the design of their building in the studio project. The scene is proscribed by several strict parameters: no dialogue is permitted, only one character may be depicted, and the tale is to be told by an omniscient narrator; the description must be more than a simple walk-through, or 'shopping-list' of building spaces and details; and at 500 words maximum, the scene must be part of an implied larger narrative. As the design project is sited somewhere in Chicago (following the field trip to that city midway through the semester), the scene usually makes some reference to its urban milieu, as well as some particular aspects of the individual student's design, whether as an interior or exterior. Students are also asked to direct their attention to ambient conditions: Owing to the relatively colder climate of Chicago (vs. Charlotte), this has normally meant that scenes take place on 'dark and stormy nights', or in the crystalline chill of a midwinter morning.

The second assignment calls for a diary entry, written in the first person by the single character from the previous narrative. The entry should document any events deemed significant by the character to merit being included in a journal on the same day in which the scene from the previous assignment took place. The entry needs to make reference to the place of the scene, but it need not be central to the journal entry: it might be mentioned simply in passing. In other words, the scene need not be remembered by the diarist as a highly significant event, and might even be entirely tangential (marginally present) in the journal entry for that day. The third assignment asks students to revisit the first scene, with two significant changes: that the scene should now incorporate a flashback, and that the scene be written in screenplay format. Additionally, students are asked to draw up a vignette that captures the essence of this scene. This final version of the narrative exercise is designed not only to provide a refinement of the first assignment, but in its explicit reference to cinematic traditions of storytelling, it emphasizes the need for the student to imagine a vivid inhabitation of their project as they near completion of their final presentation drawings in the design studio.