Clio in the Caribbean:
History as embraced and challenged within a new Architecture curriculum

JORGE RIGAU
Universidad Politécnica de Puerto Rico

After years of training, teaching, research and practice, I adhere vehemently to the pertinence and vitality of history in an architecture curriculum. However, talk to most people today about the significance of history in schools — mention *precedents*, the *discipline*, *tradition* — and someone will passionately cry passe'; *non-progressive* or succinctly set you aside as "B.C.". In spite of it, *History* remains more than merely an unavoidable sequence of required courses, or a tool for identifying design typologies; it is a pedagogical instrument around which an architecture curriculum can both grow and grow stronger.

My background? I attended Cornell the years Colin Rowe, Oswald Mathias Ungers. Werner Seligmann, and Michael Dennis were there, but behaved neither as an apostle or an agnostic. To this day, however a university training anchored strongly in spatial analysis, has facilitated a unique, expanded understanding of my cultural heritage. Said heritage embraces spare, sober colonial churches such as that of San Carlos in Santo Domingo, but also Enrique Norten's much more modern and controversial drama school in Mexico. The weight of academia would years later nurture (and also be enriched by) extended research on the architecture of the Hispanic Caribbean: Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. In addition, my professional practice, since day one, has been inextricably bound to building in historical contexts, although never limited to preservation projects, *per se*, but ratherreinterpretativeones, mostly committed to the pursuit of contemporary expression within pre-existing conditions. A masters' degree in history (not architectural history, but historiography) helped to further elucidate issues pertaining to my cultural heritage, academic background and professional proclivities.

So, upon being recently entrusted with developing a new curriculum for a brand new architecture school in the region, my own education, practice and teaching experiences had to be reexamined. The meeting which now brings us together — and the opportunity for debate granted by ACSA — seemsan ideal setting for examination and discussion of our proposed curricular model, one committed to expound for both students and society, the dual notion of legacy and aspirations. Everything we contend to be doing, it is here acknowledged, will only be fully validated when all the five years of our school's first professional degree program are in place and, more importantly, when our graduates make an impact in the world. However, youth can not be an obstacle to introspection.

Any given school's curriculum lies at the heart of negotiating an architectural education, but more than that, professional work and, ultimately, public mentalities. By articulating the future, curricula, in fact, shape any notion we may have of what Architecture should be. From Beaux Arts to Bauhaus, to this day, curricular structures perform as common denominators for pedagogues and students alike, even if a gifted teacher may sometimes be able, on an individual basis, to transcend and overcome said operative structures. A curriculum's seemingly inconspicuous presence is one of truly eminent power.' A curriculum is traditionally conceived as a tool forthedissemination ofcontents; some would say of *knowledge*, others would argue it is all about skills to *perform in the real world*. Upon closer inspection, more attention has been granted to what needs to be learned than how (in what order) learning is to be internalized by the student. We rarely acknowledge how crucial is theidentification of that moment in training at which familiarity with some topics should happen, for example: three-dimensional and volumetric visualization; form in service of function; spatial sequence and even identitarian/regional post-colonial concerns. In short. how do the weights of both a craft and multiple cultural legacies come together as a whole — as one world — in the mind of an architect-to-be? Ironically, not even the *Boyer-Mitgang* Report (recently commissioned, with much fanfare and no remorse, to reputed educators outside our field) addresses the pedagogy of architecture as a concern, focusing instead on endorsing successful studio formats, advocating more civic involvement or stimulating interdisciplinary debate.? No one is against these suggestions, but understanding how all learning rebounds in a student's head — against the conceptual scaffolding that a school's curriculum represents — escaped even these experts as a priority to be pursued.

In an attempt to address these related concerns, a new School of Architecture, the Caribbean's youngest one, opened up three and a half years ago in Puerto Rico. Since 1965, the Island's built future belonged, by monopoly, to a single architecture institution whose derivative curriculum — traditional in format, scope and contents — has not been officially contested for, at least, the last two decades. Including some former professors and alumni (new practitioners) of said school, the *escuela* already claims 400 students and 42 faculty members. In Spanish, the term *escuela* transcends its physical reference to a school building or institution, simultaneously embracing the notion of a specific, identifiable philosophy or school of thought. Because the actual structure within which we are housed is a pre-existing multipurpose building of restrained expression, we feel much more comfortable within the latter interpretation.

The *ad-hoc* curriculum exemplifies myriad renewed aims of bringing together Latin and North American spheres of pertinence (the region's aspirations) and influence (its legacies). Customarily, architecture students are exposed to *design* every year, but face *history, theory, technology* or practice in a somewhat stepped manner with inconsistent overlaps if they happen at all. Familiarization with some of these courses is delayed to other years. This ladder approach to the curriculum generally fosters compartmentalized and interrupted experiences, without knowledge of what lies ahead and insufficient opportunities for readressing what has been left unaddressed. Furthermore, the late introduction of themes such as *Struc-*

tures or *Finances* implicitly suggests their lesser degree of relevance to the foundations of an architectural education. How can we expect a student, after three years of training, to value them as integral to the discipline?

At our school, pedagogical sedimentation — the simultaneous and continued exposure to **all** areas related to architecture — begins at the freshman level and continues throughout the five-year degree program offered. Concurrence grants students a more integrated experience as thematic overlaps are constant, varied in proportion, but occurring naturally. Vertical relationships within the curricular strata are thus strengthened, particularly because all disciplines related to design are initially taught by architects with academic training, experience, and personal interest in fields like *history*, *theory*, and *technology*. At our school, in the first two years, the *technology* or *history* teachers might also be your studio critics. Specialists on their respective fields subsequently teach advanced technical courses.

With the Design sequence as *datum*, each year becomes an opportunity to address a wide variety of problems, at a deeper and more profound level each year. An in-depth look at the *history* component of our curriculum best exemplifies key related considerations, even if the theory or technology components could also have been chosen venues to meditate upon our sedimentation concerns.

Risking accusations of nostalgic proclivity and historicism — but in no way paying service to current (neo) classical commitments — at the new school, a student is expected to take a history course every year. Course contents do not reflect traditional formats. Freshmen sign up for *The History of Architectural Space*, our version of the traditional survey with a more compressed focus. Themes of design composition (continuity, symmetry, hierarchy, transparency...) are introduced and illustrated with local and international samples before the full chronology of different periods, styles, and spatial concerns is explained. Toward the end of the trimester, students are required to design and build an object of practical purpose, based on an idea borrowed from architectural history, but with the requirement that the appearance be contemporary. As examples, the pyramid's structural system of support once suggested a low stool; the Roman arch also inspired a *tabouret*, and a savings bank which opens upon removal of its key, and like its architectural precedent, collapses to make the money accessible. The Coliseum's three levels yielded a more flexible stool, simultaneously evocative of collapsible plastic picnic glasses. Three terms ago, students were asked to produce candlesticks: some referred back, again, to the pyramids, Cretan columns, or the caryatids of the Erechteum. There was no model shop at our school, and thus students had to engage in creative negotiations in order to realize their objects. Mom or Grandpa lent their hands to the process; a steel welder agreed to help in exchange for having his lawn mowed. When students go to someone else for assistance in getting their object built, they experience their "first time" with a contractor. The most recent project involved an architectural interpretation of the surrealists' *cadavre exquis* or exquisite corpses. In one example, the Gothic cathedral was represented as each town's jewel, with a snail conveying the extended time of their construction. In another, ornament and surface working as independent yet related systemsexemplified the Rococo. When the "corpses" were piled up at random, quite unexpected relationships between different periods in History could be established. Different "boxes" had to convey an architectural idea independently, but also collectively. In these inaugural encounters with design and construction, History is thus experienced first hand as a tool for creation, while remaining firmly grounded by the possibilities of application.

Concurrent courses offer different historical perspectives. *Mechanical Drawing* (an early freshman requirement) is taught through building and space documentation of Antillean historical subjects, such as patios, colonnades, towers, fortifications, and so on. Based on this work, the school has just received a grant from the AIA College of Fellows to produce the first ever-architectural guide of

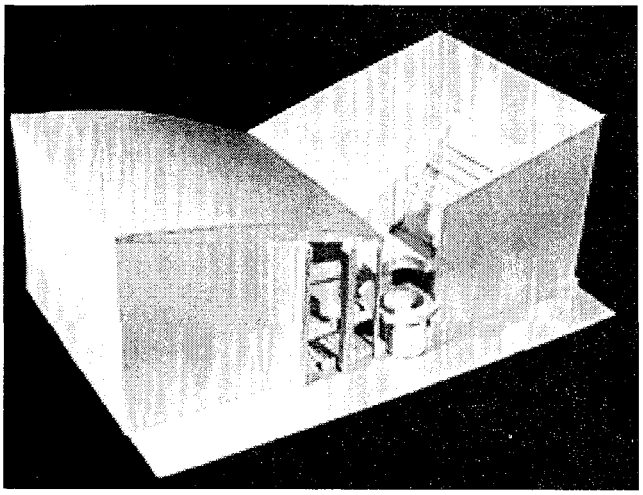

Fig I

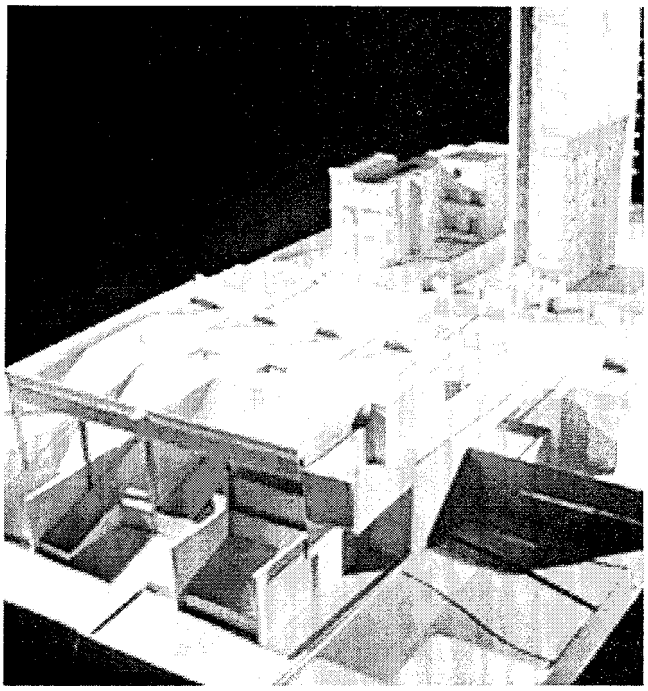

Fig 1

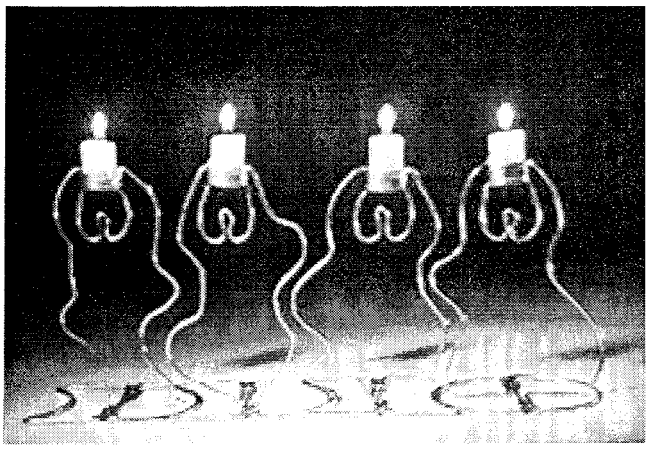

Fig I

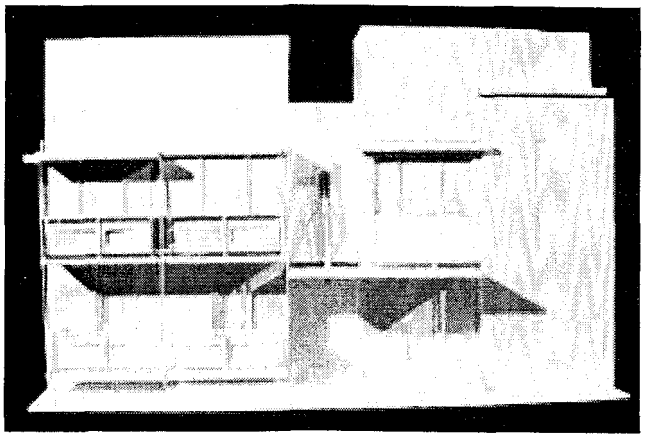

Fig. 4.

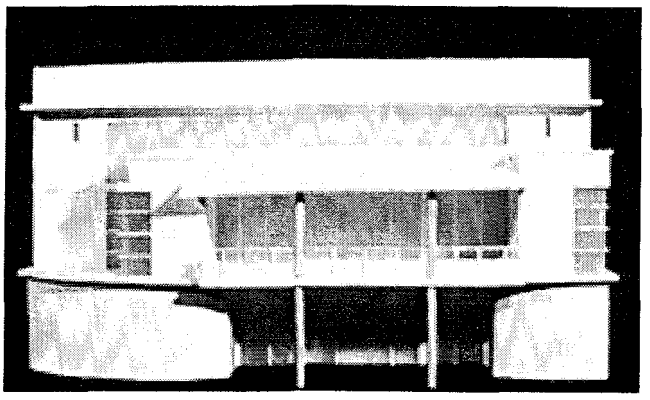

Fig. 5.

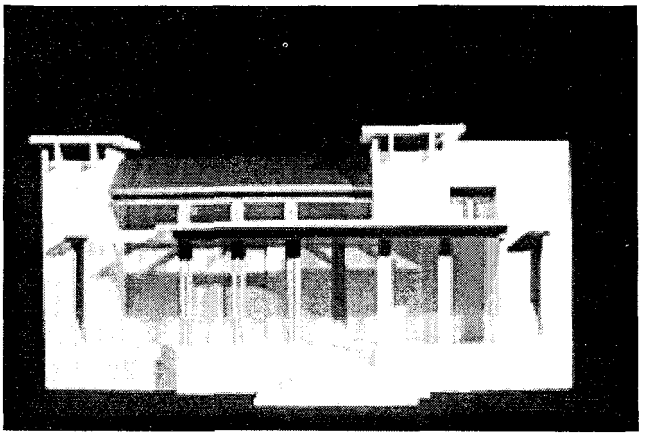

Fig. 6.

Fig. 7

Old San Juan, with drawings, renderings, and photos by students. Early introduction to these relatively complex recording exercises sharpens the students' representational abilities in the initial stages of training. The *basic theory* course will deal concurrently with seminal texts by Alberti, St. Augustine, and Laugier, among others, and examine these in relationship to both historic and contemporary architectural examples in Puerto Rico. Last term, the impending demolition of an Early Modern hotel in San Juan became the subject of position papers, exhibits and installations. As a corollary, students learn to properly gauge foreign achievements in the history of architecture, past and present. After all, architectural history's expectations should be the avoidance of what seamen call *looming*; a phenomenon whose principal effect is to make distant objects appear larger. Even more, sometimes *looming* makes a ship appear to topple, its suddenly inverted image confirming theories that the world ends at a definitive edge. In education, however, edges should never be taught as definite.

A subsequent *computer-aided design course* (also required) picks up on documenting complex historical structures, which further enables students to tackle the representation of contemporary architecture with greater ease when they choose to start working. The *Basic Technology* course, which aims at sorting out the worlds of *discovery*, *creation* and their overlaps, complements first-year history and theory with readings like Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*, Kostof's *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*; and Neil Postman's *Technopoly*. At the same time, the projects issued in First Year Design have supported the contents being expounded in history, theory and technology. Faculty coordination, as expected, (or feared) is crucial, but in a new school, cooperation is fuelled by the energy all new projects customarily bring with them.

Sophomores are then required to enroll in the second history requirement: *History of Caribbean Architecture*. Inspired by noted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, we have deemed fruitful the use of personal, immediate experience as the point of departure for understanding the outside world.[3] This represents that special moment to value what students can bring to a curriculum. Shouldn't all schools in the states require, early on, a history of American architecture'? Why not? With second-year design studios addressing issues of Identity, Nationality, and Post-colonialism, *Caribbean Architecture* — pays attention to the built legacy of the Antillean region through the comparative method as endorsed by historians Marc Bloch and Pierre Vilar.[4] Students enrolled in the course have produced an interpretation of Serlio's comic and tragic scenes in relationship to the Caribbean's prototypical street sections: also graphic explanations of local historical examples in terms of international ones, like San Germán's longitudinal plaza being measured against the Uffizi. its urban scale and character. It would be expected from a course like this to require a paper, but said has been discarded. The student's most important responsibility at this stage is understood to be not to write about what others say, but to develop an intelligent question, a fertile question first posed on day one, and endlessly re-stated and re-phrased throughout the course without providing any actual answer. After passing through four or five drafts, with some required research to substantiate their stances, the student's question might be eight to ten pages long. To pursue answers, we must first learn to ask appropriately.

After taking *Caribbean Architecture* — but before third year — *aesign* tackles *preservation* head on. Untypically, our school includes an architectural conservation course as an undergraduate requirement, not an elective, integral to the design studio sequence. A structure of importance to some community group is identified and studied: organizations from all over the Island approach us with projects. Oral and archival research on the subject becomes the basis

for a short paper; recording of the structure then proceeds according to HABS standards. On-site tests are carried out to study the composition, aging, and future protection of building materials, with the assistance of preservation specialists. Recently, staff from the English Heritage and Penn State's Architectural Conservation Lab led a two-day immersion into lime techniques.

In dialogue with the community, a building program is determined and students produce a design that may confront old and new in the diverse ways they come together, such as addition, restoration, and rehabilitation. Public presentations and exhibitions close the circle. Because it encompasses historical, philosophical, social, and technical concerns, Design 203, as the course is both numbered and called, fulfills the largest number of NAAB criteria represented by any other course in our curriculum. Recent projects have included nineteenth-century road keepers' houses (*casillas de camineros*), lighthouses, and warehouses, for building programs like a cultural center, a small 'hotel, and an exhibit hall. Last term, students documented a turn-of-the-century residence and their drawings won an AIA Chapter award.

Furthering familiarization with *Clio*, juniors then go on into *historiography*, the history of history. The course purports an understanding of how the discipline has been written, represented, disseminated and manipulated throughout time, for the global architect needs to be critically equipped with tools to confront any subject or material, even when it is not immediately familiar. Historiography is conceived as an enabling instrument for critical thinking. History as analysis is a far cry from history as story. Still postponing full responsibility for a paper, an annotated bibliography is developed for this class. Tools to become effective critics, after all, are developed at a slower pace and must include aggressive measures to improve literacy skills. At our school, all students have the opportunity to see a first draft corrected before their final submission.

Third-year design studio makes a very specific link with history. Projects at that level may include relating a new building, in plan, section or facade to a pre-existing structure's compositional strategy. Multiple possibilities are explored, without replicating vocabulary, but instead re-stating ideas, in order to learn more about process than about the seductions of product. To move into fourth year, juniors must fulfill a *Mid-Career Research* requirement on a topic of their choice that is somehow related to the identification of viable design strategies for a given problem. At this point, students begin to define their own set of values and decanonize others. This course prefaces the fifth-year thesis. Some choose to pursue an answer to the question confronted in the *History of Caribbean Architecture*. One student engaged in the first exploration ever of the nature of alleys, or *callejones*, in Puerto Rico, establishing and experimenting with design criteria for new ones. Another explored variations on building sections as representations of the essence of tropical architecture *vis a vis* what is identified as modern architecture in the region. Yet another examined fear of fire as one determinant of urban growth in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico. Effective definition of methodological procedures and agile, refreshing, taxonomical skills become key objectives for these projects.

At fourth and fifth-year levels, two specialized courses on a given history topic must then be taken; the subjects chosen by the students from a wide array of possibilities. Scholars who specialize in particular areas teach these courses. Recent topics include *Metaphors for Modernity in Mexico*, *Early Modern Buildings*, *Architecture of Sixteenth Century Italy*, and *Tile Discourse of Ruins*. We encourage students to save a *History of Puerto Rico* requirement for their next to last year, just before embarking on their thesis project. But we also stimulate commitment to other courses, which expand professional learning. Before immersion on the second half of their career, students can also take in-house courses on *Ceramics* (to exercise their skills in molding space), *Photography*, (as a unique medium to represent space) with photos capturing movement in time). *Set Design*, has been conceived as a hands-on introduction to building techniques and spatial transformation through light. *Archaeology as Cultural Anthropology* is a favored elective, acknowledging both changing and perennial aspects of human behavior as backdrop to Architecture's life cycles. To see beyond what the eye records: isn't that the essence of education'? Only through these kinds of distancing will anyone understand on which instances is detachment from tradition a futile or a fertile effort.

The dialectical answer to such proposition — and its pursuit — now nurtures the educational stance of our school: pluralism, marginality, and non-neutrality, neo-colonialism... all lie within the brackets of that question. For tradition — in spite of its eternal hordes of detractors — to this day continues to facilitate the critical distancing from our own efforts that constitutes the true legacy of Modernity. Derived from *tradere*, the term refers simultaneously to the action of transmitting knowledge and to an act of betrayal. In times of undefined direction and unstable trends, to remain silent is not to take side with either of the two possible meanings.

NOTES

[1] Thomas A. Dutton. Ed. *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991).

[2] Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang, *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation, 1996).

[3] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[4] Marc Bloch, "El método comparativo en historia," *La historia como ciencia* (San José: EDUCA, 1975).

REFERENCES

Bloch, March. "El método comparativo en historia," La *historia como ciencia*. San José: EDUCA, 1975.

Boyer, Ernest L. and Lee D. Mitgang. *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*. Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation, 1996.

Dutton, Thomas A. Ed. *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*. New York: Bergin & Garvey. 1991.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of rhe Oppressed*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.