

# Teaching Architectural History in the Educational Institutions of Pakistan

## A Problem or a Solution

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*The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find yourself and your country both examples and meanings fine things to take as models and rotten to avoid [1].*

(Roman Historian, T. Livy (59 B.C. – 17 A.D.))

## Introduction

Architecture has existed since early ages of the human evolution and is considered mother of all arts. Architecture is a coherent chain of events, styles, tendencies, beliefs and techniques, therefore, it covers a broad spectrum including art, science, engineering, and human sciences, like history, geography and sociology. Architectural works are also often perceived as cultural and political symbols, and will thus need good skills in all those domains. Indeed, 'History of Architecture' is one of the major subjects, along with Design and Technology, in all architectural institutions. History of civilization, leads to a direct understanding of how and why architecture is made today, and points to what it can be tomorrow.

## Importance of History

Teaching and learning of history is important to our survival as the knowledge of history has the potential to give us new perspectives about our past, present and future. In the European or Western tradition between the Renaissance and the modern movement, to be trained in architecture was to be trained in history. The rationale was that history is important to the enterprise of architecture and an examination of the role that

history plays in the curriculum of any school of architecture may reveal its philosophy of education. In addition, the conscious effort to create identity and interpret architecture in context is dependent on understanding of local architectural histories. History is also important because it embodies the precedents in architecture. For the architecture student or practitioner these precedents are important to the formation of new or the understanding of existing forms of architecture or indeed the imagination of future acceptable forms of architecture. History is the context within which students first encounter polemical issues, criticism and theories in general and continuously throughout their student years. It is therefore important to the architectural curriculum to fashion a history or histories with which students can identify in relation to the local context.

Another major reason why architectural history is studied is to provide accounts of how present-day architectural interests have developed over time. Such interpretations of the backgrounds to architectural beliefs can, but need not necessarily, provide justifications for current architectural practices. The history of architecture and the general history are indispensable; therefore understanding the denotative and connotative meaning of history is essential for its effective teaching.

### Meaning of History

History is a term for information about the past. When used as the name of a field of study, history refers to the study and interpretation of the record of human societies. The term history comes from the Greek “historic”, “an account of one’s inquiries,” and shares that etymology with the English word “story” [2]. Generally, it is the branch of knowledge that records and researches past events. It may be the continuum of events occurring in succession leading from the past to the present and even into the future. A broad stroke of variety of interpretations by the world renowned scholars highlights its connotative meaning.

*History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity.*

(Marcus T. Cicero, 106-43 B.C., A Roman Philosopher)

*History studies not just facts and institutions; its real subject is the human spirit. History is the discipline closest to life; and life is rarely free of contradictions.*

(Karl J. Weintraub, *Visions of Culture*)

*What is history? An echo of the past in the future; a reflex from the future on the past.*

(Victor Hugo)

*If you didn't know history, you didn't know anything. You were a leaf that didn't know it was part of a tree. For me there is no greater subject than history.*

(Edward Johnston)

*History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.*

(Napoleon Bonaparte)

*History is who we are and why we are the way we are.*

(David McCullough)

*Uncovering the pieces of history hidden in each building's story can be as exciting as a treasure hunt. In fact it adds a layer of suspense and surprise, for the aim is not to find something we already know but to lay bare facts and associations that may be utterly lost to current record or memory.*

(Paul C. Larson)

*History can be a sterile enumeration of data or it can be an inspiring narrative which places the same data in a context that makes us understand ourselves and the human evolution and drama.* (Pervaiz Vandal)

These interpretations suggest the diversity of meaning people attach to history thus the major concern of historians has been to delineate the best way to teach history.

## Different Approaches

The teaching and learning of history is a complex undertaking as access to the past is indirect, largely governed by artifacts and residue left behind by those who lived it. Vansledright points out

that before the 1980's it was generally assumed that a gradual process of committing historical narratives constructed around key events, details, names, and dates (substantive knowledge) to memory would eventually result in a sturdy understanding of the past. The body of research compiled since 1980, however, demonstrates that learning history, if it is to lead to deeper understanding, involves not only the repeated study of such narratives, but also the acquisition and use of a set of domain-specific cognitive strategies (strategic knowledge) [3]. Although history does not change, it continues to grow. Every day there is more history for teachers and students to examine and learn from. The methodology of teaching history has differed and changed and learners adapt to different modes of teaching. Some work best in a classroom, while others do not; teaching methods and available resources can make learning history a great experience. Each member of the history faculty teaches in a distinctive way, yet the most common practices are traditional and thematic [4].

### Traditional Approach

Chronologically oriented lectures either longitudinal or cross-sectional have been, for many years, the traditional method used to teach history. History can be seen as linear as any subject, as it takes place one day at a time. Most people remember the time lines of events and names that needed to be memorized for a quiz or a test. There is a sense of flow that teaching history chronologically offers.

Teaching history chronologically, however, also has drawbacks as history is more than just names and dates. Although in history one thing follows another, there is a lot of meaning and important lessons to learn in between the things. A chronological approach can make it difficult to see the similarities between time periods. This method also has certain limitations to learn about specific themes in architecture. Instead of sitting in a chair and copying down notes of what is being said, one could actually learn in a more productive way. Christopher S. Wilson, professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design at Izmir University of Economics in Turkey, proposed a thematic approach that enables students

to compare and understand artistic perspectives and movements throughout different historical periods.

## Thematic Approach

A different approach to teaching history is thematic. Using the thematic approach history is taught based on big themes that run through history. Comparisons and lessons can be drawn immediately between the topics and more critical analysis would be required of the students. The hope of this approach is that the students would come out of the class with deeper understanding of history and not just a lot of names and dates.

The thematic approach has its drawbacks as well. Since the topics that are being compared may not be from the same time periods a good basis of chronological knowledge could be missing. Also, thematic based classes usually are not able to cover quite as much content as the chronological approach. Some critics also argue that students in thematic based classes cover a lot of fluffy ideas, but do not develop any hard knowledge of the subject [5].

## Creative Approach

There is no set way for creative teaching but it is not random and chaotic, rather, it is done by teachers with the sensitivity and imagination to seize opportunities as they arise, going beyond a mechanical input-output model of teaching. History is a wonderful and interesting subject to study, but one-way teaching is the wrong way to go. Good creative teachers provide a framework and purpose for active learning by students. The creative approach in history is treating history, first and foremost, as an active process of inquiry. It involves the use of the creative imagination grounded in evidence, where the teacher:

- sets up open-ended and wide-ranging investigations
- stimulates students to think actively and constructively, putting together different sources of evidence to construct a picture of the past
- challenges students with mysteries to solve
- asks students to pose questions, to form hypotheses, then to test these against the evidence

- encourages discussion and debate
- engages students' imaginations through storytelling, simulations and drama

Learning can become interesting, just by making it interactive. Creative teaching is done by teachers who are confident, innovative, interested in learning, and who encourage students to ask questions and explore ideas. This does not mean abandoning standards, rather, it is an invitation to think of new and more stimulating ways to meet them. Architecture is a discipline where the analytical "left brain" and the creative "right brain" must collaborate. The ultimate goal is to eventually use the "whole" brain approach. In order to achieve this, teachers must start incorporating activities into everyday life that exercise both sides of the brain. Weiner (1995) proposes a Humanistic approach in order to make it pertinent to a student's life [6]. He emphasizes that history must be presented in a fashion in which students can relate it to their lives and meaning in it.

### Humanistic Approach

Focus of this approach is to teach history from a humanistic perspective in which students can relate past events to present lives. It provides students with a present-day connection, giving them something they can relate to and encourage students to make history come alive.

### Guidelines for Effective Teaching

Students in the early stage should be taught the basics of history, including people of renown, significant events and other dominating forces. The emphasis of both lectures and presentations could be more to do with the forces generating the building rather than the building itself. Weiner (1995) advocates six methods of presenting history content and ideas to make it more meaningful to students [7].

1- Active learning situations such as debate, demonstration, and simulation

2- Specialized topics approach

3- Utilizing primary resources materials

4- Use of historical films

5- Use of the library

6- Use of historical fiction

Communicating information with the use of visual aids can help students picture the concepts being described. Oral teaching used in conjunction with visual methods that make use of text books, maps, pictures, time lines, films, drawing buildings and field trips is a critical component of a student's education in history of architecture. The teacher should learn to make effective use of different methods. Textbooks guide the outline for the course, but they should not become sole authority as too many history textbooks tend to be dull and boring. One can use local newspapers in a variety of ways. Hanging a map in the front of the classroom and frequently referring to it in the course of a lesson helps students familiarize themselves with basic geography and provides them a spatial sense of history. Displaying photos of famous architects makes these figures appear more real to the students, giving them some hint of what they were like as people. Photos of famous events or locations also can serve as excellent historical illustrations, often communicating information about times and places more vividly than can be done in words. Time lines marked with important historical events convey progression of events giving students some sense of development and cause and effect. Films serve much the same function as photographs, telling an event about history through images and words and can be a powerful way to get students' attention; however they cannot replace teaching. Students could be told about what to look for in the film and write a feedback about them as it is a tool to convey a deeper understanding of the historical event, building form etc. Drawing and sketching is an interactive way for the students to better understand people and buildings important to history. Students could be encouraged to draw sketches that illustrate the concepts and combination of spaces. Sketching and labeling of different architectural elements can be helpful in developing their architectural vocabulary. A field trip to historical sites allows students to see the topics they've discussed

embodied in the form of architecture and artifacts. Possible sites for visits should be explored before the conduct of the course.

The relationship between history and geography is especially intimate as neither can be adequately understood in the absence of the other, so it only makes sense to study them together. Geography represents the spatial dimension of human activity while history represents the time dimension [8]. Above all, enthusiasm is the first and most important way to bring life to any classroom [9]. Teachers' own enthusiasm for the topic and teaching inspire their students and, to teach with enthusiasm, teachers must love what they teach and make it a part of them. One needs to know the objectives of teaching history and learn something more about it each day. These qualities help students to be inspired and enthusiastic about learning history. Along with enthusiasm, Marlow (1988) emphasizes presenting material in a stimulating manner, appropriate voice inflection, and quality eye contact for good history teaching [10].

### Teaching Scenario in Pakistan

Though architectural history is taught in all schools of architecture in Pakistan, the mode of teaching is as ambiguous and confusing as ever. The central focus is still the western tradition represented largely by Banister Fletcher's enduring book based on European lines, starting with ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman through to the Modern movement, and this approach has persisted till today. Though much has been added in the local history of architecture, but the course, content and teaching has not changed much. A major dilemma is that the teachers teaching history of architecture in different departments, by and large follow a traditional way of teaching. They are usually not trained to teach history using multisensory methods and updated approaches that inspire students. The teaching is examination based and hardly involves any intellectual discourse. In addition, the studios are ill equipped, which make the environment unpleasant.

Teaching is mainly confined to lecture rooms with occasional field trips and site visits. Though the majority of the teachers

consider books as the sole authority, there are others who are using audio visual aids. There is some realization that without bringing change in the pedagogical structure history cannot be made meaningful for the architects. The interaction of history teachers at different schools of architecture is missing. It is high time to make a determined effort to understand history, teach history and write history from our own point of view. The establishment of Trust for History of Art and Architecture of Pakistan (THAAP) in 2010 is a step in the right direction.

## Conclusion

Though history of architecture is a very vast subject, it is an indispensable and invaluable key to a meaningful understanding of architecture. To understand architecture, one must also understand the philosophy behind the various styles. Kierkegaard, a Danish Philosopher said that life must be lived forward but understood backward. So the task of the history teacher is neither to love the past nor to emancipate from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present. By teaching history in an exciting manner, students can be motivated to learn more and thus develop a deeper understanding of the meaning of the past. It is essential to continue incorporating enthusiasm through primary sources, well-written secondary sources, current issues, local history, music and film, and the new technology of teaching. Since history is a thoroughly interpretive discipline so the teachers must develop students' ability to think systematically, rationally and critically. The emphasis of both lectures and presentations should be more to do with the forces generating the building rather than the building itself. Teachers must observe and listen carefully to their students to determine what constitutes the best style to them.

Undoubtedly, history of architecture is a wonderful subject but its pedagogy, especially in Pakistan, has made it tedious and passive. The solution lies in the study and teaching of history in a holistic manner. There is no one recipe available, but the best scenario is probably a combination of the traditional, thematic, creative and humanistic approach. By grounding the history class in the chronological events that occurred and emphasizing certain themes, or vice versa, in a creative and humanistic manner,

hopefully, the best of all strategies can be achieved. Bhuvan suggests that when history class becomes a laboratory where teachers and students form a partnership to investigate what is known, to question the unknown, the study of the human history escalates from passive memorization to inquiry and discovery [11]. The word “history” contains the word “story”, thus if history is taught in the form of stories, it will never be forgotten by the students. Rudyard Kipling shares a similar view that if history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.

### Endnotes

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- 2 “History Quotes” Retrieved from <http://www.best-quotes-poems.com/history-quotes.html>
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- 6 Weiner, R. G. “History: Teaching & Methods” Texas Tech University, 1995. Retrieved from <http://thinktech.lib.ttu.edu/handle/2346/1528>
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