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### **A conversation about architectural history and non-architectural subjects, and their role and relevance to the design studio.**

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## **CEBE Trigger Paper: text document**

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### **Title: A conversation about architectural history and non-architectural subjects, and their role and relevance to the design studio.**

Margaret Stewart argues:

Many schools of architecture nowadays are teaching an ever widening range of non-architectural subjects, such as contemporary art, the study of the latest discourses in philosophy, anthropology, the visual image, etc. These subjects are taking up more and more space in the curriculum that was once devoted to cultural context, by which we mean largely history. The proposition is that the architecture students' needs to study architectural history more than they need any of these other non-architectural disciplines.

Architecture should not be any different to other disciplines or creative arts. Arthur Miller argues that in literature the present is 99% the past. He refers to Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Rattigan when he discusses his own work. Architects should make similar dynamic connections with their profession's past. Philip Johnson and Louis Kahn both gained from revisiting architecture's past as the starting point for new explorations. 'There's nothing new in history', and all new and fundamental changes in architecture can traceable to architectural history.

Architectural history studies the factors that make great art and great artists, for instance nobody can teach us more about the integration of art and site than Bernini can. The zeitgeist of Bernini's age can be found in historical narrative. The zeitgeist of the present time belongs in studio teaching and not in the lecture room?

Though architecture is a profession as well as an art, it differs from other arts in possessing a coherent and consistent discipline of its own. In this respect it resembles the other professions, and like them it should respect and learn from its own past. To do this is to uphold its distinctiveness and value. Introducing non-architectural subjects such as sociology and semiotics as formal elements in the curriculum can blur this distinction, and undermine the students' and the professions' confidence in their subject. It is more relevant for students to study landscape and urban design than the non-architectural disciplines.

Any interpretation of a building or a design must be predicated on the acquisition of knowledge: that cannot be done from a starting point of ignorance of facts, names and buildings. An architect who is ignorant loses out as a designer. In addition clients expect their architect to be knowledgeable in the same way as they expect their surgeon's experience to be the product of all the other surgeons who developed the techniques he practises.

In conclusion, the introduction of non-architectural subjects into the curriculum is a trendy gloss that risks the diminution of the coherence of architecture, and distances us as students and educators from the true educational values that are essential to sound architectural education.

Lynda Wilson argues:

Students need to study more than just history. The contemporary world demands that they are not passive but active participants in current cultural and artistic debates. History has a part to play in the students' education, but history alone cannot fulfil all of their needs, nor can it, perhaps more importantly, nourish the activities of the design studio.

If the historians want to make architectural history more relevant to the studio then they have to look at the traditional delivery of architectural history: there is a complacency that needs to be challenged. History teachers should be more aware of what is being explored in the design studio and should be willing to be involved there.

In addition to this the contemporary world demands that architects are conversant with some aspects of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, the visual arts, literature, and so on. These are as important, if not more important than history. Architects must be able to participate in and contribute to the debates of our own time.

Architectural history should not just be a deluge of facts, dates, names and style, but should address why and how change occurs. Students need understanding more than they need knowledge, and they need to understand the spirit of the ages that they study. When students study precedent in the studio they often mirror the historian's approach to history: they study physical facts, and they rarely look beyond these concrete facts to understand the many other cultural issues that have informed the work or which the work will impact on. Non-architectural studies would help to deepen the students' understanding and encourage them to select more appropriate precedent models.

In conclusion it is clear from studying this issue that many schools claim to teach a new approach to history that is studio-centred or studio-orientated, that is, they claim to fulfil the students' needs for a cultural-context education that enhances learning in the studio. However, this claim does not stand up to closer inspection: in fact students are receiving the same precedent, historical or theory material as formerly, but under a new name and with a spurious claim about its relevance.

In conclusion, given what has been said it remains unclear whether history is capable of becoming more relevant to design, or whether in fact the non-architectural disciplines can better fulfil the needs of the student.