POETRY AND ARCHITECTURE

Building A Poem

Teaching Poetry to Architecture Students

JOANNA FUHRMAN

"To teach is to learn again," says the fortune cookie aphorism posted prominently in the office of the Saturday Outreach Program of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. I had been hired by the program to teach poetry writing this year to teenage architecture students, but as a writer with no architecture background, I have often felt that my task in teaching this course has been not to "learn again," but simply to learn. Teaching in the program, I hoped, would bring my inchoate notions about the connection between poetry and architecture into focus.

My position as poetry consultant entails running writing workshops for the students and collaborating with five other teachers, all of whom are undergraduates at Cooper Union Architecture School, to create an interdisciplinary curriculum for New York City public high school students. Cooper Union, in New York City, is the only private, full-scholarship college in the United States dedicated exclusively to preparing students for the professions of art, architecture, and engineering. The school's Outreach Program was designed to serve public high school students from throughout the five boroughs, many of whom stay in the program for several years. It has six divisions: drawing, sculpture, graphic design, painting, architecture, and a special program in portfolio preparation for seniors who are planning to apply to art school. With around thirty-five students per semester, the architecture division is the largest of the six.

I was especially excited about being part of the architecture division because of my interest in David Shapiro's and John Hejduk's work in bringing poetry and poetics into architecture education at Cooper Union. Twenty-five years ago, John Hejduk, the former dean of Cooper's architecture school as well as a visionary artist, poet, and, as he put it, "medieval modernist," asked the poet David Shapiro to develop a class introducing architecture students to poetry and poetics. The class today is much the same as it was in the beginning. Shapiro's students read poetry by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Pasternak, Mayakovsky, Stevens, Ashbery, and O'Hara, and write their own poems inspired by their readings, discussions, and Shapiro's in-class writing exercises. At the end of the term, each student creates a book containing ten of his or her own poems. The books range from standard handmade chapbooks to scrolls to innovative constructions that resemble small houses. While there are many architecture programs now that introduce

John Heyduk, "Museum for War and Peace (M-09)," 1999–2000. Black ink and gouache, with pencil, on Japanese paper. Reprinted with permission of The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of John Hejduk in honor of Dominique de Menil.

their students to poetry, Cooper Union's was the first.

David Shapiro likes to quote John Hejduk as stating, "Architecture is poetry and poetry is architecture." On a deep level this statement feels true to me, but I am afraid that it might be true in the way a wish is true. It expresses what I want to be the case, rather than what is.

As a poet, I want people to think of a poem as a form that one can enter completely, a structure like a cathedral or a house of mirrors, powerful enough to affect how one thinks and feels. I want to believe that we live in language as much as we live in space, that our experience of the world is structured by the poems we have read. I also appreciate Hejduk's implicit emphasis on the poem as something built. Too often, beginning writers think of poetry as unmediated self-expression. Because it's possible to write about one's own experiences in a poem in a way that is impossible in other media, students and, to be honest, some teachers often forget that a poem, like any other work of art, is something constructed. There are so many clichés about writers "finding their voice" that I worry the real, hard work of assembling a poem is too easily overlooked. To call poetry a form of architecture is to circumvent the clichéd elevation of sincerity over craft.

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As much as I want poetry to be like architecture, I also want architecture to be like poetry. I like to imagine a sort of Platonic architecture freed from the usual constraints of client demands, budgets, and planning committees: an architecture of pure, expressive abstraction, simultaneously personal and universal. I like to think of the architect, like the poet or the surrealist, always creating something at the edge of what she is able to explain or even understand. As a child of twentieth-century America, I see the archetype of the poet not as the court scribe or state laureate, but as the risk-taker. Because of the poet's status at the margins of our commodity-defined culture, she is thought to have freedom that few other artists can claim. When I think of architecture as poetry, I like to imagine a radical architecture that would transform our culture of buying and selling, making possible moments of non-commercialized being and communicating, an architecture that would create spaces for emotion and reflection. I think of Madeline Gins' and Shusaku Arakawa's writing on poetics and architecture, their insistence that through architecture we cannot only change consciousness, but defeat death itself.

In thinking about how poetry and architecture are linked, I am interested in how different ideas about poetry and poetics inspire the creation of different architectures. The formalist poet Annie Finch recently co-taught an architecture class at Miami University in Ohio with the architecture professor Ben Jacks. For Jacks and Finch, what connects the two art forms is proportion, aesthetics, and context. Jacks says, "Of proportion and rhythm and beauty, only the word rhythm has any place in the architecture studio. I hoped that proportion, unofficially and officially banished from architectural

education in the 1940s, and beauty, misunderstood, hijacked, perverted, and subjected to claim and political counterclaim, might rejoin architecture by way of the poem as a Trojan horse." In other words, poetry provides a way around what Jacks sees as the limits of postmodern discourse. Students read poems in order to think about the similarities between linguistic and built structure. Poetry is a means to recover an older way of thinking about construction and space.

This view of poetry, as a means to salvage the past, contrasts starkly with the avant-garde approach of the architect Alberto Cruz and the other founders of the Open City in Ritoque, Chile. For the last half century, the Catholic University of Valparaiso's architecture program has been developing architectural practices based on poetry and poetics. For the architects associated with the Open City, poetry does not only teach one how to construct, but how to live. All of the architects reside in the buildings they create. For the residents of the Open City, the emphasis is not on the final product. (In fact, this is so much the case that many buildings go unfinished.) What matters instead is the creative process. Like Le Corbusier, whose writing they study, they believe that "architecture is a habit of mind, not a profession." The goal is to create an architecture that is completely unconventional and devoted to the concept of art as discovery. These architects use poetry and poetic techniques as a way to think about creating structures and organizing space in a new way as well as a means to think about the nature of community. Sometimes this process involves Surrealist-influenced chance operations. Other times it involves a heightened awareness of the tensions among various ways of interpreting a space. Poetry and poetics are a means to understand the nature of uncertainty. In other words, the complexity, ambiguity, and disjunction of modern poetry provide a model for architecture. Often the buildings' relationship to poetry is abstract. Its influence can be seen most clearly in the open approach to building. Dwellings are not constructed from blueprints, but are designed as they are built. This is similar to the poetic process where one discovers the subject of the poem as one writes it. Occasionally the connection between architecture and poetry at the Open City is more concrete. For example, there is a garden structured to mirror the rising and setting of the sun as well as the rhyme and cadence of a poem.

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As a writer whose work is often rooted in surrealism, I teach classes that are probably closer in spirit to the community of the Open City and to Shapiro's classes than to Jacks' and Finch's class. While I plan to introduce my students to traditional forms later in the year, so far I have concentrated on exercises that emphasize chance and broaden the students' conceptions of figurative language. For me, the most important pedagogic goal is to help my students develop fearlessness as writers and architects, to force them to think in ways that might feel uncomfortable at first so that

they can transcend the limits of what they think they know. This manifests itself in surrealist or Oulipean-influenced writing games, exercises with constraints to force students to use their imagination.

To accompany each architecture project the Saturday Outreach students worked on, I tried to create a poetry assignment that would mirror the project's themes. For example, when my students worked on line weight in drawing, I created a lesson on the qualities of sound in language. I wanted to heighten my students' sensitivity to different qualities of materials used in constructing a work of art. We talked about which phonic sounds feel "loud" and which feel "quiet," and then wrote lines about postcards of paintings, one quiet line and one loud line for each image. On the day they went on a trip to the Architecture Foundation and a nearby plaza, I wrote a series of questions designed to help students create metaphors for the space they were in: "What animal do you think would be most at home in this space?" I asked them, and "What music would sound best?" They were also asked to list five random letters and pick a concrete noun for each letter. They then had to create metaphors comparing their nouns to the space they were in. I use this metaphor generating exercise often in my classes to push my students to get away from clichéd comparisons.

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When my co-teachers taught the students about scale in architecture, I created an assignment about scale in poetry. This was my first day with the class, so I didn't know what to expect. The group was huge—around thirty-five students—but the students were all focused in a way that I rarely see as a teaching artist.

I brought in a group of poems that show how poets create an illusion of space. First, I asked my students to read a translation of a poem by the Tang poet Tu Fu that ends with the line "all heaven and earth and one lone seagull." I talked about how the contrast between the expanse of sky and the single seagull allows the reader to have a visceral feeling of space. Without the seagull, the line about "heaven and earth" would be more abstract—readers could conceptualize the idea of space, but they wouldn't be able to feel it. The seagull gives the reader a focal point so that she is able to feel the scale of the expanse. In a similar way, a figure created to scale next to a model of a building gives one a feeling of the size of the building in the way a number or conceptual approach cannot. We then read and talked about the Wallace Stevens' poem "Anecdote of the Jar." In the poem, the speaker places a jar on a hill in Tennessee. Stevens writes of the jar, "It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill." We talked about how Stevens' jar allows one to experience the space around the jar. In both Stevens' and Tu Fu's poem, space is naturalistic. Objects that are small in life look small in the poem and objects that are large appear large. The relationship between objects mirrors the reality of the physical world.

For the in-class writing assignment, I tried to contrast this naturalistic conception of space with the more subjective experience of space present in post-surrealist poems. I wanted my students to experience poetry's ability to use concrete language to reflect subjective, abstract experiences. We read Frank O'Hara's poem for his friend Bunny Lang in which he writes, "a glacier spoke in your ear." I asked my students what they thought about the oddness of this image. We talked about how the poem takes something that is usually huge and makes it as intimate as a whisper. We also read Noelle Kocot's poem "Running with Closed Breast" as an example of this technique. In the poem she writes, "But now my town has scattered / like crumbs in a beard." In retrospect, it would have been interesting to bring in pictures of contemporary art—maybe Joel Shapiro's three-inch-tall chair, or Claes Oldenburg's massive sculptures of hamburgers, spoons, and other everyday objects, so that my students could see that the subjective use of space is not just a part of contemporary poetry, but an aesthetic strategy in visual arts as well. Both poets and artists play with scale as a means to disorient the viewer/reader, and this disorientation can create a way of looking at familiar sights in a new way.

Following our in-class discussion, I told the students I wanted them to write a poem that creates a feeling of space by contrasting the tiny and the huge. To help them do this, I gave each student twelve index cards and asked them to write the name of a tiny object (such as an eyelash or a freckle) on six of the cards and the name of something gigantic (such as the universe or a skyscraper) on the remaining cards. I then collected the words and redistributed them. The students were asked to include all of the words in a single poem. Since this was my first week, I didn't know what to expect. Because the group was so big, the process was a little chaotic. A few students didn't make enough examples of small things, so the co-teachers and I quickly made some extras to fill in the gaps. Despite (or perhaps because of) the feeling of disorder, the poems they wrote were profound and alive, full of familiar strangeness.

NICKY DEAK

Serendipity

A teardrop filled
America as it watched
its lollipop get eaten
by flies the size of rice
fields. An ant overran
the Army Corps of Engineers.
Everything in the universe is
the sky.

FABIAN JAMES

A Small Thing in The Big World

I am very important
yet no one knows me.
So small like a rat searching
for cheese in New York City,

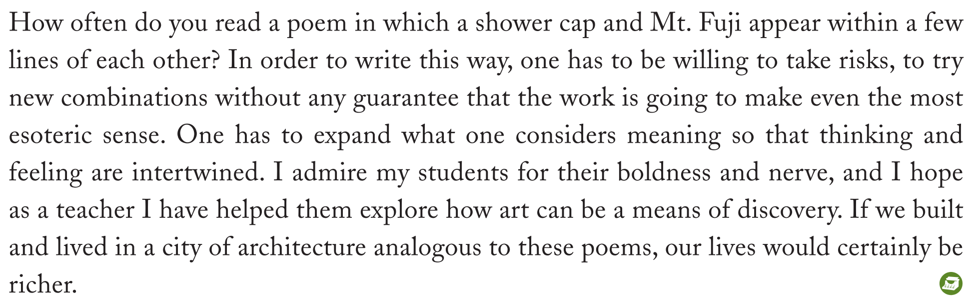
overlooked like a button lost in a wave.
But I am powerful like
one of the cells
that makes up the sun.
Without me, there would be no light.
Like a grain of sand on a whale's back,
I am able to defeat it with a great itch.
I could destroy the world,
but no one knows me.

TANISHA SCOTT

Waking Up

Having your mind scatter like
marbles covered in a shower cap.
Babies popping up like the sun at dawn,
opening their eyes like pebbles against the earth.
Feeling like an answer is a nerve ending
on the top of Mt. Fuji or jumping out
of a plane and having the wind pushed into
your face from a whale's blow hole.

How often do you read a poem in which a shower cap and Mt. Fuji appear within a few lines of each other? In order to write this way, one has to be willing to take risks, to try new combinations without any guarantee that the work is going to make even the most esoteric sense. One has to expand what one considers meaning so that thinking and feeling are intertwined. I admire my students for their boldness and nerve, and I hope as a teacher I have helped them explore how art can be a means of discovery. If we built and lived in a city of architecture analogous to these poems, our lives would certainly be richer.



*In an interview with Jaap Huisman in 1993, Hejduk said, "Building—I prefer to call it fabrication—happens in my mind. Architecture isn't restricted solely to the visible process [. . .] A poem, literature, music, even medicine are sources of inspiration to me for architecture. It is misguided to think your working drawing must always end up as a cut-and-dried building." [*De Volkskrant, *November 11, 1993] Hejduk studied and taught for many years at The Cooper Union School of Architecture in New York, where the teaching focused on the integration of art and architecture. The work he made consisted not only of architectural drawings and models, but also of more autonomous work such as poetry, graphic art, and painting. All these disciplines are covered by the publications listed below.*

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POETRY AND ARCHITECTURE

Imaginary Buildings

A Poetry Activity Inspired by the Drawings of John Hejduk

JOANNA FUHRMAN

Materials

Copies of John Hejduk's drawings, unlined drawing paper, lined writing paper, markers or colored pencils, copies of Imaginary Buildings Worksheet, one six-sided die.

Background

John Hejduk (1929–2000) was an architect and dean of The Cooper Union School of Architecture for thirty-five years. He stressed the importance of drawing and poetry to architecture. In an interview with the poet David Shapiro, Hejduk said, "I cannot do a building without building a new repertoire of characters of stories of language and it's all parallel. It's not just a building per se. It's building worlds." This exercise, drawing on Hejduk's work, is designed to introduce students to the felicitous connections between architecture and poetry and, more broadly, to illustrate how working in multiple genres can inspire the discovery of new creative possibilities.

Activity

- To begin, the teacher passes around or shows projections of Hejduk's drawings of fantastical buildings, then facilitates a short discussion of how one might feel inside a building like the ones in the drawings. The teacher might want to start by asking the students to describe places where they felt overwhelmed by the space or where they felt at peace.

- Students then write the numbers one to six on a piece of lined paper. For each number, they write down an emotion such as "happiness" or "fear."

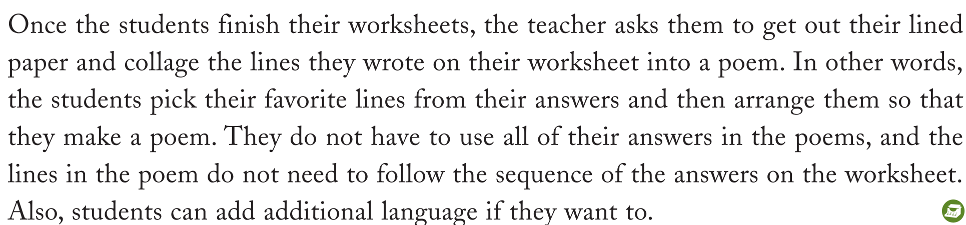
- Once the students have finished writing down six emotions, the teacher rolls the die, and students circle the emotion on their paper that corresponds to the number on the rolled die.

- Next, the teacher leads a discussion of how different shapes have different emotions. He or she draws some basic and complicated abstract shapes on the blackboard and asks the students how each shape makes them feel. For example, the teacher might explain how a jagged shape might make one feel anxious while a round shape might make one feel comforted.

- Students are then asked to draw a picture of a building that matches the emotion they have circled, keeping in mind the previous discussion of how different shapes convey different sorts of feelings and using that to help them think about what they are drawing. It might help to remind students at this point that the emotion they are trying to convey in their drawing should not be expressed by trying to make their buildings anthropomorphic; i.e., resembling a human face, but through the particular combination of shapes they choose to use in their design.
- Students are given ten minutes—or longer if time allows—to draw their pictures. After the students finish their drawings, the teacher hands out an Imaginary Building Worksheet listing the questions below and asks the students to answer the questions as they relate to the building they have drawn.

Questions for Imaginary Buildings Worksheet

- What does it smell like inside?
- What sounds do you hear?
- What furniture is in the building? What does it look like?
- Who lives in the building?
- Are there any pets in the building? What kind are they?
- Any plants? What do they look like?
- How would you want to move if you were in the building?
- What would you dream about?
- What would you want to eat?
- What would be the best time of day to appreciate the building?



Once the students finish their worksheets, the teacher asks them to get out their lined paper and collage the lines they wrote on their worksheet into a poem. In other words, the students pick their favorite lines from their answers and then arrange them so that they make a poem. They do not have to use all of their answers in the poems, and the lines in the poem do not need to follow the sequence of the answers on the worksheet. Also, students can add additional language if they want to.

A House in the Condition of Poetry

DAVID SHAPIRO

When you read Rimbaud's "L'aube" and "Ville," in *Les illuminations*, think about not only doing an imitation of each of these poems; your task is to think of a house in the condition of the Rimbaud. You are to draw something that is not an illustration, but a complement to the poems. Just as one student used the mathematics of the sestina to create a "Sestina House," with grid systems and repetitions of geometric patterns inspired by Elizabeth Bishop's and John Ashbery's sestinas, you are to take the prose poem and all the literary devices found within Rimbaud's two poems to make a house in the condition of poetry.

Excerpt from An Architectural Exercise for Students at Cooper Union, 1980–2007