

## *In the Classroom*

### POETRY AND ARCHITECTURE

# Imaginary Buildings

## A Poetry Activity

Inspired by the Drawings of John Hejduk

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### 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. 