

Teaching Philosophy: Craig Zabel

Architecture is one form of art that engages all of us everyday: where we live and where we work. What are the historical forces that have shaped the built environment of our own community, our nation, the world? What is the Ionic Order and why do most of the buildings at Penn State from the 1920s and 30s reflect the distant principles of a classicism that was initially developed for Ancient Greek and Roman pagan temples? Why do two water towers on our campus (one recently demolished) reflect the profile of Brunelleschi's famous dome on Florence Cathedral? These are a few of the issues that I ask over 300 undergraduates most spring semesters to consider in my ART H 202 course on "Renaissance to Modern Architecture." For over 30 years at Penn State, I have taught such large introductions to architectural history and have attempted to awaken in my students a lifelong interest and understanding of architecture and its historical precedents. Architecture can be a very abstract art, laden with technical jargon. I strive to establish the aesthetic, structural and/or spatial meaning behind this architectural language and attempt to bring these buildings alive. My courses go well beyond the formal considerations of architecture, as the students attempt to examine buildings from the points of view of religion, politics, philosophy, culture, economics, gender, society, technology, engineering, landscape architecture, urban planning and interior design. In the 17th century, how does architecture shape the religious practice of a Jewish synagogue in Amsterdam as compared to a Puritan meetinghouse in Massachusetts as compared to a Catholic Spanish mission in New Mexico? How does Monticello embody Thomas Jefferson's ideals for a new nation, while the adjoining log slave cabins speak to a very different reality?

I am driven by a necessity to teach and I strive to transmit my passion for architectural history to my students everyday. No matter what else I might achieve in scholarship and service, it is teaching that it is at the core of my professional existence. Although I have been a Department Head for nearly twenty years, I have chosen to teach every semester, even during 2006-08, when I was an Interim Associate Dean (as well as a Department Head). I strive through my actions to communicate to my fellow faculty members the essential importance of teaching, which is sometimes not always the top priority at a research university.

It is not easy teaching an introductory course in the Forum to over 300 students. For some students (such as those majoring in Architecture or Architectural Engineering) ART H 202 is a required foundational course, for others it is one of two courses that they may be taking to fulfill their Gen Ed requirement in the Arts. As the teacher, I need to be challenging to those who plan to be professionals in the realm of architecture, while keeping the course truly understandable and meaningful for someone with absolutely no background in the arts. My greatest thrill as a teacher comes when I bump into a former student (sometimes in a distant city) and s/he tells me that my course totally changed their perceptions of cities wherever they travel. Sometimes students during the semester will remark that even a walk across the Penn State campus has totally changed for them, as they pick out motifs and architectural forms that were examined in class.

Teaching takes place as a *discussion*. As students learn, the professor needs to step back and ask them to visually interrogate the image before them and see how their fellow students respond. One should always be asking questions. I always start my courses with a short, but pithy question. In my ART H 415 course on "The Skyscraper," I simply begin by asking two questions: "What is a skyscraper?" "Why build tall?" The first day's discussion then leads to a 15-week course.