Conservation Basics - The making and lessons learnt

Image

By Brinda Gaitonde Nayak

Conservation Basics is a 12-week elective course within the 5-year architecture programme for undergraduate students in historic preservation at a university in Mumbai. It is an introductory course on the theory of historic preservation and its application, bridging the decision-making process between undergraduate general architecture studies and specialization for postgraduate education in a specific area of interest. The programme is designed to have asynchronous readings, visuals and activity-based components, site visits and synchronous discussions over video conferencing, with the city of Mumbai as the experiential laboratory—chosen on account of the city being a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site. However, this model can be adapted and applied to any historic site.

The Germ of an idea

The beginning of 2020 brought most of the world to a near standstill. In an extraordinary moment of human history, the global pandemic of COVID-19 affected nearly every aspect of behaviour, response and the most primary of functions – human interaction. While the world grappled to come to terms with unprecedented measures adopted by countries, such as lockdowns and furloughs, developing or underdeveloped countries were the hardest hit, especially in terms of access to remote education and healthcare. One of the most challenged fields was historic preservation, as heritage sites lay abandoned by tourists and custodians alike, and colleges were hard pressed to disseminate virtual versions of typically hands-on training courses. In 2006, I developed an eight-week elective introductory course on historic preservation including a series of lectures and site visits for fourth-year undergraduate architecture students at a college in Mumbai, India. Conducting this as a virtual course in early 2021, with limited access to technology and poor internet connection, meant I had incredibly limited resources for teaching what should have been a hands-on programme. To add yet another spin to this situation, I was not based in India anymore but lived over 50,000 miles away in the United States in a time zone half a day removed from my students—it seemed an insurmoun-table task. I decided to defer teaching the course until I reached a point at which I felt I was equipped to teach in a non-traditional format, but even this decision did not seem like a favourable outcome to me, and I continued to dwell on how to teach preservation remotely.

As a result of the training that I gained while doing the digital history graduate programme at George Mason University (2021-2023, Virginia, USA), I was able to devise a course structure using a digital platform that would ultimately form the foundation for *Conservation Basics*. The elective course structure is divided into three distinct modules: "Urban History", "Architectural Conservation" and "Cultural Historic Preservation". This structure allows students unlimited potential to explore different forms of resources when interpreting historical data. *Conservation Basics* is built with the intent to be completed as an additional class within the regular curriculum of a rigorous architecture programme, with minimal taxing assignments and easy readings.

On-site or On-line? solving a quandary

While the basic structure of the original 2006 class remains the same in the 2023 version, the fundamental difference is that my teaching project, *Conservation Basics,* is meant to be completely online (with the exception of some in-person field trips attended by the students,

remotely coordinated by me).

When I first started outlining this digital teaching project, my intent was to promote a greater understanding of local contextual history, as this was found to be completely lacking in the academic curriculum. With that in mind, I set out to identify numerous methodologies to convey local history and the general concepts of architectural preservation, referencing city repositories, international and national examples.

For instance, the initial "Urban History" section includes a paper written by me on Mumbai's urban growth and development, beginning with a group of seven fishing islands which would become he first planned British colonized city—the *Urbs Prima in Indis*—leading to the financial capital of the country. After completing this reading, the students would participate in an architectural walking tour of the historic district of the city to experience the different layers that Mumbai has taken on over the years, as examples abound: from sixth-century C.E. rock-cut cave temples, to the fragments of Portuguese fort walls, the neo-classical Town Hall (where the British Empire first proclaimed India as sovereign), the neo-Gothic building array along one side of the Esplanade with the bastion of Art Deco buildings on the other—all are markers of Mumbai's eclectic past.

This tour is then followed by a session using JuxtaposeJS, an online application that allows the user to interpose aerial views or maps from different time periods. This layering visually shows the students how Mumbai's footprint has radically changed over time.

Arriving at a digital pedagogical platform to teach preservation

The other crucial aspect of designing this course was to arrive at a suitable digital platform to convey the lesson plan—an application which would need to accommodate different forms of media such as online readings, overlaying maps, walk throughs, video recordings and conferencing, populating photographs and, of course, a student recording and grading system. Before identifying the web application, I worked out all the various subsets and modules of the course in Microsoft Word (I admit, I am not tech savvy and learned Photoshop from a book, hence I was particular about the digital platform being extremely user friendly).

This initial outline contained, apart from modules and sub-sections, a set of simplistic activity-based headings such as "View", "Create", "Read", "Attend" or "Visit" within each component. While I ultimately chose not to use these as subtitles, they became the order on which I based the content of the project. Eventually I used the learning management system called Moodle LMS, in which I was able to incorporate activities and resources within a grading and recording system.

Past forward—making the change from convention to atypical

I have always liked teaching. Evolving my teaching project from a completely onsite, hands-on and in-person elective course to a partially hands-on and web-based course has been a soul-searching experience. To make the transition from always being available and guiding students through every process, to being neither easily accessible nor present in-person was a hard choice. Somewhere during the making of *Conservation Basics,* I had that nagging feeling that what I wanted to convey might not be fully achievable in a digital format.

A prime example of my grappling with the pedagogical medium is illustrated through the centrepiece of the digital project: the module on "Architectural Conservation". This particular section of the course requires the most adept planning because of its practical format. For instance, assessing the condition of a building needs astute onsite observations which are then recorded onto printed architectural building drawings. In the past when organizing this module for students, or while training interns and other conservation professionals involved in a conservation project, I have undertaken building condition assessments with them onsite to accurately document these issues. This was the building block within the learning process; precise recording of structural and aesthetic issues is the backbone of any successful restoration project on which rides the analysis of problems affecting the building, the write-up of recommendations and then the tendering process of finding an agency to undertake the specified work.

Doing the initial examination and recording in a virtual format goes against the grain of my fundamental teaching methodology; there is no substitute for onsite field work and no better way of knowledge transfer than being physically present. How would I explain how to identify building defects to a class of undergraduate students while I was 50,000 miles away and in a time zone 12 hours behind? I could have chosen to simply organize a site visit and have a conservation architect colleague explain, in person, how to undertake the condition assessment, or I could try to adapt or reinterpret my hands-on curriculum strictly through online media. In the end, I decided to create a hybrid learning experience that would cover the gaps in these methodologies by deriving resources from both. In this module, the students will study annotated architectural plans demonstrating how to undertake a condition assessment. I will teach them, via our online class, the different key symbols and methodologies used in assessments, and then the students will undertake an assessment in person, subsequently submitting their work to me.

For the main module "Architectural Conservation", there are four sections—Building Inventories, Condition Assessment, Material Conservation and Adaptive Reuse. I introduce students to the fundamentals of architectural documentation and building inventories by assigning topical readings and arranging an in-person visit a local organization that sponsors conservation studies in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. By taking a look at precinct studies and building inventories undertaken by conservation firms over the years, the students get an overview of the process. This is followed by online instruction and more background reading focused on identifying building defects.

By using this top-down structured approach of studying historic districts, making building inventory cards and conducting a condition assessment, the students obtain a thorough foundation. In any case, how much the students learn, whether in an in-person format or through a virtual format, entirely depends upon how the content is presented and how they engage.

Next steps

Conservation Basics is intended to broadly touch upon various aspects of historic preservation, providing just a little taste of the profession, the research it entails and the absolute joy of working with historical spaces. To this end, I have provided a variety of activities in each teaching module including preparing street furniture catalogues after watching clips from old movies based on Bombay (none of the original Victorian lamp posts, as seen in the older films,

survive today) and completing a quiz with a twist (an activity I call "Spot the Indifference" in which students compare archival and contemporary images of Bombay buildings in order to identify missing details, incongruous additions, etc.). The students also watch trailers for movies that feature World Heritage Sites, the most infamous being the James Bond film *Spectre* in which Daniel Craig is shown scaling the walls of a Mexico City World Heritage Site before the entire city is blown to bits. All these activities are intended to encourage students to apply their thinking and skills in non-traditional approaches and to demonstrate how one might offer instruction in our professional field in a unique way. *Conservation Basics* is set to make its debut as an elective to a group of 20 third-year undergraduate architecture students at a college in Mumbai in Dec 2023, where it will test the waters for the first time since its formulation.

Author Bio

Brinda Gaitonde Nayak works remotely as a consultant for World Heritage Sites in India for the conservation firm Abha Narain Lambah Associates in Mumbai, while being based in the USA. She is also co-founder of *The Bombay Heritage Walks*—an organization that undertakes architectural walking tours in Mumbai. Her vision for *Practical Preservation Series* began while she was doing her graduate certificate in Digital History, and *Conservation Basics* is the first sub-set.

(Read the full article and see the images in the December-January 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 99, p. 24-29)