

# UC Santa Barbara

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The Chicago Schools Symposium

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## CHICAGO SCHOOLS AUTHORS, AUDIENCES & HISTORY

2<sup>ND</sup> INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT SYMPOSIUM  
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Reported by DAN COSTA BACIU

Millions of tourists come to Chicago to see the early high-rises built between 1875 and 1915. What brings all of these people to the city? Under the lead of Michelangelo Sabatino, dean at IIT's College of Architecture, my colleagues and I organized a graduate student symposium on the topic of my dissertation, and participants flew in from four continents. We mingled, networked, and made friends.

The past of the Chicago School is a who's who of modernist architectural history. Sigfried Giedion, Colin Rowe, and Manfredo Tafuri are among the most influential theorists of their times, and their literature referencing the Chicago School found both lovers and haters as it was read and evaluated over and over again. An entire line of distinguished scholars has attempted to add depth to the past ideas, work out the details, or also debunk them as myths. John Zukowsky, David Van Zanten, Robert Bruegman, Johana Merwood-Salisbury, and Christopher Vernon have shaped the public opinion through monographs and exhibitions. Nevertheless, in the last four decades, the debate has collapsed under the burden of increasing expectations. In professional magazines, the discourse on Chicago's architecture lacks the previous continuity; the Chicago School is hardly ever referenced to. Sabatino and I wondered whether there are young voices who wish to enter the stage with so little room left for new interpretation. We discussed the possibility of a symposium, and finally decided that the time had come to organize an international event at Illinois Institute of Technology in partnership with the Chicago Architecture Biennial.

The symposium was designed to bring together established scholars and students. The above-mentioned historians together with a number of additional curators and professors were invited to the scientific committee. A call for papers was

sent out and published internationally. Finally, contributors were selected through a peer-review process. At IIT, paper sessions were each chaired by an established scholar, and students also received individual feedback from respondents. Johnathan Mekinda (University of Illinois), Rolf Achilles (School of the Art Institute of Chicago), Thomas Leslie (University of Iowa), Alison Fisher (Art Institute of Chicago), Kevin Harrington (IIT), and many more offered their support. Gwendolyn Wright (Columbia University) delivered the keynote address. Revisiting her past work as a student, she opened the field for new discussion. Wright called for a more playful approach to history, reminding the audience gathered at the Chicago Cultural Center that errors, improbable events, and new discoveries are part of the game.

Four Chicago lectures were delivered by members of the scientific committee. I was honored to start the series with a synopsis of everything called Chicago School. Using methods from Data Science, my research disambiguated hundreds of lines of thought that entered the public discourse over the last two centuries. Although many records might have vanished, newspaper publications prove that a group of office and theater builders were already known as the Chicago School towards the end of the 19th century. In the rise of Midwestern awareness, these architects and engineers claimed to bridge theory and practice giving rise to a bold, new synthesis. Later fiction writers and philosophers, as well as other professionals and academics formed new lineages. They departed from previous sets of values, or returned to them creating a vast web of thought. Most surprisingly, history shows that Chicago Schools not only co-existed—they were as influential as they were heterogeneous. As a theoretical takeaway, my lecture explained the shaping factors of an oftentimes observed, but previously little understood relationship between influence and breadth.

The following Chicago lectures offered a number of highlights that added substance to the paper sessions. Michael Golec from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago spoke about the dialog between the Chicago School of Psychology and the Chicago School of Design at the beginning of the 20th century. His lecture traced the effect of theory beyond disciplinary boundaries. The ramifications of the two Chicago Schools gave rise to a much greater exchange than previously assumed. The subsequent Chicago lecture brought a highly visual narrative that gave a sense of the accelerated growth of the metropolis during the 1880s. In a surprising comparison, Burnham & Root's Monadnock building, and the structures of Ludwig Hilberseimer's High-rise City revealed breathtaking similarities. With attention to every minute detail, Alexander Eisenschmidt (University of Illinois) let the time gap between the 19th century and the Avantgarde literally collapse. Finally, Eric Mumford's lecture (Washington University in Saint Louis) concluded the Chicago series with a scholarly evaluation of American urbanism and CIAM.

Students from the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, Egypt, Ireland, as well as Columbia University, Virginia Tech, University of Delaware, and University of Michigan spoke about the Avant-garde, the skyline of signs, American

architecture in Spanish magazines, Mies in Greece, and many more topics. Traditional scholarly work stood next to new methodologies. Archival work was followed by evaluations of present day digital text. At the end of the day, the symposium was more heterogeneous than I would have expected. As a counterpart to the academic parts of the symposium, Daniel Whittaker (IIT co-organizer) planned a dinner at a private house museum, another dinner at Union Temple, and an architectural tour that offered a more informal framework for networking. We visited the Farnsworth and Bruce Goff houses on a splendid Sunday morning.

I would like to acknowledge the support of IIT's John Vinci Fund and Fred Eychaner, together with the immense time invested by all committee members who reviewed papers, including Claire Zimmerman (University of Michigan) and Sean Keller (IIT). I would like to thank the many other helping hands and minds not already mentioned, as well as the board members of the Society of Architectural Historians who joined us for the talks. The online appearance was possible through the efforts of IIT's publications office, and we are now working towards a publication in which the papers are refined in an effort to develop a compelling new evaluation of the Chicago Schools as seen by both established and emerging scholars.

