

At night I'm starting to draw, heads of Alma and copies of postcard American city streets. I would never have known how much even a little of it sharpens your eye and gives you more understanding and affection for even some small part of a human or architectural feature. . . . I now possess and know Alma's face and a Brooklyn street in 1938 as if they were a part of me, as much as my hand. . . .

—JAMES AGEE

chapter

4

Alternative Pedagogy

Visualizing Theories of Composition

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Working with Dick Putney in architecture classes like the one he describes in Chapter 6 fed my long-time interest in architecture, but they also offered a ground for my growing interest in the connections between the visual and verbal. As the writing expert in the class, I asked Dick what it was that his students had difficulty understanding in these classes. He immediately said that they lacked the ability to observe detail. Students in his classes would learn basic Gothic architectural concepts like buttress, clerestory, and so on, or could easily learn them because they had probably heard these terms before, but they did not become adept at identifying the subtle differences that distinguished particular periods of time, cultures, or regions. The traditional art historian's methods, lecture and slideshow, did not accomplish as much as he hoped. What we had to do was create a bridge from the concrete, physical, visual, graphic world to an abstract, intangible, textual, imaginative one. An initial, successful use of architectural language to discuss writing brought me closer to finding a solution to this problem and to answering a question that kept emerging for me: despite our emphasis on process writing, why do students increasingly seem to write less interesting, in-depth papers?

Somewhere during the Gothic architecture class I started using the language of architecture to talk about how to write a paper. Terms referring to cathedral structure—the nave, rotating chapels, center aisle, clerestory—became metaphors for the writing process: focus, main argument, radiating arguments. For example, buttressing

arguments, like their architectural counterparts, seem to support the weight of the paper (building) invisibly; there is a seamless series of claims and assumptions that form the structure underneath the main point (the vault of the ceiling) upon which one builds. Nonetheless, as buttresses emerge on the outside of a building, so too do concrete arguments that one can see within the paper. For students so immersed in learning architectural terminology, such language proved a convenient and beneficial way to talk about the dual purposes of the course: to teach writing and to teach Gothic architecture. What I began to learn in this class, however, led me to develop a metaphor that has proved useful in many of my classes. The process draws together the physical, visual world of the students and the abstract, textual world of the classroom, so they *see* the writing process.

A New Si(gh)t(e)

After I had completed several class collaborations with Dick, an event occurred that uprooted the entire art department and offered an opportunity to use architectural language to teach students about writing in classes other than art history. The university art department had always been housed in the Toledo Museum of Art. Considered one of the ten best in the country, the museum looks, well, like a museum: its nineteenth-century-schooled architect created a Greek temple to art in the midst of a graceful residential area (Figure 4-1).

Today, however, while the columned facade of the museum faces graceful restored mansions, the back looks over the roaring traffic of Interstate I-75 and beyond that, a mostly African American neighborhood struggling to keep itself above poverty. Likewise, the museum was struggling through a capital campaign to renovate galleries and renew its art education program in the community, and planned to reclaim the offices and classrooms formerly dedicated to the art department. As part of the renovation, a new art department building would be constructed next to the museum. After a competitive review of submissions by architects, the contract was given to Frank Gehry, one of the most controversial internationally known postmodern (though he dislikes the term) creators of space today. Once the controversy about the daring design died down in Toledo, the resulting CVA (Center for Visual Arts) became the centerpiece for Dick's new class on postmodern architecture (Figures 4-2 and 4-3).

Students were ambivalent about the new building for many reasons. They were leaving the very familiar, very solid museum in which they had long been housed. Many saw the new CVA as a disruptive space, difficult to move into and even more difficult to get

Figure 4-1
Toledo Museum of Art

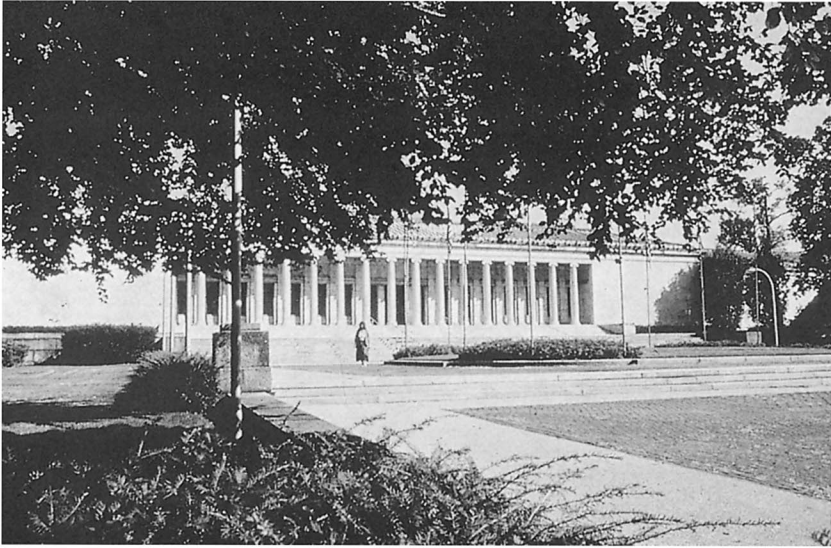


Figure 4-2
Center for Visual Arts (front)

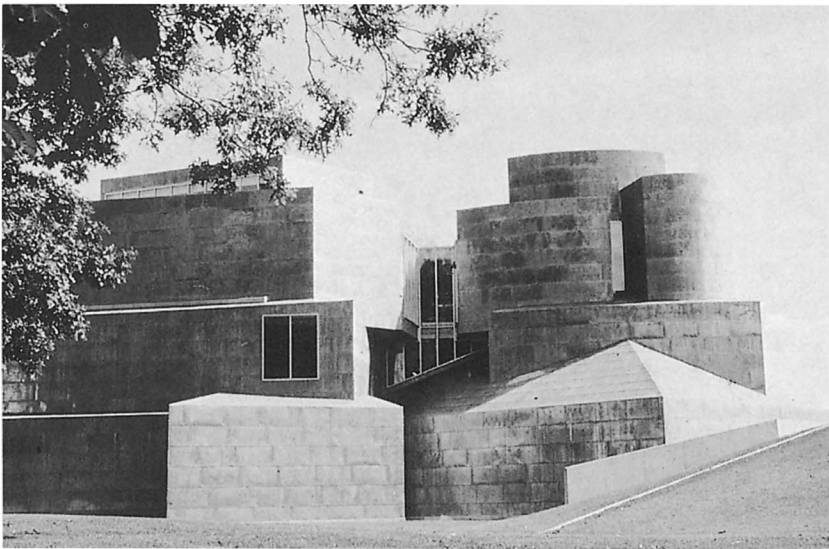
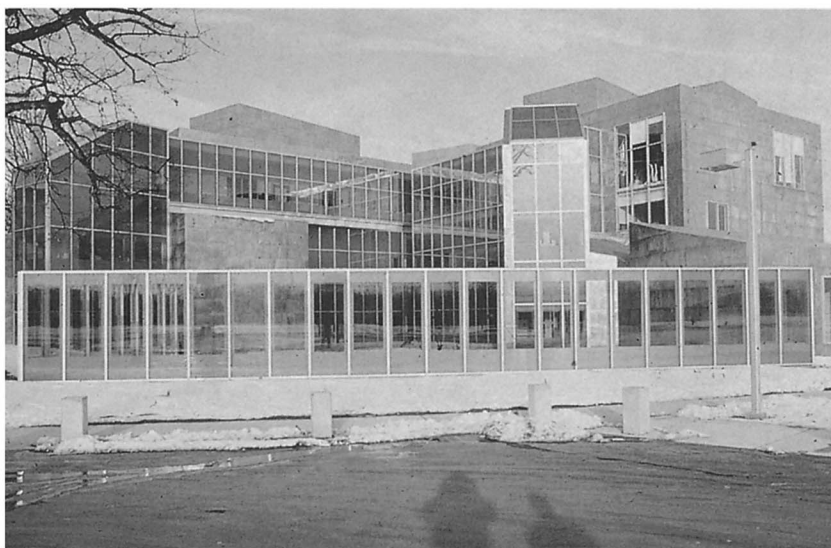


Figure 4-3
Center for Visual Arts (back)



used to. They were simultaneously drawn to and repelled by it. As students voiced their response to the building during class and in their journals, their words took on a predictable ring. More and more I found that I could substitute “writing” for “CVA”: “I don’t like the CVA [writing] because it’s not a building [paper] one can easily describe [write about].” Dick was frustrated by the students’ inability to lay aside their assumptions and write about the building with insight. As the tension in class increased, I was frustrated because when we did ask students to write, they were turning in fairly *safe* papers:

- the ones that are five paragraphs in nature
- the sort that tell us what students think we want
- the ones that leave out as much of their personal views as possible
- the kind that skim the surface
- the ones always preceded in class by someone asking, “And how long does this have to be?”

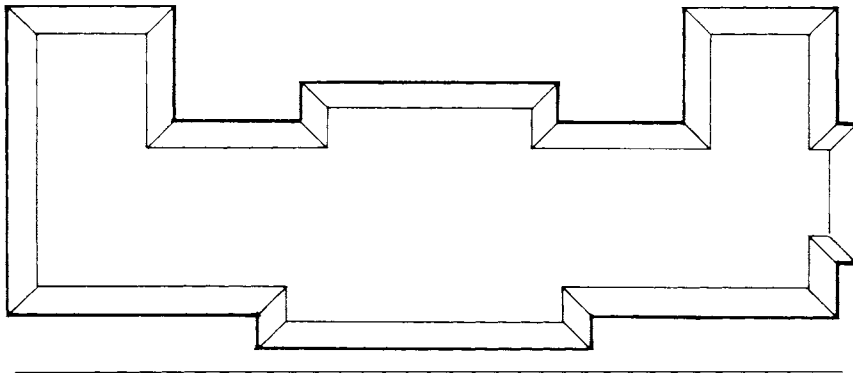
As Dick and I talked about the class, the museum, and the CVA, I began to see the two structures as more than a metaphor for writing; they served as visual, physical examples of the differences between how students may have been taught to write and how they now needed to learn to write.

Traditional Architecture, Traditional Writing

The days I took over the class to talk about writing, I explored this metaphor with students. While we had the physical buildings to walk through as well as slides, I have since found that either one will do. The following is a blueprint of what we discussed and its correspondences to writing. The objective behind this teaching strategy was to have students visually and physically *walk through* two different, built spaces and compare those experiences to writing within different contexts. High school students can easily relate to this exercise, and its feasibility is evident from the way in which educators are speaking about successfully using architecture as metaphor and content in elementary classrooms. For these teachers, as for me, architecture is a natural connection because it has “two distinct design traditions: building as concept and building as construction. On the one hand the building is seen as the realization of a set of ideas about the philosophy of beauty, symbology and the nature of space, human interaction and place. On the other, the building is an assembly of materials that are jointed, finished and positioned to protect and promote human activity” (Cleaver, Scheurer, and Shorey 1993, 354).

This definition corresponds easily to “two distinct design traditions” in writing: that associated with content and that associated with conventions. Neither can exist without the other, although educational tradition in English has caused many students (and teachers) to think about the two as mutually exclusive (giving one grade for content and one for grammar; teaching grammar in isolation from the act of writing and the contexts in which one writes; assuming that once students have learned grammar they can write; assuming that if students cannot write, we should teach more conventions and grammar). That tradition, unfortunately, is often maintained at the expense of students. They learn that they cannot write unless they know the comma rule. Or *never*, under any circumstances, to start a sentence with “and” or “or.” And, of course, they learn that length determines how much one says, rather than content determining how much room one needs to say it. Thus, to get back to the architecture class, when they find themselves challenged by new ideas, they revert to old forms rather than using the new ideas to determine how they might write in the new context. If this last sentence is abstract and confusing, so it was to the students, and thus I started one class by showing slides of the museum. Later, students actually walked through the two spaces, comparing them on their own. The following is a collapsed version of the correspondences we found between the museum (see Figure 4–4) and the CVA and between traditional and contemporary views about writing.

Figure 4-4
Toledo Museum of Art footprint



Museum (Original design)

Large, formal, ornate entrance facing major street and newly restored residential area of turn-of-the-century mansions. The entrance is framed, decorated, and obvious.

After walking up the long staircase and through the doors, one stands in the entryway and then walks through to the central lobby. Containing one graceful sculpture in the middle, the open space soars overhead and the floor indicates choices: left or right to the galleries, or straight ahead to whatever special exhibit is currently showing. Though the staircases (subtly placed behind columns) indicate

Writing (Traditional approach)

Begin your essay with a catchy introduction that will interest the reader. Do not insult the reader, but make sure that your thesis is the last sentence of the introduction.

The first paragraph should indicate how your essay will proceed and give the reader a clear indication of what you will present. Often there are three clear supporting points arranged in corresponding paragraphs. Let your reader know what these will be and in what order they will be presented. If necessary, dismiss any items that may prevent your reader from understanding your main

a downstairs, no one would mistake the implication that these lead to services: restrooms, stores, dining, and educator's resources.

There are no windows to the outside once a visitor enters the museum. No matter which direction one chooses (right, left, or center), one will always have to return to the lobby to move to another area.

At the end of the museum visit, or at any time visitors return to the lobby, they can use the services downstairs. When they wish to leave, however, they will do so through the main lobby upstairs.

Visitors exit the same way they came.

The purpose of a museum is to display already created pieces of art that have been deemed *masterpieces*.

points: that is, narrow your topic sufficiently so that the reader does not bring in biased or extraneous views.

Whatever point you choose to start with, continually relate it to your main point. Make sure you have clear transitions between each paragraph. Your focus should be tight and not cause a reader to stray from the main point.

Make sure not only that you support your main points, but that you anticipate objections others may raise or give examples of support (there are many correspondences to *services*). Always, however, return to your main point.

Be sure to restate your main point in the conclusion.

The purpose of a paper is to display an already formulated argument or point of view (such as a description). When it is submitted, it should be a finished, perfect piece.

Just as we can usually pick out the post office or the courthouse in any small town, so too, the museum (and the traditional paper) has specific parts that one expects to see and use in particular ways. This arrangement presupposes a familiarity with convention and the culture that produced it (I would not, for example, assume to know the first thing about entering or finding my way through a temple in Bali). Likewise, teachers presuppose that students are familiar enough

with school culture to put information where it is expected in the way they expect it. As a result, the emphasis in a paper is on display, on ideas being in the right order in the right place. The museum is not intended to explore the ways art might be conceived, or even to consider unacceptable productions that aspire to be called art (museums don't purchase pieces not already recognized as valuable in the art world). Likewise, though we talk about the importance of students' ideas and emphasize process in our classrooms, the *form* in which we demand our students' texts *really* announces to them: *We want a reproduction of already accepted ideas—ours—in acceptable formats.*

(Post)modern Architecture, (Post)modern Writing Process

The process movement of the seventies was to have changed all that, but teachers' own upbringing often placed (and still places) a wedge between what they speak about in class and the message they give students through feedback on papers: unintentional though it may be, our evaluation and assessment practices encourage traditional approaches. Then we wonder why students don't take risks, why they write *safe*—and boring—papers, or why they don't even know grammar (though we may like their ideas). This gets right back to the problem in the architecture class: faced with a challenging subject, students couldn't find a form or format for exploring their ideas. And if they tried to circumscribe the tension between what they thought and what they wrote by turning in a traditional paper, one of two things happened: their form was weak (the paper had lots of syntactical or grammar errors) or their format suffered (the paper was disorganized, inconclusive, or lacked support). This is where constructing a comparison with the CVA for students proved useful. (See Figure 4–5.)

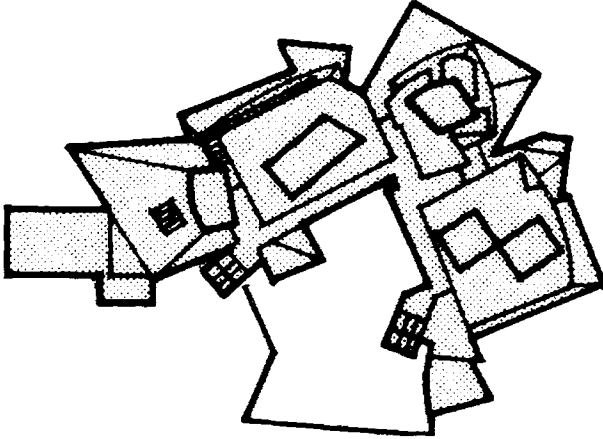
CVA (Postmodern)

The logical entryway for this building would be the same as the museum: facing the major road through town and the residential neighborhood. However, the only thing that greets the eye on that *side* of the building is a number of planes and curves flowing and jutting in and out of each

Writing (Process)

Nowadays, papers can't always start the way they used to. While it may be visually obvious that what one is holding is a text, sometimes a lot of background must precede any major *point*. This may be due to the emphasis on narrative or point of view. But, as with

Figure 4-5
CVA footprint



other. As one walks around, one sees in the building a wing that juts like the prow of a ship (a reference to Toledo as a shipping center on Lake Erie), the suggestion of a cathedral (a nod to the one down the street and the others on the horizon). One has to move around the entire building to get to the entrance in what could easily be called the back. While there is an entrance, as one would expect in a building, it's not exactly in the place one might expect. And one can enter the center of the building through a glass enclosed courtyard next to the common entryway.

The front of the building is composed of rectangular copper lead sheeting that mimics, in its blockiness,

this chapter and this book, we increasingly find that we can't assume our audience comes from the same (gracious, nineteenth century?) background; we need to make connections between our ideas, show where they come from, and bring our audience to these reference points before we get to the main point(s). As with the CVA, there may be more than one point of entry: one, obvious, the other, subtler, equal in importance.

The introduction of a process paper, though it may not contain the main point, is nonetheless a beginning.

the slabs of marble that make up the museum next to it. Planes angle off in juxtaposition with the museum's roof line. And where the front is a solid mass broken with windows, the back—the entrance—is all glass.

The visitor has choices at the entrance, though usually, the complexity of the courtyard entry in relation to the building is passed up for the clearly familiar entryway with large doors.

There are choices after passing through the entryway: left or right. A glance left immediately shows a gallery for student art—and a wall with a large door in it. This door signifies the end of the CVA on that side, but walking through the door will bring a person into a long, curving corridor that leads into the museum.

If one turns to the left, there stretches a long corridor with the glass of the courtyard on one side, a wall on the other, doors to stairs, rest rooms, department offices, and then, the

Embedded in it are expectations that this text, like others, will lead the reader to an expected point of entry. There will be sentences, they will be *correct*, and the grammar and structure will be used to accomplish an obvious end. Previously unthinkable, it is now not unusual to read "in this paper, I will explore" or "I would like to look at . . ."

One can be well into the paper before a main point emerges, but the main point will, nonetheless, clearly stand out.

It is not unusual for process papers to use research, the already accepted ideas of others, as part of the paper. These citations might lead to further ones and even to a recommended bibliography. Some space might be devoted to going over the pertinent research that led to the present text. But mostly, in a process paper, the reader, like the writer, wants to see what the writer thinks.

The process text unfolds, usually exposing the writer's way of thinking, how she approached the subject, why he chose this area, and how the reader might participate in constructing the meaning of

elevators and museum library way at the end; however, one also sees, through the glass and courtyard, that the corridor turns right and forms another corridor. What's down there? There is a playfulness of beckoning corridors, shifts in perspective, angled walls; a visitor wants to explore and is invited to do so.

Despite the soaring ceiling, the glass, and the playful perspectives offered by the architectural design, the visitor is in a familiar corridor that leads to familiar, useful spaces: the department offices, student gallery, stairwells, elevators, library. All the pieces are there, but juxtaposed differently, causing one to reconsider their placement and, therefore, their functions in the production of art.

Wherever one wants to go in the CVA, there are several ways to do so—or so it appears. One continually feels the need to explore this building and is for the most part invited to

the text: you are invited to play with the ideas, write in the margins, argue with the text, suspend your disbelief, reflect on the words alone and on your responses to those words. You are invited to interact with the text.

There are choices for writers that may displace their readers' expectations. The sentences in a paper may be organized syntactic units, and they may offer evidence or give examples. Yet writers are playing with punctuation, risking more by presenting personal points of view and multiple perspectives. While texts today may lay out major arguments beforehand, they don't always do so. Readers will be led through a text by familiar signs, marks, transitions, summaries, and restatements; however, the formatting of a text may also make use of desktop publishing possibilities: ideas may be physically juxtaposed.

A process paper may seem exploratory, but reader and writer should both have a clear sense of its purpose. Eventually, all discussions in the paper are pertinent to the entire

do so (the drawing and painting studios had to put up signs asking visitors to respect the classes in session, because they kept wandering in). There are wonderful nooks and crannies offering framed window views of the surrounding grassy area and downtown skyline to the east, of the museum's architecture to the west, of the expressway and neighborhood beyond to the south, and of the major street and residences beyond to the north, and even a surprise tiny balcony. Nonetheless, in order to exit, there are only some obvious choices, and one takes precedence: the main entryway.

In the CVA, art is created, risks taken, ideas explored, lines redrawn, perspectives moved.

environment being created for the reader. The writer may offer possible areas for further exploration, acknowledge that more research is needed, or state that she is making a generalization for the purposes of this discussion and knows it, but there is still a reason behind writing papers and it is often to offer one perspective on a subject—that is, not necessarily a definitive answer, but one particular perspective held by the writer for the reasons just constructed. While the reader may have a personal perspective or discover new ideas in the text, the writer is offering this view at this time.

Conclusions may suggest, question, offer further areas of investigation. Answers are not necessarily given, and, if given, not definitive. This set of ideas contributes to a pool of ever-changing knowledge.

Laying the Groundwork for Change

One could say that this activity lends itself only to art history or art classes. On my own, I would not have shown pictures of these buildings to students and said, "Okay, now, how are these buildings like writing?" That this visualization worked at all testifies to the power of Dick's perspective and knowledge when joined to my experience and perception. Yet it seems that in our classes we often ask students to move from the verbalized museum they bring to our classrooms to a very different CVA verbalization. Unfortunately, we do it without

clearly demonstrating that they must undergo a “paradigm shift.” Students—and, too often, teachers—aren’t aware that reading a textbook or hearing a discussion about a new concept does not always ensure that learning will take place. Students often have to see that their own long-ingrained and previously held ideas will cause them to continue responding in traditional ways. Physically comparing the museum (or any traditional building) to a new space provides a visual context for discussing the world of ideas students hold and the one into which we want them to move.

Mina Shaughnessy, Langer, Vygotsky, and others studying language acquisition have pointed out that the child’s interpretation of language and the way it works begins long before formal schooling. Children begin with a visual vocabulary before proceeding to a textual one. If the perceptions (speaking visually and cognitively) underlying students’ ideas remain stuck in a former way of thinking, learning, or doing, processing new information will not displace their previously held ideas. I ask students to picture their already constructed world as a sieve. As new knowledge comes in, some remains trapped but some slips through. Our constructed world (the sieve) will only retain information that it can accommodate; all else is forgotten.

This metaphor, however imperfect, gives me a place to begin talking about why students who have had twelve years of grammar and syntax still cannot use the conventions when they write. It gives me a place to talk about why students in the writing center who don’t understand how to use commas are not shown yet another copy of the rules for commas but asked, “Why did you put a comma *there*?” This question elicits the incorrect rule the student does hold: “Well, every sentence has to have a comma” (this is a true response from a student). That’s the teachable moment. Similarly, unless we bring students to an understanding of how they think about writing and about constructing texts, we will find it difficult to move them toward a more mature writing that exhibits critical thinking. Instead of visiting the museum, they will be stuck there for the duration.

Offering a Blueprint to Students

By leading students through two different structures, I was able to have them discuss their writing in terms of architectural differences. Although this strategy may not appeal to every teacher and such radically different buildings may not be available in every town, certain elements of this activity can be successfully adapted. For example,

1. As a class, draw a "footprint" (the surface area it covers) of the school or a building on campus; have students determine what they expect inside, and where they expect it to be.
2. Every town has a courthouse or a public library that looks like what it is. Ask students to draw its footprint as they remember it and discuss their expectations about the building's design and function.
3. Have students draw a footprint of their house. How does it differ from the footprint of a public building?
4. Have students write an essay about a given topic, or choose an essay they have already written. Have them draw a footprint of their paper or that of another student.

Assignments such as these give students a pictorial representation from which they can discuss a number of writing-related issues:

How is the purpose of a building (text) announced by its form?

This leads to discussions of main points in texts (the "So what?" question), introductions, supporting evidence, description, or subsections.

What expectations do public buildings (texts) signal to their visitors (readers)?

This can address reader expectations and writer obligations, formats, and the diversity of formats across disciplines.

How do people learn what to expect from buildings (texts)?

Discussions here can range from what constitutes a "good" paper to factors contributing to students' attitudes toward writing.

What happens if some feature a visitor (reader) expects to find in a building (text) is missing?

This provides a good basis for discussing confusion on the reader's part, from organization problems, lack of conventional reading signals, surface features that lead readers to spend a lot of time trying to guess what is meant, point of view, and so on.

When can a building (text) break the rules or deviate from what is expected?

Can writers make their own rules? When?

For those students who are visual or kinesthetic learners, walking around in a building becomes a concrete metaphor for walking around in a text. For those students who are verbal learners, the discussions can clarify for them the ways in which texts need to be constructed. For all learners today, most of whom are subject to media

images in one form or another, these activities open the possibility for reading other visual representations. Students

- develop a personal vocabulary for examining objects spatially
- develop a classroom vocabulary for assessment (foundation, supporting walls, detail, footprint)
- learn how readers *see* and (re)construct their written texts
- realize the impact the visual has on us even without our conscious knowledge
- acquire skills and a desire for visual analysis

Using the Gehry building as a way to discuss the structure of a paper certainly worked in that class. Since that time, I have been able to adapt the idea of the footprint successfully to other classes. Whether that alone proved crucial to the papers my students wrote—thoughtful, developed, organized, and at times, as they played with structure, risky—might be too broad a claim. I do know, however, that architecture became part of the vocabulary in our classroom as students peer-edited each other's work, as I conferred with students, and, when the year was over, students reminisced about our classes together. As one student put it, "I never understood why teachers couldn't understand what I was saying—I thought it was clear! And then I saw that my supporting structure would have been blown down by the first big bad wolf that came along! I finally could see what I was doing."