
From Knowing to Interpreting: A Qualitative Case Study of Multidisciplinary and Experiential Pedagogy in Teaching Islamic Architecture

Uzma Kabir

Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture and Design, COMSATS
University Islamabad, Islamabad campus, Pakistan

uzmakabir@comsats.edu.pk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2933-2700>

Abstract

This article presents a multidisciplinary and experiential approach to teaching Islamic art and architecture in an undergraduate architecture course. It elaborates a retrospective qualitative case study of ARC 371, History of Philosophy of Arts and Architecture, taught in Semester 5 at COMSATS University Islamabad. The course combined historical and architectural lectures with student research, presentations, debate, and hands-on engagement with pottery painting, illumination and miniature-making. The study uses the course's end-of-semester review, its documented pedagogical activities and learning outcomes, student-feedback summaries, and related course documentation as an archival qualitative corpus. A hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the documented evidence. Seven themes were developed: engagement through active participation; movement towards independent inquiry; critical thinking through argument and comparison; interdisciplinary learning; experiential learning through making; movement from historical description towards architectural interpretation; and pedagogical tensions and implementation constraints. The findings do not claim measured gains or causal superiority over conventional teaching. Rather, the case demonstrates how a sequence of learning activities can reposition architectural history from a largely transmissive subject towards a space for inquiry, dialogue, making and interpretation. The multidisciplinary teaching team expanded the range of learning modes available to students, while the course review also revealed the need for stronger curricular integration, better workload calibration, greater opportunities for site-based learning, and more explicit scaffolding for academic research and writing. The article proposes a pedagogical sequence comprising of knowledge acquisition, investigation, argumentation, crafting and interpretation, as a transferable framework for rethinking history and theory courses in architecture education.

Keywords: architectural education; Islamic architecture; architectural history; experiential learning; learner-centred pedagogy; interdisciplinary teaching; thematic analysis; higher education

1. Introduction

Any robust architectural curriculum stresses upon learning through studios as well as theory based courses. While both studios and theory based courses are important but due to far greater weightage of credit and contact hours of studios, theory courses are relegated to secondary importance by the students. Rote learning, teacher centric pedagogy and weak linkage to studio also create further obstacles in evoking engagement of students.

Nonetheless, history of architecture occupies an important position within architectural education. It is simultaneously a humanities-oriented field of historical inquiry and a disciplinary resource for architects who extensively work with precedent, context, cultural meaning and existing built environments. Traditionally the educational format of history courses has often remained more dependent on lectures, surveys, chronology and visual recall than on more familiar analytical and experimental forms of learning deployed in the design studio. Young (2018) observes that students in conventional lecture-based architecture-history classes can become entangled memorizing dates and images and fail to observe connections among buildings, technology and society, politics and cultural context. Research on the relationship between architectural history and the studio similarly establishes that the learners and teachers both predominantly perceive lecture room as a space of passive learning while the studio is associated with active creative synthesis of ideas. (Stewart & Wilson, 2008).

This aspect is particularly substantial in the teaching of Islamic architecture. The field covers wide geographical, chronological and cultural diversity which in itself are contested. Blessing (2020) argues that teaching Islamic architecture requires students to develop tools for researching and analysing historical, cultural and religious questions rather than merely memorising a fixed body of monuments. Hasnan, Utaberta and Ismail (2020) similarly argue that traditional lecture-based pedagogical approaches can obfuscate multiple narratives and complexities of Islamic architecture and propose course design as a pedagogical tool for supporting critical learning. More recently, Hasnan et al. (2024) developed an inclusive content framework for Islamic architecture intended to foster dialogical, critical and contextual inquiry to enrich learning.

Recent research literature has increasingly advocated the importance of active, inquiry-oriented and experiential forms of learning. Hein and van Dooren (2020) found that architecture students experienced seminars, studio work, books and physical engagement with buildings as complementary forms of learning, while Pohaničová, Vaňová and Baxa (2021) describe thematic education, research, dialogue and physical or digital modelling as ways of connecting architectural history with cognitive and design-oriented competencies. Salama and Holgate (2025) similarly argue for a process-oriented architectural pedagogy that integrates critical

inquiry, experiential learning, empirical making and dialogue in both studio and lecture-based settings.

The relevance of these arguments became apparent in the delivery of History of Philosophy of Arts and Architecture. The course was deliberately structured to move beyond didactic teaching. A historian, an architect and an artist contributed different forms of disciplinary knowledge; students undertook research and presentations, participated in debate, and engaged in practical artistic activities. The end-of-semester review documented both the pedagogical possibilities and the limitations of this approach, providing a unique reflective record of an architecture-history course in which conventional content delivery was consciously combined with learner-centred and experiential methods.

The present study therefore asks: How did a multidisciplinary, learner-centred and experiential approach shape the documented learning processes of students studying Islamic art and architecture? Two sub questions also arise: firstly, What forms of engagement, inquiry, critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, experiential learning and architectural interpretation are visible in the documented course evidence? Secondly, what tensions and implementation constraints emerged from the approach? The objective is not to establish statistically proven learning gains or to claim that the pedagogical model is universally superior. Instead, the study seeks to showcase a cases tudy that documents how a particular course sequenced learning and what this portends as far as the possibilities and limits of reimagining architectural history education.

The contribution of the paper is twofold. First, it provides a thematically reflective interpretation of an existing pedagogical record rather than being a descriptive narrative of a course report. Second, it synthesizes the case into a transferable sequence comprising of knowledge acquisition, inquiry, argumentation, crafting and interpretation. This model can help architecture educators connect historical knowledge to evoke students' curiosity through inquiry, critical dialogue and architectural interpretation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Architectural History as a Component of Architectural Education

Architectural history is not just a supportive subject of humanities within professional education. It enhances the repository of knowledge of precedent, cultural context, typology, morphology, materials, values and ways of understanding the built environment. Pohaničová et al. (2021) present architectural history as a pivotal part of the professional profile of future architects and stress links between scholarship, teaching, typological understanding, theoretical context and creative process. Likewise Xiong, Yang and Zhang (2017) suggest that the nature of architectural education is interdisciplinary by itself, since technology, art and the humanities converge in architecture and architectural history is an important resource for architectural ideas, cultural understanding and independent thinking.

However, the relationship between history education and design practice is still debated. Stewart and Wilson (2008) interviewed six Scottish architecture schools and found differing opinions about the need for history to be more integrated with the studio, but also a continuing divide between the lecture room and the creative culture of the studio. Hein and van Dooren (2020) show that students do feel history is relevant for design, although this relevance is often implicit and not clearly articulated. These findings suggest that the problem is not about the value of history per se, but about a pedagogical problem of enabling students to deploy historical knowledge.

2.2 From Content Transmission to Active Historical Learning

It is often objected that the traditional teaching of history identifies knowledge with knowing facts. Dave, Parikh and Baghel (2018) identify the barriers to student interest in architecture-history courses as being: excessive workload; information-heavy history teaching; limited interaction; and time constraints. They proposed a response based on self-study, reports, presentations, visual materials and digital resources to convert students from passive recipients into active participants. In response to concerns about student engagement, Perrotta and Bohan (2013) also investigated active-learning strategies in undergraduate history courses. Their study employed survey methods and is methodologically different from our current case, but it highlights the need to consider engagement as a pedagogical process and not as an assumed property of the subject.

Dialogic approaches offer an alternative perspective. Dialogic pedagogy views different perspectives as resources for shared inquiry rather than seeing classroom talk as only a means of transmitting the teacher's interpretation. Phillipson (2020) describes dialogue as collaborative meaning-making involving listening, questioning, explaining and reflection, while Chang, Wegerif and Hennessy (2023) demonstrate that historical reasoning can be supported in classroom dialogue where monologic and dialogic forms of teacher talk are combined dynamically. The implication for architectural history is that lectures should not be completely eliminated but that historical knowledge can serve as the material for comparing interpretations, formulating questions and constructing arguments.

2.3 Teaching Islamic Architecture as a Complex and Plural Field

Islamic architecture offers unique pedagogical challenges as the topic cannot be confined to a singular stylistic progression. Blessing (2020) emphasizes the problematic nature of its definition, vast geographical and chronological scope, the relationship between religious and non-religious structures, and the need to engage with the topic from a broader geopolitical and historical perspective. Hasnan et al. (2020) suggest that the plurality of Islamic architecture's narratives and ruptures can be underappreciated in canonical surveys and lecture-based pedagogy. The authors conduct a systematic review, positioning the topic's content and curriculum design as active pedagogical devices to navigate the complexity of the topic. Hasnan et al. (2024) employ a qualitative case study and grounded theory method to advance the discussion, proposing an inclusive framework for teaching Islamic architecture to promote critical learning, dialogue and reflection. Thus, the challenge is not only how to make history interesting; it is also how to organise breadth without sacrificing depth and coherence.

2.4 Experiential Learning, Making and Contextualization

Experiential learning is particularly pertinent to architecture when knowledge is acquired through observing, drawing, modelling, making and discussing built. Young (2018) aimed to bring some of the deep-learning properties of studio pedagogy into an architecture-history course lectured at the institute by using flipped learning, multi-phase research and a large physical timeline. Pohaničová et al. (2021) present an extended project where students researched buildings, visited archives and undertook field research before producing physical or digital models, while Abouelmagd and Ahmed (2021) describe an experimental architecture-history course where students analysed heritage buildings and then used their analysis as a basis for design work, explicitly addressing the perceived disparity between theoretical history courses and architectural practice. Elgawad (2014) argues for creative history teaching that bridges learning and applying using strategies such as modelling and educational games, while Salama and Holgate (2025) locate empirical making and experiential engagement within a wider process-oriented architectural pedagogy. All of these studies provide foundation for a conception of making not as entertainment but as a means by which abstract historical concepts can become material, spatial and interpretive.

2.5 Gap Identified from the Literature

The literature thus sets out a number of key principles: architecture history is relevant to design education; there are benefits for history teaching through active and dialogic learning; Islamic architecture needs plural, contextualized narratives; and experiential or making-based approaches can bridge theoretical knowledge and architectural interpretation. Yet little attention has been paid to the collective operation of these principles within a single Islamic architecture course documented retrospectively through course-level evidence. Stewart and Wilson (2008) pointed to the fact that much of the early writing on architectural history pedagogy was anecdotal and lacking in analysis. The present study responds to this issue through the use of a systematic thematic interpretation of an archived course review, rather than presenting the teaching activities as a catalog of innovations.

3. Conceptual Framework: From Knowing to Interpreting

The conceptual framework developed in this study treats learning as a sequence rather than as a collection of unrelated activities. The History and Philosophy of Art and Architecture v course review describes an intentional progression from reproduction of knowledge, through comparison, to synthesis in a creative endeavour, making a tentative connection to Bloom's taxonomy. Rather than using Bloom's taxonomy as a formal measurement framework, the present study interprets this progression as a pedagogical sequence where **knowledge acquisition, curious enquiry, rational argumentation, valuing the artefact by making and authentic interpretation** became the mainstay of the design of the course.

KNOWLEDGE Historical framing	ENQUIRY Independent research	ARGUMENTATION Presentation and debate	CRAFTING Artistic/material practice	INTERPRETATION Architectural meaning
---------------------------------	---------------------------------	--	--	---

Figure 1. The proposed pedagogical sequence

The framework does not imply that learning occurs in a strictly linear order. Rather, it identifies a pedagogical direction. Historical knowledge provides the base from which students investigate; investigation becomes visible through communication and argument; making provides experiential mode of engagement; and the combined processes make more interpretive forms of architectural thinking possible. Interdisciplinarity operates across the sequence: history, architecture and art are brought together rather than treated as entirely separate components.4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a retrospective qualitative case-study design with thematic analysis. The bounded case is one undergraduate course, ARC 371: History of Philosophy of Arts and Architecture, delivered in Semester 5 in COMSATS University Islamabad. The course review identifies its focus as taught content, methodology, learning outcomes, shortcomings and student feedback, providing a documentary record of the pedagogical intentions, activities and reflective assessment of the course.

The study is interpretive rather than evaluative in the experimental sense. No attempt is made to estimate an effect size, compare a control group, or infer causal learning gains. The purpose is to identify and interpret patterns in the documented pedagogical experience and to relate those patterns to the contemporary literature on architectural history education, active learning, dialogue and experiential pedagogy.

4.2 Documentary Resources

The primary corpus comprised the end-of-semester review report and the course documentation represented within it, including the course outline, documented presentations, debate activity, research reports, final-project description, student-feedback summary, learning outcomes and recommendations. The report records that the course review was supplemented by a student feedback survey and related course documents. Where the report describes student work or responses, the present analysis treats these as documented observations rather than as independently re-analysed raw student transcripts. No identifying information about individual students is reported.

Documentary source	Role in the analysis
Course review and course outline	Established pedagogical aims, content organisation and implementation context.
Documented presentations and reports	Provided evidence of independent research, communication and knowledge synthesis.
Debate activity	Provided evidence of comparison, questioning and argumentative practice.
Hands-on project documentation	Provided evidence of material, artistic and experiential engagement.
Student-feedback summary	Provided evidence of perceived workload and desire for site-based learning.

Instructor reflections and recommendations	Provided critical evidence of strengths, limitations and future improvements.
--	---

Table 1. Documentary evidence used in the qualitative case study (AI generated Table)

4.3 Approach to Analysis

The analysis used a hybrid deductive-inductive thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) account of thematic analysis. The literature supplied sensitizing concepts—engagement, inquiry, critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, experiential learning and architectural interpretation—while the course record was read for evidence that confirmed, complicated or contradicted these concepts. Themes were therefore not treated as pre-established outcomes; they were refined through comparison of the documentary evidence and through attention to tensions and negative cases, particularly workload, time, curricular fragmentation and the limited number of site visits.

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the course documentation was read repeatedly to establish familiarity with its pedagogical narrative. Second, meaningful passages were assigned initial codes such as self-directed research, comparison, questioning, argument formation, learning through making, interdisciplinary contribution, architectural interpretation, workload pressure and desire for field exposure. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed against the full documentary corpus and consolidated into seven themes. This procedure mirrors the logic of thematic analysis while remaining appropriate to a small archival case.

Illustrative evidence	Initial code	Category	Theme
Students were encouraged to find and analyse information independently	Self-directed research	Inquiry	Independent inquiry
Three presentations and three reports were documented	Knowledge synthesis	Inquiry/communication	Independent inquiry
Debate required students to compare and argue both sides	Argument formation	Argumentation	Critical thinking

Questions were encouraged during presentation sessions	Questioning	Dialogue	Engagement / critical thinking
Pottery painting, illumination and miniature were used as projects	Learning through making	Experiential practice	Experiential learning
Historian, architect and artist contributed distinct expertise	Multiple disciplinary perspectives	Interdisciplinary integration	Interdisciplinary learning
Buildings were read through planning, decoration and context	Form-context interpretation	Architectural analysis	Architectural interpretation
Students felt overwhelmed by the number of tasks	Workload pressure	Implementation constraint	Difficulties / limitations
Students requested more site visits	Need for direct experience	Contextual learning constraint	Difficulties / limitations

Table 2. Illustrative coding pathway from documentary evidence to themes (AI generated table)

4.4 Scope of study

This research employed source triangulation at the course-document level: pedagogical intentions were compared with documented teaching activities, student-feedback summaries and reflections of instructors. The analysis also deliberately contain contradictory evidence, especially where the same innovation created a benefit and a burden. For example, the multidisciplinary model expanded disciplinary perspectives but also generated a documented need for greater coordination of history and architecture. The active workload generated opportunities for inquiry but also left students feeling overwhelmed by the amount of tasks. These tensions were treated as findings rather than as errors to be removed from the narrative.

The study is limited by the archival nature of the corpus. It does not contain a contemporary experimental baseline, systematic observation recordings or a complete re-analysis of individual student artefacts. The paper therefore makes claims about pedagogical processes and documented experiences, not measured changes in achievement. This distinction is essential to the interpretation of the findings.

5. The ARC 371 Pedagogical Case

5.1 Course Design and Pedagogical Intent

The course of ARC371 was designed with the intent to augment the students' cognitive as well as affective development through sequenced teaching methodologies with the aim to develop a fairly comprehensive understanding about Philosophy and Techniques employed in Islamic Architecture and Art amongst the cohort. To enhance the students' analytical abilities they students were introduced to the concepts of linkages between cultures, religions, political landscapes and their collective manifestation in Arts and Architecture. The content aimed to enable students to understand Islamic architecture through overlapping and non-linear timelines rather than through isolated periods alone.

The course aimed to familiarize students with political events, dynastic timelines and major rulers in relation to the built environment, while making connections among politics, religion, arts and architectural practices. Major Islamic monuments were studied in depth, and buildings were read through architectural planning, decorative idioms and historical context.

The breadth of the intended content is visible in the final-report topics documented in the course record. Students worked on mosque traditions, mosque constituents, the hypostyle hall, the dome, minaret and mihrab, funerary architecture, gardens, carpets, tiles, geometry, surface decoration, the meaning of decoration, muqarnas, dynastic histories, geographical locations, Islam and science, and the relationship between Islamic culture and arts. This breadth is pedagogically significant because it shows that the course was already moving beyond a narrow monument survey towards thematic questions, even though the course review later recommended a more deliberate thematic organisation.

5.2 The Multidisciplinary Teaching Team

The defining feature of the course was its combination of a historian, an architect and an artist. The historian addressed the major dynasties; the architect addressed architectural design, decorative techniques and urban issues related to Islamic cities; and the artist introduced arts of the book, miniature and illumination techniques. The arrangement created disciplinary differentiation without abandoning the shared course focus on Islamic art and architecture. This team became very effective when the interpretation stage reached. The students had multifarious perspectives on the themes being tackled in the class. Moreover, all three disciplines had their peculiar methodologies of teaching, enabling the students to experience a range of teaching strategies including didactic to experiential. It is important to recognize that interdisciplinarity is not simply the presence of several disciplines; it requires curricular coordination and a shared conceptual structure.

5.3 Pedagogical Activities

Pedagogical element	Documented implementation	Learning orientation
Historical lectures	Political events, dynasties, monuments, planning, decoration and context	Knowledge foundation

	supported by images and graphics.	
Independent research	Students were encouraged to locate information and analyse it themselves; three presentations and three reports were documented.	Learner autonomy
Presentations	Students communicated research verbally and were questioned by peers/teachers.	Dialogue and synthesis
Debate	Second sessional assessment used debate and required students to compare and argue both sides of topics.	Critical argument
Pottery painting	Introduced as an arts-oriented alternative to a conventional paper.	Making and engagement
Illumination	Offered as an extension of the art project.	Experiential learning
Miniature exercise	A small miniature was made compulsory for the final project, with specialist guidance.	Embodied and material learning
Final report/project	Written report and practical project were combined and intended for compilation/exhibition.	Synthesis and interpretation

Table 3. Pedagogical components documented in ARC 371(AI generated Table)

6. Findings

The thematic analysis produced seven interconnected themes. The first six describe forms of learning that the course design made possible or sought to encourage; the seventh captures the constraints that shaped implementation.

6.1 Engagement through Active Participation

Student engagement was the main concern around which the whole course content and methodology was geared. The sequence of activities was designed with the explicit aim of engaging the learner. Importantly, the course content was designed to make the exercises follow the knowledge acquisition till interpretation cycle. The class rapidly progressed from lecture based to inquiry based pedagogy and then shifted to a studio like environment where

the learners were the makers of the arts of the book. Additionally the students were engaged through a structured debate to consolidate their learning and to internalize the knowledge gained thus far. Finally they submitted a reflective report on the artefact they created to close the loop of learning.

Engagement emerged most clearly when students were moved from receiving information to contributing publicly to the construction of classroom discussion. The students were encouraged to research information independently, present it to the class and ask questions during presentation sessions. Students 'did enjoy and learned more from presentation sessions than they otherwise would have'(student feedback). The debate activity intensified this participatory structure. Students were required to occupy argumentative positions rather than simply reproduce information, and the teaching team described their participation as energetic. The art activities generated another form of engagement: the miniature and illumination work generated sufficient interest for some students to consider pursuing further training. Taken together, the engagement was associated with the degree to which the activity required students to do something with historical knowledge—present it, question it, argue with it or make something through it.

This is consistent with literature arguing that engagement in history education depends on the forms of participation made possible by pedagogy. Perrotta and Bohan (2013) distinguish among active-learning strategies rather than assuming that all activity is inherently engaging, while Phillipson (2020) locates engagement within dialogue, listening, questioning and shared enquiry. In architectural education, Young (2018) similarly sought to create in history courses some of the active synthesis associated with studio learning.

6.2 Movement towards Independent Inquiry

Independent inquiry was a stated intention of the course rather than an accidental by-product. The teaching team deliberately shifted from didactic teaching towards learner-oriented methods and required students to undertake reports and presentations. The stated learning outcomes included developing a lifelong habit of inquiry, research competence and analytical ability, and the final reflection hoped that students would learn 'how to research and not just search'.

The distinction between researching and searching is pedagogically important. Searching refers to locating information; research requires selection, evaluation, synthesis and interpretation. The course attempted to move students along that continuum through topic-based assignments and oral communication. Pohaničová et al. (2021) report similar goals in architecture-history education, where research projects, archival work, field research, presentations and models were used to develop searching, systematising, comparison, synthesis and interpretation. Dave et al. (2018) also propose self-study, reports and presentations as ways to encourage active participation and questioning.

The pedagogical design created opportunities for independent inquiry and began to reposition students as researchers, but research competence itself required further scaffolding.

6.3 Critical Thinking through Argument and Comparison (debate)

Critical thinking was most explicitly enacted through the debate. A debate competition was arranged on different topics for the second sessional exam. Students participated with alacrity and this was particularly satisfying for the teaching team because the aim to bring them to a level where they could compare and argue both sides of the topic was quite successfully achieved. This shifted historical knowledge from an object to be recalled towards evidence to be used in making and defending a position.

The significance of the debate lies in the cognitive operation it required. Students had to identify relevant information, distinguish positions, decide what counted as persuasive evidence and respond to an alternative view. These are closer to historical reasoning and architectural interpretation than simple chronological recall. Another important aspect that the debates achieved was that the students learnt to work in teams. Every team member was assigned a role and the atmosphere of “Us” against “the Rest” created a competitive energy in the class.

Critical Learning Outcome	Desired attributes for learners	Relationship to the Course
Critically interpret historical evidence	Examine architectural monuments, historical accounts and visual evidence rather than treating historical knowledge as fixed information.	Moves from KNOW → INVESTIGATE.
Construct evidence-based arguments	Formulate a defensible position on an architectural-historical proposition and support it with relevant historical and architectural evidence.	Transforms knowledge into ARGUMENT.
Evaluate alternative interpretations	Recognize that Islamic architectural history may be understood through multiple historical, cultural, religious and architectural interpretations.	Challenges a purely single-narrative/chronological understanding of history.
Engage in critical dialogue and rebuttal	Question opposing interpretations, respond to challenges and formulate reasoned counter-arguments.	Develops dialogic and critical inquiry.
Integrate visual and architectural evidence	Use photographs, plans, sketches and other architectural representations as evidence in constructing historical interpretations.	Connects architectural analysis with historical inquiry.
Develop collaborative interpretive understanding	Work collectively to research, organize and communicate an interpretation of Islamic architecture while negotiating differing viewpoints within the team.	Links INVESTIGATE → ARGUE → INTERPRET.

Table 4: Pedagogical Design for the Debate activity

The course's tentative use of Bloom's taxonomy reinforced this direction. Assignments were described as beginning with reproduction of knowledge, moving through comparison and culminating in synthesis through a creative endeavour. Although the course did not formally

assess these levels using a validated instrument, the sequence suggests an intentional attempt to increase cognitive complexity.

This aligns with dialogue-focused research in history education. Chang et al. (2023) show how dialogue can support historical reasoning when knowledge is opened to questioning and interpretation, while the broader architectural pedagogy literature emphasises critical inquiry as a component of meaningful learning (Salama & Holgate, 2025). The ARC 371 case suggests that debate can function as a bridge between historical knowledge and architectural thinking when students are asked to justify interpretations rather than simply report facts.

6.4 Interdisciplinary Learning

Interdisciplinarity was not an abstract aspiration in ARC 371; it was embodied in the composition of the teaching team. History, architecture and artistic practice were deliberately combined. This combination expanded the object of study: Islamic architecture could be understood as historical development, architectural organization, visual language, surface decoration and artistic practice.

The pedagogical potential of this arrangement becomes clearer when considered alongside the range of student topics. The documented final reports included dynasties as well as geometry, decoration, mosque elements, gardens, funerary architecture, carpets, tiles and the relationship between Islam, science and the arts. Such diversity created opportunities to move between political history, spatial analysis, material culture and visual practice.



Figure 2. A reinterpretation of Islamic art of the miniature Painting.

At the same time, the case provides a valuable counterpoint to celebratory accounts of interdisciplinarity. The review explicitly acknowledges disconnect between the history and architecture components and calls for a coherent narrative. Stewart and Wilson (2008) identified a similar problem across architecture schools: history and studio can occupy separate institutional cultures even when educators agree that history has value. The lesson from ARC 371 is therefore that interdisciplinarity requires coordination around shared questions, sequencing and learning outcomes; simply placing different specialists into the same course does not guarantee integration.

Through this multidisciplinary engagement, students are better equipped to analyze, respect, and creatively reinterpret Islamic architectural principles with a well-rounded, culturally sensitive foundation.

6.5 Experiential Learning through Making

The practical art activities represented a deliberate attempt to give historical learning a material dimension. The sequence moved from pottery painting to illumination and a compulsory miniature exercise, with specialist guidance from the artist. The rationale recorded in the report was that an arts-oriented project could enhance understanding more effectively than another conventional paper.

Making changed the student's relationship to the subject in at least three ways. First, it required sustained attention to material and technique. Second, it created a bodily and visual encounter with processes associated with historical artistic production. Third, it introduced an iterative dimension: the student had to make, observe, adjust and complete a physical artefact rather than merely describe one.



Cobalt Iznik Pottery



Hand-Painted Moroccan
Mandala Plate



Ornate Ottoman-Style
Calligraphy Plate



Hand-Painted Blue and
Teal Floral Plate

Figure 3. A glimpse of students' Pottery Painting outcome.

This is consistent with architectural-history pedagogy that uses models and field research to connect knowledge with investigation. Pohaničová et al. (2021) describe physical and digital modelling as a way of combining research, interpretation and creative development, while Abouelmagd and Ahmed (2021) similarly seek to connect history education with practical design work. Salama and Holgate (2025) extend this argument by positioning empirical making as a core component of process-oriented architectural pedagogy.

By engaging with traditional Islamic arts such as geometric pattern-making, calligraphy, tilework, and ornamentation, students gain hands-on experience with the principles of symmetry, proportion, and spatial organization integral to Islamic design. Craft-making activities, such as constructing miniature models of historical Islamic structures or creating decorative tiles using traditional techniques, deepen students' appreciation of the material, cultural, and spiritual values embedded in Islamic architecture. This approach fosters a nuanced understanding of the aesthetic, functional, and symbolic aspects of Islamic architecture, moving beyond theoretical study to a more experiential and culturally contextualized learning process.

Nevertheless, the course evidence does not permit a claim that making produced higher achievement than conventional written work. Craft making expanded the modes through which students could encounter and express historical knowledge and created a different form of engagement that the teaching team documented as particularly productive.

6.6 From Historical Description to Architectural Interpretation

This theme provides the strongest link between history education and architectural education. The course did not limit its subject matter to dates and monuments. Buildings were explicitly read through planning, decorative idioms and historical context, while the final-report topics included geometry, decoration, mosque elements, gardens and funerary architecture. In the mid of the semester when students had grasped the geographic as well as chronological depth of the Islamic world in relation to arts and architecture, they were introduced to the idea that the knowledge could now be studied in thematic breadth. Instead of quizzing them on dynasties, themes like Decoration as a veil in Islamic Architecture, Funerary Architecture: a representation of power, Islamic landscape: a microcosm of afterlife, orientalism and the Islamic world, were introduced into the class. These themes enabled students to synthesize their learning and develop their worldviews as designers.

This shift from description to interpretation can be expressed through three increasingly complex questions: What is present? How is it organised and produced? What does it mean in relation to context? A student who only identifies a dome, minaret or mihrab is demonstrating recognition; a student who examines spatial role, formal relationship, material expression and cultural context is beginning to interpret architecture.

This interpretation is important because history becomes relevant to the architect when it informs ways of seeing. Hein and van Dooren (2020) found that students viewed history as a relevant foundation for design, even when they could not always articulate that relevance precisely. Young (2018) argues that deeper historical understanding requires connections among buildings, movements, technological change and social context, while Stewart and Wilson (2008) call attention to the unrealised learning that can result when history is separated from design cultures.

In ARC 371, the combination of independent research, debate, architectural reading and making created multiple routes towards interpretation. The case therefore supports a view of architectural history as a mode of architectural thinking rather than merely a body of historical content.

6.7 Pedagogical Tensions and Implementation Constraints

The most credible feature of the case is that the review does not conceal its weaknesses. Several limitations were explicitly documented. Historical coverage was uneven, with some dynasties receiving greater attention and later material being rushed. The report identified a disconnect between the history and architecture teaching, described the history component as overly verbose and the architectural component as excessively graphic, and called for teachers to learn from each other. Students were also reported to feel overwhelmed by the amount of work.

Site-based learning was another constraint. Students requested more site visits, but only two external visits—to the Pakistan National Council of the Arts for a lecture on Islamic decoration and a detailed visit to the historic monuments of Mughals in Lahore—was completed because of timetable pressure. This finding is important because physical engagement with buildings is

identified in the wider literature as a significant source of historical and design learning (Hein & van Dooren, 2020), and field and archival research are central to some innovative architecture-history models (Pohaničová et al., 2021).

Research writing was another weak point. The course review identified problems with report writing, plagiarism checking and the still-developing capacity for independent learning. These difficulties demonstrate that learner-centred pedagogy cannot simply transfer responsibility from teacher to student; students also need explicit research, writing and source-evaluation scaffolding. Finally, time was a structural constraint. The course attempted to accommodate historical teaching, architectural analysis, research reports, presentations, debate, practical art activities and final project work within one semester. The resulting workload demonstrates a central design problem: active pedagogy can become counterproductive when activity is added without removing or restructuring content.

7. Cross-Theme Synthesis: The KNOWLEDGE–INTERPRETATION Model

The seven themes can be read as parts of one pedagogical trajectory. Engagement is the entry condition; independent inquiry shifts responsibility towards the learner; argumentation creates critical distance from received knowledge; making provides experiential and material encounter; interdisciplinarity connects multiple perspectives across these stages; and architectural interpretation brings the learning back into the discipline of architecture. Limitations operate across the sequence and determine whether the model remains coherent or becomes an overload of tasks.

Stage	Primary student position	Typical course activity	Primary pedagogical process	Architectural question
KNOW	Learner	Historical framing and lectures	Build a contextual knowledge base	What happened, where and when?
INVESTIGATE	Researcher	Reports and topic research	Search, select, compare and synthesise	What can I discover and how reliable is it?
ARGUE	Critical thinker	Presentation and debate	Question, justify and challenge	How can I interpret and defend this reading?
MAKE	Practitioner	Pottery, illumination, miniature	Experience material and visual processes	What can making reveal that description cannot?
INTERPRET	Architect	Building and thematic analysis	Connect form, context, meaning and practice	What does this mean architecturally?

Table 5. The KNOWLEDGE–INTERPRETATION pedagogical model derived from the case

The model is deliberately modest. It is not a validated learning theory, and the case does not establish that every student moved through every stage. Instead, it offers a curricular design principle: history courses can be structured so that historical knowledge is repeatedly converted into inquiry, argument, making and interpretation. The model also suggests how the

shortcomings identified in ARC 371 can be addressed. Content overload can be reduced through thematic organization; multidisciplinary fragmentation can be addressed through shared teaching sequences and joint planning; research weaknesses can be supported through staged research-writing exercises; site visits can be embedded as evidence-gathering rather than treated as optional enrichment; and practical work can be connected explicitly to architectural questions so that it does not become an additional task with weak curricular relevance.

8. Discussion

8.1 Reframing History as a Mode of Inquiry

The central implication of the case is that the pedagogical value of architectural history lies not only in the quantity of historical knowledge transmitted but in the intellectual operations students are asked to perform with that knowledge. ARC 371's most significant departure from conventional teaching was therefore not any single activity. It was the cumulative shift from receiving information towards researching, presenting, debating, making and interpreting.

Hasnan et al. (2020) argue that Islamic architecture teaching requires attention to multiple narratives and contemporary relevance; Chang et al. (2023) show that dialogue can transform historical knowledge into a resource for reasoning; and Salama and Holgate (2025) argue for process-oriented, inquiry-driven architectural education. The present case contributes an experimental sequence showing how these principles can be combined within a history-oriented course.

8.2 Making History Relevant Without Reducing It to Design Imitation

A common danger in integrating history and design is to reduce precedent to a catalogue of forms to be copied. The ARC 371 experience chartered a different path. Students learnt historical architecture through political and religious context, planning, ornament, geometry, artistic technique and debate. The intention was not simply to take out merely a style from Islamic architecture for contemporary use but to build a more interpretive relationship with the available historical material.

This approach resonates with Hein and van Dooren's (2020) argument that designers 'practice history' by incorporating the past in their present work. It also addresses the concern in Blessing (2020) that Islamic architecture should be taught through the tools required to conduct further research rather than through a unidirectional survey of established monuments.

8.3 Multidisciplinary Requires Integration, Not Addition

The multidisciplinary structure of ARC 371 was a major strength because it allowed students to encounter history, architecture and art through different disciplinary lenses. However, the course review reveals an important qualification that separate disciplinary contributions can create fragmentation and overload the learner. This is consistent with the Scottish evidence reported by Stewart and Wilson (2008), where organizational boundaries influenced how history and design were understood.

A well planned and designed interdisciplinary model therefore requires common questions and planned transitions between disciplinary perspectives. Such inputs require carefully planned activities involving all disciplines from the beginning. This sequencing converts parallel disciplinary inputs into interdisciplinary learning.

8.4 Experiential Learning Should Replace, Not Simply Add to, Redundant Tasks

The workload problem documented in ARC 371 is a significant design lesson. Adding presentations, debates and practical projects on top of a content-heavy survey can overwhelm students. Experiential pedagogy is most defensible when it replaces less effective work or consolidates several outcomes simultaneously. This principle is compatible with Young's (2018) effort to restructure class time rather than merely adding activities and with Pohaníčová et al.'s (2021) use of integrated research, fieldwork and modelling.

8.5 Implications for Islamic Architecture Education

The case supports a shift from a predominantly dynastic survey towards a more thematic and inquiry-oriented structure without rejecting chronological order of conventional teaching altogether. Chronology is recognized as essential for historical orientation, but thematic interpretation can provide deeper learning focus. Possible themes emerging directly from the ARC 371 experience include sacred space, mosque typology, geometry and proportion, ornament and meaning, landscape and paradise, funerary architecture, infrastructure and city-making, craft and materiality, and the relationship between politics, religion and architectural expression.

Such a structure also responds to the problem identified by the course review that early dynasties received excessive emphasis while later developments and broader themes were rushed. It allows the instructor to use chronology as a scaffold and themes as the principal sites of investigation.

9. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Challenge identified in ARC 371	Pedagogical response	Expected role of the instructor	Expected role of the student
Content overload and rushed periods	Use chronology as scaffold; organise detailed study around themes.	Curate and prioritise.	Connect cases across themes.
History, architecture and art taught in parts	Joint planning around shared questions and transitions.	Act as disciplinary bridge.	Integrate evidence from multiple domains.
Students overwhelmed by tasks	Replace redundant assignments with integrated projects.	Sequence and consolidate tasks.	Produce fewer, deeper outputs.
Weak research/report-writing skills	Introduce staged research questions, source evaluation and writing milestones.	Teach research explicitly.	Document evidence and revise.

Limited site visits	Use local built heritage and digital/virtual site evidence as part of assignments.	Frame visits as evidence gathering.	Observe, record and interpret.
Passive historical knowledge	Use presentation, dialogue and debate.	Facilitate questioning.	Compare and defend interpretations.
Practical activities disconnected from history	Attach making to explicit historical and architectural questions.	Explain conceptual links.	Reflect on what making reveals.

Table 6. Recommendations derived from the case and literature

10. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it is a single-course case and therefore cannot support statistical generalization. Second, it is retrospective and relies on course documentation rather than contemporaneous, independently collected qualitative interviews or observation recordings. Third, the source record is stronger in documenting teaching activities and instructor reflections than in preserving the complete range of student voices. Future studies should investigate the proposed Knowledge-Interpretation sequence using direct student interviews, observation, longitudinal portfolios or comparative multi-course case studies.

11. Conclusion

This study examined ARC 371, History of Philosophy of Arts and Architecture, as a qualitative case of multidisciplinary and experiential pedagogy in the teaching of Islamic architecture. The documented course combined history teaching with independent research, student presentation, debate and craft-making. Thematic analysis identified seven interconnected patterns: active engagement, independent inquiry, critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, experiential learning, architectural interpretation, and implementation constraints.

This case study does not signify that one teaching method is universally better than another. Rather, it lies in show casing how the relationship among activities can change the educational role of history. When students are asked first to know, then to investigate, argue, make and interpret, historical knowledge can become a resource for architectural thinking rather than an end in itself.

For Islamic architecture in particular, this approach is valuable because the subject is historically, geographically and culturally diverse. A pedagogy that links contextual knowledge, dialogue, research, material engagement and interpretation can assist students to approach Islamic architecture as a dynamic domain of ideas and practices rather than as a catalogue of monuments

References

- Abouelmagd, D., & Ahmed, H. M. A. (2021). An experimental educational approach through teaching the history of architecture and heritage for a better practice in architectural design. *Journal of Architecture, Arts and Humanities*, 6(30), 91–109.
<https://doi.org/10.21608/mjaf.2021.52865.2109>

-
- Blessing, P. (2020). Teaching Islamic architecture. *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, 2(3–4), 124–133. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jmw.2020.2.3-4.124>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chang, C.-C., Wegerif, R., & Hennessy, S. (2023). Exploring dialogic education used to teach historical thinking within the cultural context of East Asia: A multiple-case study in Taiwanese classrooms. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 41, Article 100729. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2023.100729>
- Dave, D., Parikh, S., & Baghel, A. (2018). *Searching new pedagogy: Teaching history of architecture in architecture institutes*. SCOPE-2018, School of Planning and Architecture, Vijayawada.
- Elgawad, I. O. A. (2014). Setting a path for creativity in teaching history of architecture classes: A strategic view of sparking students' interaction. In *Proceedings of the Conference on Teaching Arts and Architecture Between Academic Rules and Liberty of Creativity* (pp. 1–11). Helwan University.
- Hasnan, L., Utaberta, N., & Ismail, S. (2020). Pedagogical strategies of Islamic architecture within higher education: Paper review. *Journal of Architecture, Planning and Construction Management*, 10(2), 55–65. <https://doi.org/10.31436/japcm.v10i2.442>
- Hasnan, L., Abidin, N. Z., Hassan, L. S., & Lim, N. H. H. (2024). Islamic architecture framework towards critical learning. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education*, 39(2), 117–135. <https://doi.org/10.21315/apjee2024.39.2.7>
- Hein, C., & van Dooren, E. (2019). Teaching history for design at TU Delft: Exploring types of student learning and perceived relevance of history for the architecture profession. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 30(5), 849–865. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10798-019-09533-5>
- Perrotta, K. A., & Bohan, C. H. (2013). “I hate history”: A study of student engagement in community college undergraduate history courses. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 24(4), 49–75.
- Phillipson, N. (2020). *A teacher's guide to dialogic pedagogy*. 21st Century Learners.
- Pohaničová, J., Vaňová, V., & Baxa, P. (2021). An innovative model of education in architectural history. *Global Journal of Engineering Education*, 23(1), 31–36.
- Salama, A. M., & Holgate, P. (2025). Where critical inquiry, empirical making, and experiential learning shape architectural pedagogy. *Encyclopedia*, 5(3), Article 129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia5030129>
-

-
- Stewart, M. (2008). The relationship between architectural history and the studio: A survey of staff opinion in the six Scottish schools of architecture. *Architectural Heritage*, 17, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1350752408000058>
- Xiong, X., Yang, H., & Zhang, Y. (2017). Innovative thinking on the education of contemporary Chinese architectural history. In *Proceedings of the 2017 2nd International Seminar on Education Innovation and Economic Management* (Vol. 156, pp. 1–4). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/seiem-17.2018.47>
- Young, S. M. (2018). Flipping time and space: Three methods of contextualizing architecture history in the classroom. *National Conference on the Beginning Design Student*, 34(1).