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*Submissions will be accepted all semester long and will be published within a week of being received, edited, and revised. At the end of the semester, all issues will be compiled into a single volume.*

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**XS**  
*quick notes on a changing architecture*  
xs@mit.edu

# XS

*What's the  
Point?*

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Points



# What's the Point?

Emily Williamson

*This essay was originally submitted as a response to a presentation by Edward Eigen, as part of the Fall 2012 SMArchS Colloquium. This lecture is available on MIT's website at <http://video.mit.edu/watch/edward-eigen-12901/>*

On October 12, 2012, as part of the SMArchS Colloquium, Edward Eigen shared an elegantly crafted narrative about the inventor Louis Braille.<sup>1</sup> Although this poignant account began with a letter written by hand to Braille's mother and concluded with an inscription on Braille's grave that reads, "in this urn, the hands of the utter genial inventor," the content between these two bookends constructed a rich network of interrelated texts, histories, myths, and scientific facts. To summarize the essay using Eigen's own words, "This essay is about the interpretation of signs in the sense of touch and the appearance of blood and the wasting of the flesh, of tokens of thanksgiving and grace, of contact between the hand and mouth, of coughing and contagion, of fear that is a parent to cruelty, and finally the necessary pointedness of writing and with it, the fatal desire to read."

Instead of developing a single argument in which one example builds upon another in a linear trajectory towards a single conclusion or all encompassing vision, Eigen uses unusual, even jarring juxtapositions of terms to encourage the

listener to form a new set of relationships among objects, ideas, people, and the senses, both real and imagined, that transgress traditional geographic and chronological boundaries.<sup>2</sup> For example, though early on in his talk he speaks about Braille as a tangible series of raised points on a surface, his use of the term *point* acquires numerous attributes and 'substance' as the narrative continues. At times, the *point* may manifest as an object—such as a stylus, pruning knife, punctiform worm, thorn, or red dots on a piece of polenta—while at others it might become an action—such as reading with the finger, impressing upon a surface, puncturing the skin, piercing a host, or even spraying points of spit. Just as the point and its differentiated meanings continue to punctuate and thicken the sub-narratives throughout, the larger narrative of Louis Braille mutates from the clearly articulated, sharp point of his childhood to the thick, gelatinous residue of tuberculosis that ends up taking his life.

Ironically though, one might ask, "What is the point?" While many scholars might reject such a method, in pairing the histories of the peculiar, unappetizing, and obscure, with that of scientific and religious fact, Eigen calls into question why and how we choose one construction of knowledge over another. His tactics enable us to imagine a substantive reality that contains multiple meanings and trajectories; to negotiate across conflicting interpretations, and to invite contingency into the formation of our knowledge. This being said, what is the purpose of modernity's oppositional and binary categorizations of the world and how does our longing for objectivity over subjectivity get us any closer to the truth? Might there be room for an inter-subjective narrative process in architecture? Eigen's uncanny ability to uncover, fabricate, and imagine relationships among otherwise disparate phenomena, suggests new, inventive, and open modes

of design-thinking that could deepen and expand the discipline of architecture by inventing new ways of "reading" the world.

We can look at the notion of excess or waste as a particular example. Though he implies this term throughout the narrative in his references to decay, burial, and residue, it is in the beginning of his presentation where he addresses waste explicitly. He provides us with the French expression, "En bon point", which translates to "heavier set", or in bleaker terms, "the point from which one wastes away". Despite this very literal transcription of waste, one could imagine waste to be all that is not "the point"; that is, waste becomes the excess information, ideas that have been tossed aside, and anything else that does not contain perceived direct relevance to the conclusion being made. What is the substance of a single, discrete conclusion built up by chronological elements? Might we be able to use this residue to structure a new, thickened knowledge base that gives priority to openness and interrelatedness over a single string of thoughts? How could the application of a narrative technique inform not only the processes of architectural pedagogy but also how we communicate to one another that encourages a shared divergence without a point? To end, let's revisit Eigen's words, "This is the point I want to begin with, which is just that, the gesture of pointing, something we have to do in our writing, and something I am wedded of not doing, which is making a point."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A link to Eigen's lecture, *Anaglyptography and the Phthisiophobic Imagination; or, The Passion of Louis Braille: An Historico-Religio-Numismatic Essay* can be found here - <http://video.mit.edu/watch/edward-eigen-12901/>

*The SMArchS (Master of Science in Architectural Studies) Colloquium convenes every Fall to bring into conversation the six streams of the post-professional program. The theme of the Fall 2012 Colloquium was Waste/Failure. The blog maintained during the*

*Fall hosts a list of speakers and student responses to each of the talks. (<http://4.221.scripts.mit.edu/fal12/>)*

<sup>2</sup> *Edward Eigen is an architectural historian and scholar whose work focuses on intersections of the human and natural sciences with architecture in the 19th century. He is currently Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and is preparing to publish the book *An Anomalous Plan* which discusses a system of novel sites, instruments, and institutions for researching the natural environment. His recent publications include: "Instruire/DŽtruire: Mary Stuart, Catholic Modernism, and the Breton Cult of Monuments," *Perspecta* 43 (2010); "On the Perils of Historical Geography: On a Pretended Lost Map to a Legendary Sunken Forest," *AD* (2010); "On the Plagiarism of the Heathers Detected: John Wood on the Translation of Architecture and Empire" *Journal of the History of Ideas* (2009); "Rain and Rainfall—Great Britain—Periodicity—Periodicals," *Cabinet* 32 (Spring 2009); "The Disappearance of Charles Perrault: A Cautionary Tale," *Perspecta* 40 (Fall 2008); and "On the Record: J.M.W. Turner's Studies for the Burning of the Houses of Parliament and Other Uncertain Requests to History," *Grey Room* 31 (Spring 2008). He was named an Old Dominion Faculty Fellow at Princeton University, 2003–2005, and was awarded the 2005 Graduate Mentoring Award by the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning and the Graduate School of Princeton University. This annual award honors Princeton faculty members who are exemplary in supporting the development of their graduate students as teachers, scholars, and professionals. He was also named to the Executive Committee for the Program in Architecture and Engineering, 2006–2010.*

<sup>3</sup> *Edward Eigen, "Anaglyptography and the Phthisiophobic Imagination," Lecture, MIT, October 12, 2012.*

*Emily Williamson is a student in the SMArchS Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT.*