

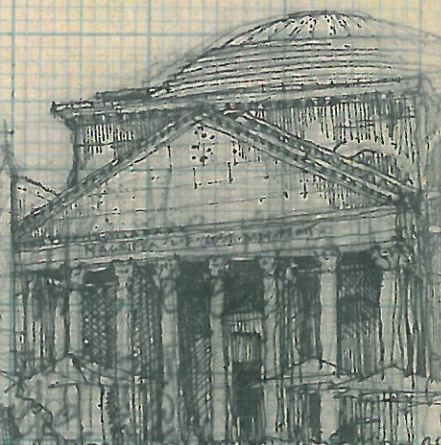
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HOW ARCHITECTS WRITE

Tom Spector

and

Rebecca Damron

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CONTENTS

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Acknowledgments

1	How (and Why) Architects Write	1
2	Design Journals	15
3	History Term Papers	31
4	Project Descriptions	61
5	Research Reports and Analyses	87
6	Business Documents	107
7	Statements of Design Philosophy and Manifestos	137
8	Theses	169
	<i>Notes</i>	189
	<i>Index</i>	193

HOW (AND WHY) ARCHITECTS WRITE

Now if it were asked: "Do you have the thought before finding the expression?" what would one have to reply? And what, to the question: "What did the thought consist in, as it existed before its expression?"

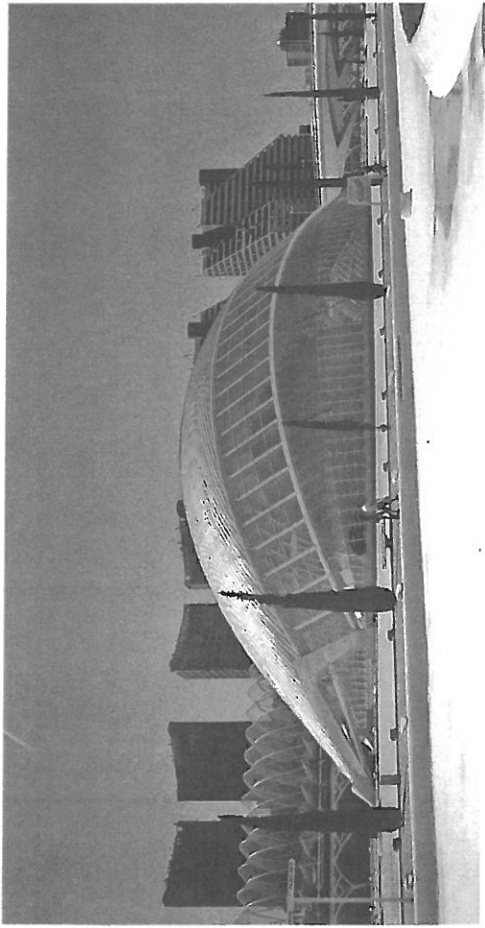
(Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosopher)¹

Architects often finish their sentences with a sketch.

(Peter Medway, applied linguist)²

THE NEED FOR CLEAR WRITING

Clarity. If the objectives of this handbook could be boiled down to a single watchword, this would be it. The objective of writing clearly has so many dimensions—clarity of intent, clarity of expression, clarity of audience—it can seem an overwhelming task at first. Fortunately, the task becomes less formidable when broken down into its four constituent parts (Figure 1.1). Good writers have sufficient command of their *subject matter* to convey confidence that they know what they are talking about. Their use of language is both clear and appropriate—they understand the *rhetorical standards* expected of them. They have a firm grasp on their *writing process*—



Subject Matter Knowledge

Building: Hemispheric
Location: City of Arts and Sciences,
Valencia, Spain
Architect: Santiago Calatrava
Date: 1998

Rhetorical Knowledge

Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin seeks to convey emotions of horror and moral outrage to the Holocaust in a museum experience. . . .

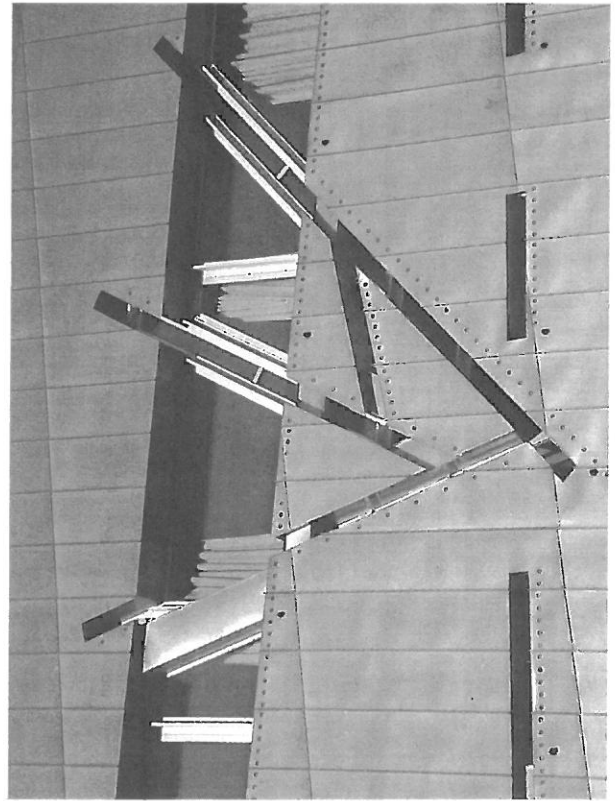
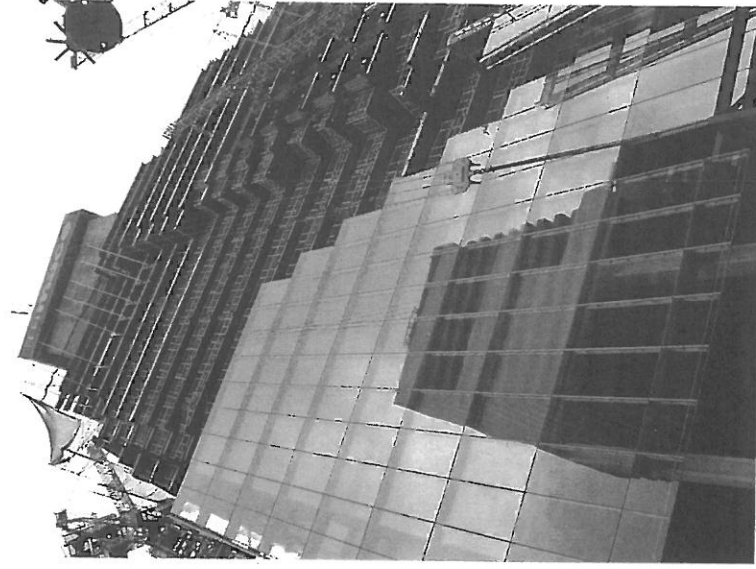


FIGURE 1.1 Writing's four knowledge types

2.



Writing Process Knowledge

Field notes, Feb. 22:

Steel erected to 45th floor
Electrical service entry discussed
Membrane roof installed on building 1
Curtainwall mock-up panel reviewed
Retaining wall stabilized
Elevator shaft wall #2 corrected
Prefabricated steel stairs ordered

Genre Knowledge

Evolution of High-Tech:

1. Early Milestones
 - a. Pompidou Center
 - b. James Stirling's buildings in the UK
2. High-Tech goes mainstream
 - a. Norman Foster



3.

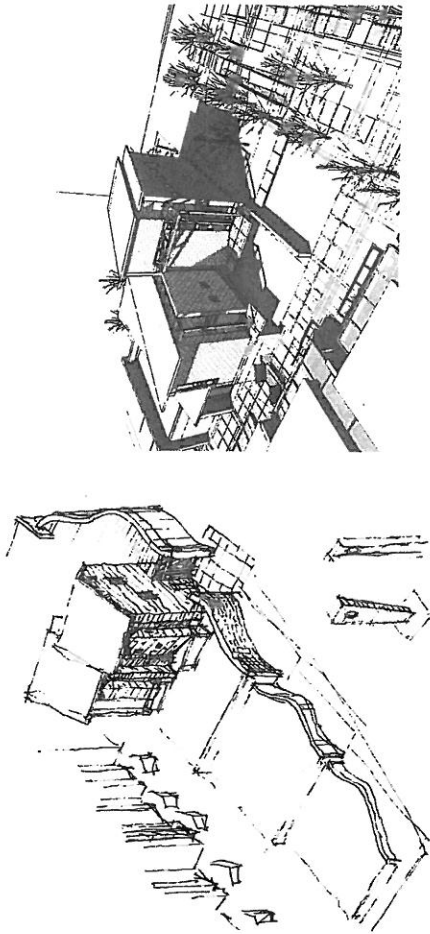
not only mastery of the mechanics, grammar, and self-editing emphasized in freshman composition, but also of the steps required to, for example, organize their observations into reports. And they have clarified the expectations of their audience; that is to say, they understand the demands of the *genre* in which they are writing.

By mastering the elements of clear architectural writing—gaining command over the subject matter, employing appropriate rhetorical standards, establishing efficient processes, and understanding the demands of the different writing genres—students and practitioners will not only become better writers but will also make themselves better architects.

When the role of writing in architectural production was used primarily to explain a design that was already conceived visually, then the written word could be relegated to an ornamental role at the tail end of a linear process (Figure 1.2). Writing happened after all the really interesting work was done. But this conception is long out of date.

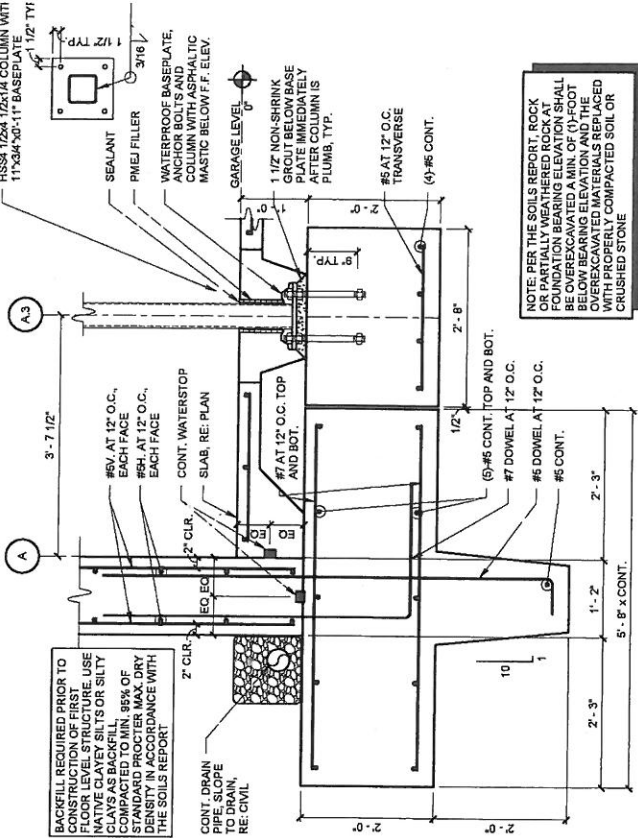
Writing doesn't just record what has already been done; it is part of the doing. What linguist Peter Medway discovered by observing both architectural practitioners and students was the *fluidity* with which architects must move between the graphic, oral, and written modes when developing and communicating design intent. This is the observation his quote at the beginning of the chapter is meant to convey. After observing architects at work in a number of different situations, he offers, "We are surprised and impressed by the *linguistic* virtuosity called for in the job."³ Yes, sentences do end in sketches, but by the same token, sketches are illuminated by sentences. The design moves forward, not linearly, but iteratively as the designer gropes toward a desired future state of affairs. It gains authority as the mind incorporates information from a variety of sources. If design is allowed to be about more than the creation of geometric form, then a fluid conception which places design at the center of an activity informed by graphic, oral, and written modes is a more adequate representation.

If the linear conception of writing's role in architecture was ever adequate, it certainly is not now. Both the increasingly collaborative environment of the construction economy and the



a)

5 EXTERIOR WALL SECTION
3/4" = 1'-0"



b)

1 EXTERIOR WALL SECTION
3/4" = 1'-0"

FIGURE 1.2 Writing's role in the linear view: (a) a design is conceived in models, drawings, and sketches; (b) it is presented with advanced graphics and oral explanation; (c) instructions are communicated via 2-D graphics and writing

technological advances in the design process have placed a premium on architects' ability to write to be effective on the job. Whereas at one time architects might have conceived of themselves as visual artists handing-off their designs for others to figure out how to build, today they are more likely to be at the center of an integrated team needing someone to organize its intense communication needs. These days, the value of one's investments may fade, but emails are forever. Litigation—and preventing it—is heavily dependent on crisp, clear writing. Nor is effective writing only business-oriented. No one achieves stature in the profession without at least one monograph explaining the firm's design thinking. Press and criticism are as important as ever for building a critical reputation. Meanwhile, the explosion of information that can now be brought to bear on a building design means that someone must be able to manage and organize it, and the logical center of the design process resides with the persons charged with bringing the diverse sources of information together. To exploit the opportunities the information age presents, architects must be able to write well, edit, and integrate the information generated by others into a coherent whole. The erosion of the concept of the architect as Master Builder is disappearing into that of the architect as Master of Information. This new role is not a demotion but it does signify a shift in how the world is pressing architects to think about design. In this emerging model, the design itself is usefully understood as existing either suspended at the center of a web of diverse information, or else is actually the sum of all the information that comes to bear on it. Architectural form emerges out of and becomes part of the sea of relevant information, which includes the written word. Taken together, these developments make the need for achieving clarity in one's writing all the more urgent, and central.

FOUR TYPES OF WRITING KNOWLEDGE: SUBJECT MATTER, RHETORICAL, PROCESS, AND GENRE

Think of the four aspects of clear writing as four different types of knowledge. Where and how are they transmitted? As it turns out, the majority must come from within one's chosen discipline and cannot

be subcontracted out to the English department with any expectation of success. Most of the work students do to improve their writing will necessarily come from within the architecture school curriculum. This is why the chapters in this book are organized around the typical writing tasks encountered as one progresses through school.

Subject Matter Knowledge

It is easy to see how one would be unable to think, much less write, perceptively within the field of architecture in the absence of such discipline-specific subject matter knowledge as architecture history, construction technology, and contractual relationships. By analyzing a fifth-year undergraduate student's architectural design thesis, Medway saw the process of a student's move into "architectural thinking" through a trajectory that included alternations of drawing and writing, a process that resulted in writing functioning as a design tool.⁴ In doing so, he demonstrated that students can never fully compensate for a spotty architecture vocabulary with, say, formal virtuosity because subject matter knowledge is so fundamental. Much of the writing done in architecture school is to demonstrate that one has assimilated and can synthesize subject matter information into one's observations (Chapters 2 and 6) and one's understanding of history (Chapters 3 and 7, especially).

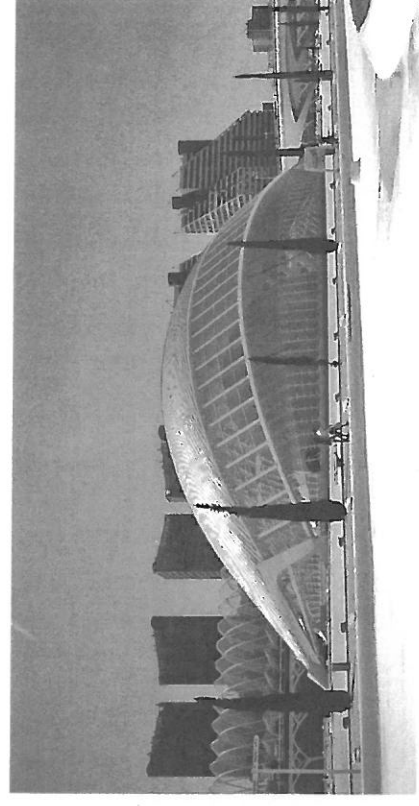


FIGURE 1.3 Subject Matter Knowledge

Rhetorical Knowledge

Some rhetorical knowledge does apply across disciplines, but only the most basic rhetorical elements of argumentation and logic can be effectively installed by outsiders. To see why this is so, consider Medway's contention that design itself is rhetorical in nature and, thus, schools of architecture teach students how to argue. This argumentative education is not only learned through the oral elements of crits or reviews, but also in the process of design itself: "Buildings that lack a 'proposition' or idea . . . are ineffective (as is criticism that evades these issues)."⁵ He also sees broader implications for understanding the role of rhetoric in architecture: the propositional content of design is a crucial element enabling students to make rational and reasonable decisions as their designs progress. Students who are unable to adequately theme and structure their arguments have a poor grasp of just the sort of knowledge that, if left uncorrected, will ultimately weaken the propositional content of their designs. When the propositional content is vague, ill-formed,

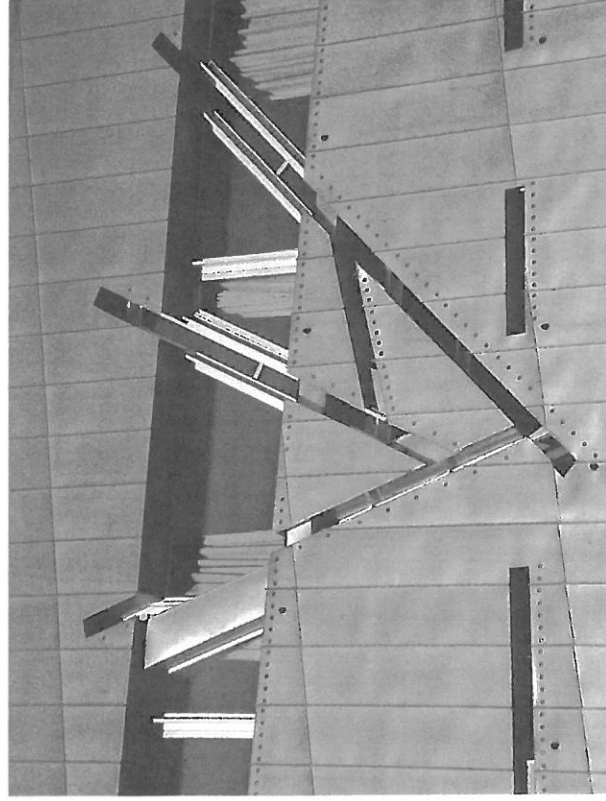


FIGURE 1.4 Rhetorical Knowledge

or inarticulate, design judgment will all too easily be reduced to the low common denominators of "it works" or "it looks good." The subject of rhetorical knowledge will receive its most complete treatment in Chapters 3 and 4.

Writing Process Knowledge

Writing process knowledge is procedural knowledge that helps the writer move through the writing task. Student problems such as poor writing mechanics and grammar take their toll here and this is the

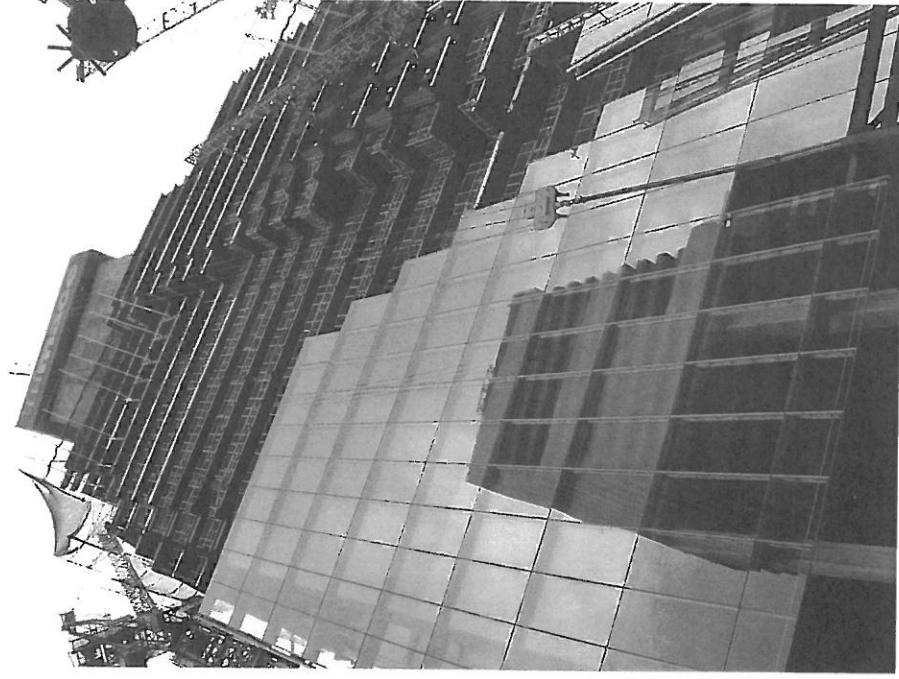


FIGURE 1.5 Writing Process Knowledge

one type of knowledge that is perhaps rightfully the realm of the English department and freshman composition. As noted earlier, attention to these processes is important for effective communication, and students must learn to attend to their own editing processes. But, as the writing tasks become more specific to the discipline, once again their instruction should shift to architecture school and practice because writing process knowledge is so immensely affected by the material and social context in which the writing task takes place. Synthesizing and relaying the results of one's research into new materials, technologies, parameters and constraints is beholden to establishing effective writing processes. How to accomplish the effective communication of one's research will be explained in Chapter 5. Even a seemingly straightforward task, such as composing a field report (Chapter 6) requires that an architect must know how observations become instructions—the architect arrives at the site with a concept in mind of the desired outcome (the quality of the building); then compares observed progress with the conception (note-taking on the observations), reconciling observations with preconceptions; and finally, through writing, he or she explains the thought processes used to arrive at decisions. The process of note-taking, reconciling those notes, and then writing the final report illustrates the indispensability of possessing an understanding of a writing process to the successful realization of one's design ideas.

Genre Knowledge

Architectural writing incorporates a number of unique genres. In essence, the chapters are separated by the genres they analyze. These genres are typically highly structured, conventionalized forms that are created and maintained by experienced members of the community who transmit their genre knowledge to its novices. Indeed, a lack of genre knowledge helps signal the difference in understanding between novice and established architects even when they apparently have similar levels of technical knowledge. These differences are apparent even between beginning and advanced students in the design studio. The unique institution of the architect's journal (Chapter 2) is a case in

point. Medway studied architecture students' sketchbooks to determine their function as a genre. The function of the sketchbooks varied from non-work related uses to recording and preserving observations, as well as aids to thinking, learning, and preparing for actions. Because they are never limited to purely sketching, journals exemplify the need for fluidity between the verbal and visual, even for what is ostensibly an audience of one. While presumably not intended for an external audience, these notebooks did, according to Medway, participate in social action, a criterion of a genre. Genre knowledge is what allows architects to know how to write effectively for their different audiences. The unfortunate phenomenon of "Archispeak" or "Archibabble" occurs when they fail to appreciate the boundaries of these audiences and write for a community of, say, newspaper readers as if it were a group that would read an architects' journal. This discriminating function of genres is best appreciated in conjunction with the important concept of a *discourse community*.



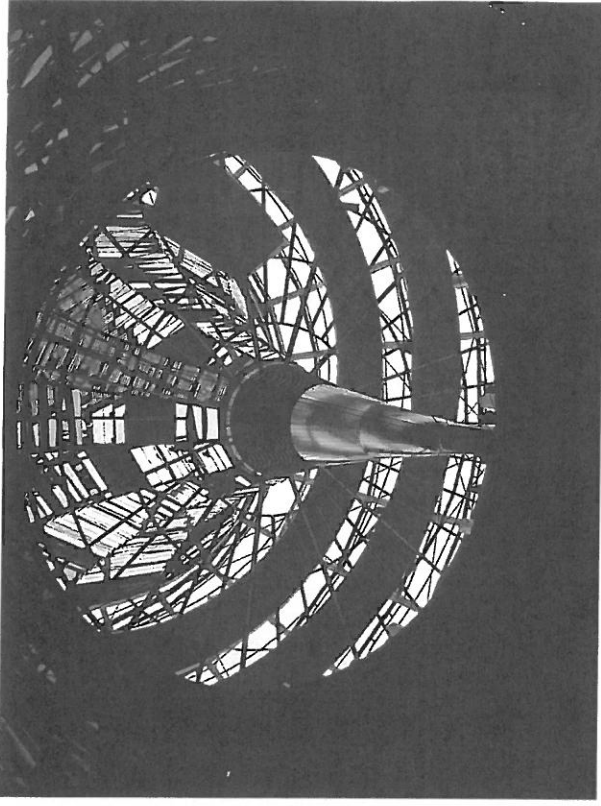
FIGURE 1.6 Genre Knowledge

ARCHITECTS' TWO DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

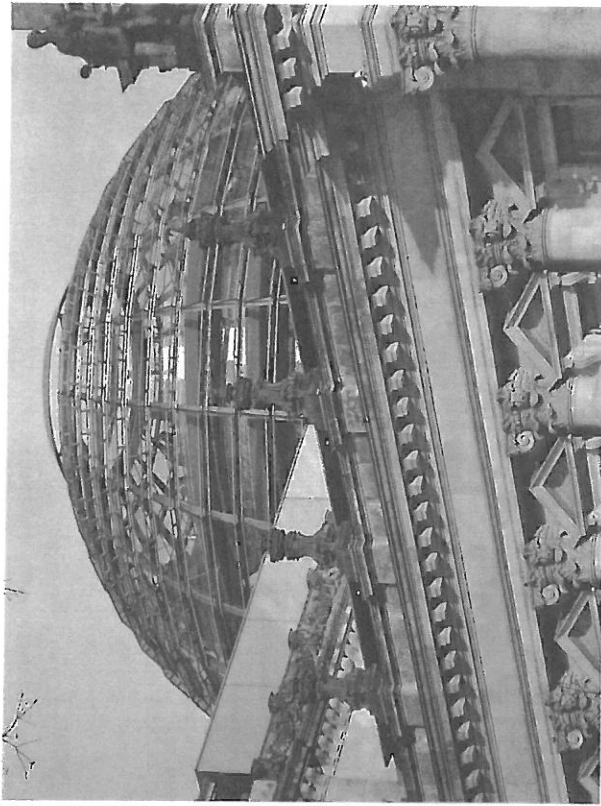
When authors begin to master the elements of clear writing, not only do they express their thoughts more effectively (as wonderful as this is) but they also begin to take their place in a larger world of writers. Their effective writing allows them to both participate in and add to the existing knowledge in their *discourse community*. A writer's discourse community includes, but is greater than, the immediate audience for any given piece of writing. A discourse community is a group of people that develops a sense of identity primarily through the writing of and for its members. Through reading one comes to understand a community; through writing one participates in it. Though the four constituent parts of clear writing apply to any discourse community, each community of writers and readers develops unique and characteristic formats for its writing; it acquires its own technical language that helps writers add precision and brevity to their communications, the community evolves its own standards for writing well, and its writers know with a high degree of specificity who they are writing for.

In the field of architecture, it is important to understand at the outset that the profession spans two different discourse communities with their own distinct standards and needs: an *internal* discourse with which architects communicate with fellow architects, educators, critics, and theorists of various stripes in the ongoing effort to improve and redefine the discipline; and an *external* discourse with such "outsiders" as clients, engineers, contractors, building officials, and the public with whom architects must cooperate for the actual production of buildings (Figure 1.7).

Both communities are indispensable to the field. Successful architectural practitioners will be fluent in both kinds of discourse and they will know when one or the other is appropriate. Chapters 2 and 3 analyze forms of writing oriented primarily for architecture's internal audience, while 4, 5, and 6 are concerned primarily with architects' communication with the world external to the discipline. Chapters 7 and 8, then, culminate with a return to writing at a more advanced level of synthesis for an internal audience.



a) Internal



b) External

FIGURE 1.7 (a) Practice spans architecture's internal discourse (fellow architects, educators, trade journals, critics) and (b) its external discourse (engineers, contractors, clients, building officials, the public)

WRITING WELL MAKES YOU SMARTER

Students entering architecture school often cite the ability to be creative while earning a reasonable living as a prime motivator for choosing architecture. But what many come to find over time is that, while the qualities inspiring that initial motivation are true as far as they go, what they could not appreciate until they had been in school for a while is how *engrassing* architecture is. Its study and design engage all one's mental processes at a very high level. Both in school and on the job, one experiences a constant pushing against one's intellectual limitations. As architects struggle to find the most penetrating expression of their design thinking, the mind bootstraps increasingly sophisticated thoughts on the available intellectual resources. Wittgenstein's elegantly stated question at the beginning of the chapter is meant to illustrate the wonder and fragility of this transcendence beyond the already-known; and how the horizons of thought are determined by the ability to express oneself. Of all the venues for recording and transmitting thought, for creating communities of thinkers, and for putting together new thoughts in flashes of creativity, writing is the most versatile.

This book is envisioned as a handy reference that will follow the standard architectural curriculum and help guide students through its writing component. Though it is organized to track the typical assignments students encounter as they move up and through the curriculum, we also hope practitioners will find it to be a ready reference to help them clarify why architects write and who architects are writing for. Filled with practical advice for clearer writing, its ultimate goal is to enable more moments of transcendence of one's previous limitations.