

Lori Thursby
Editor

Alumni Newsletter

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MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

The Alumni Association of the Victorian Society Summer Schools is in the midst of our annual membership renewal drive. Many thanks to those of you who have already renewed. If you have not yet done so, please remember to renew your support of the Alumni Association now.

In 2025, the Alumni Association contributed \$30,000 in scholarship funding as part of over \$90,000 awarded across all Summer School programs. Membership dues directly support this effort—and the need for scholarships is expected to increase in 2026. We need the support of all alumni. This year, we are making a special appeal to the alumni of Summer Schools 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025, including those who received scholarships to attend. Your participation in the Alumni Association is vital to our ability to continue to provide scholarships to the students of the 2026 class and beyond.

If you have ever received a Summer School scholarship, you know how transformative that opportunity can be. This is your chance to pay it forward. Even if you were not a scholarship recipient, your membership still ensures that the next generation of preservationists, historians, and designers

has the same opportunity to explore, learn, and grow.

Your membership helps sustain the programs and people who shaped our shared experiences. You'll also enjoy:

- Access to the Alumni Association newsletter—now expanded and beautifully redesigned
- Invitations to exclusive tours, study trips, and events
- Ongoing connection to fellow alumni through our Facebook page and member network

You can help in two ways. First, please take a moment today to Renew Your Membership for 2026 with the form on the following page, or through the PayPal link. There is a special reduced membership fee of only \$30 a year for those 35 years of age and younger. Second, be sure to tell your friends, classmates, and colleagues about the Summer Schools. Word of mouth is the best advertising!

Thank you for your enduring support and commitment to preserving our shared heritage. Together, we keep the spirit of the Summer Schools alive.

ALUMNI
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SOCIETY
SUMMER SCHOOLS

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*A Chapter of the Victorian Society in America supporting the Summer Schools
through scholarships, fundraising, and engagement with alumni.*

RENEWAL **ENROLLMENT** DATE: _____

\$60 Individual \$125 Household

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Gavin Stamp Memorial London Scholarship \$ _____
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2026 VICTORIAN SOCIETY SUMMER SCHOOLS

This is an exciting year for the VSA's Summer Schools, with new directors in all three programs, and with the London Summer School celebrating its 50th anniversary! The following describes a few details about the people and places you would experience in Newport, Chicago, and London next summer.

Explore **Newport** (May 29–June 7) with new director Dr. Willie Granston, visiting the great Gilded Age “cottages,” including Marble House, The Breakers, Ochre Court, and the Isaac Bell House. The program will also be venturing to Providence, Rhode Island and North Easton, Massachusetts, exploring 19th-century art, architecture, and material culture. Dr. Granston is an architectural historian, and currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at Trinity College, Hartford, where he has taught on “The Architecture of Leisure,” inspired by his PhD dissertation. (Tune in for his [online lecture](#) on Saturday, February 14th, to hear more!)

In **Chicago** (June 9–16), former Assistant Director Dr. Diane Dillon will be serving as the Director in 2026. She is also the Director of Scholarly and Undergraduate Programs at the Newberry Library in Chicago. Join her and other experts as they explore the American roots of Modernism, visiting premier works of architecture by H. H. Richardson, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Adler & Sullivan, as well as historic sites such as the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and Graceland Cemetery, and decorative arts collections at Crab Tree Farm, the Art Institute and the Driehaus Museum, among others.

In 2026, with new director Dr. Joshua Mardell, the **London** (June 27–July 12) program will celebrate its 50th anniversary by expanding its reach beyond England to Wales, also covering the great industrial cities of Manchester and Liverpool, and visiting sites in Surrey and the Cotswolds. Aside from city walks and museum visits, the program also visits historic houses designed by the likes of Edwin Lutyens, Philip Webb, and William Morris's home of Kelmscott Manor. Through a variety of lectures and tours, the program will seek not only to introduce participants to the principal designers, materials, styles, and construction methods of the period, but also to new approaches to the Victorian era. Dr. Mardell is an architectural historian and Research Tutor at the Royal College of Art in London.

With so much to explore and learn, how can you resist applying? Don't forget that the VSA offers full and partial scholarships for qualified applicants! Visit our Summer Schools pages for more details, and online summer school and scholarship applications. All application materials are due by March 2, 2026. Any questions about the programs can be directed to Summer Schools Administrator Anne Mallek, at admin@vsasummerschools.org.



2026 SUMMERSCHOOLS

NEWPORT * CHICAGO * LONDON

Apply for one of our three summer schools to study 19th- and 20th-century architecture, design, preservation, and the arts with fellow students, academics, professionals, and knowledgeable enthusiasts. Enjoy expert guides, lectures by leading scholars, private tours, and behind-the-scenes visits of historic sites and museums.

FULL AND PARTIAL SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

Deadline for all applications is March 2, 2026

2026 SUMMER SCHOOLS

NEWPORT
May 29-June 7

CHICAGO
June 9-16

LONDON
June 27-July 12



For more information
scan code at right or contact
the Summer Schools Administrator at
admin@vsasummerschools.org



victoriansociety.org

NEWS

Matt Bonin (Newport Summer School 2025) completed his MA in Historic Preservation from Goucher College in May, and has been promoted to Principal Investigator, History/Architecture at [Gray & Pape](#) Heritage Management.

Craig H. Lee (Newport '13 and London '16), an assistant curator in Architecture and Design at the Art Institute of Chicago who has been working in the Bruce Goff archive and collection, among other departmental projects, helped organize the first major retrospective of the late groundbreaking architect Bruce Goff. The exhibition, [Bruce Goff: Material Worlds](#), surveys Goff's 60-year-plus career and displays more than 200 models, architectural drawings, and artworks. It will be on view from December 20, 2025–March 29, 2026, and will be the first exhibit in the museum's new Regenstein Hall.

IN MEMORIAM

The Alumni Association was saddened to learn of the death last October of [Richard \(Dick\) Humphreys](#) (1953–2025), husband of **Joanna (Jo) Banham**, who is a former Director of the London Summer School. Dick Humphreys spent almost his entire professional career at the Tate. His various roles at Tate included as Head of Education and Interpretation from 1991 to 2001, and then Head of Program Research at Tate Britain. In these roles at Tate and independently, he wrote, edited, lectured, and collaborated across numerous literary and art history projects, including various publications on British artists, Modernist art and literature, and the exhibition *Pound's Artists: Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts in London, Paris and Italy* (1985). He also authored *Companion to British Art* (2001), which was published to coincide with the launch of Tate Britain. Dick retired from the Tate in 2010 to devote his time to writing and independent curating. His final project was researching British artists, writers, and travelers in Venice from the 15th century to the present.

Radney Lee Fisher (Newport '14 and London '15) passed away on November 2, 2025, in San Antonio at the age of 82. He was born on August 18, 1943 in Amherst, TX. [Radney Lee Fisher](#) had a long and distinguished career in the United States Navy (1966–93); Radney retired at the rank of Commander, having traveled extensively throughout the world. An accountant by training, he earned a Master of Public Accounting from the University of Texas at Austin and a MS in Financial Management from the Naval Postgraduate



Radney Fisher at a reception at the Griswold House, home of the Newport Art Museum, during Newport Summer School 2014. Photo by James Russiello.

School. Following his naval career, he lived in San Diego, CA, and several years later, moved to San Antonio, returning to his native TX.

Beginning in March 2015, Radney spent six months traveling throughout England, during which time he participated in the London Summer School alongside the program's current director, Dr. Joshua Mardell. He remained an engaged and enthusiastic member of the Victorian Society thereafter. Radney was variously a member of The Royal Oak Foundation, the Royal Horticultural Society, and the Preservation Society of Newport County. He attended VSA annual meetings in Los Angeles (2016) and Manhattan (2018), as well as study tours in Montreal–Ottawa (2016), Madison, WI (2018), Denver, CO (2022), Cleveland, OH (2022), and Seattle, WA (2025).



Frank Matero
(London '82), the
Gonick Family
Professor of
Historic
Preservation and a
professor of
architecture at the
University of

Pennsylvania's Stuart Weitzman School of Design passed away on December 19, 2025.

Frank Matero founded and directed the Center for Architectural Conservation, which is a graduate training and research facility of Penn's Weitzman School of Design dedicated to the investigation and treatment of historic and traditional architectural materials and the building arts. He also founded *Change Over Time*, the international journal on conservation and the built environment published by Penn Press, where he was the editor-in-chief. Frank authored over 100 publications on conservation history, building technology, ethics, and professional practice, lectured at universities and professional forums around the world, and collaborated and worked with numerous heritage conservation organizations, including the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property based in Rome, Italy. In recent years, he was focused on developing a framework for material and site risk and vulnerability related to climate change, and he was completing a book on the conservation of concrete architecture.

SEND IN YOUR NEWS!

We like to keep in touch with all our alumni and to share your news with fellow alumni. If you have news about your current position, academic studies, or research project; an upcoming publication, lecture, or organizational event; a recent award or recognition; or other related news items, please e-mail it to Lori Thursby, the Alumni Newsletter editor, at

news@vsaalumni.org.

2025 VICTORIAN SOCIETY SUMMER SCHOOLS SCHOLARSHIP STUDENT ESSAYS

VSA Chicago Summer School Essay

—Isla Stewart

Attending the Victorian Society in America's Chicago Summer School program and attending the architectural walking tours, in-class lectures and private house and museum tours created the opportunity for numerous unique experiences. The organizers filled the eight-day program with an incredible amount of Victorian history. The most significant stops, from my perspective, included St. James Episcopal Church and visiting the Wooded Island where the 1893 Chicago World's Fair took place.



Stewart on the wooded island that served as the Japanese Pavillion during the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

Going into the Summer School, I expected the content focused on the 1893 World's Fair to be the most compelling. Lorado Taft's willingness to train and employ female sculptors before, during and after the Fair allowed American women the opportunity and the skills to develop as professional artists. The lectures around the World's Fair did not disappoint, briefly touching on women's involvement and contributions. I hope to continue to research the incredible

Isla Stewart is a PhD student in the Art History department at Rutgers University.

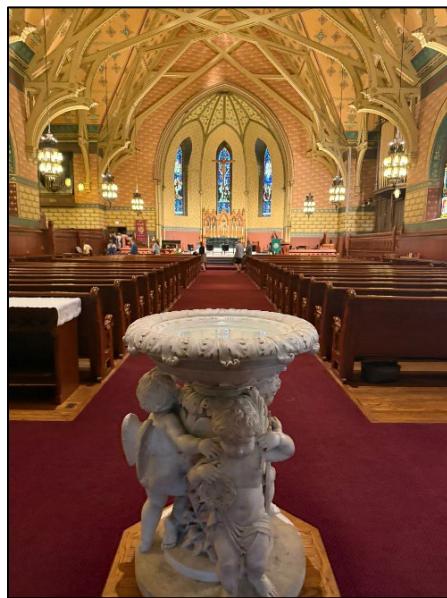
female artists who took advantage of the 1893 World's Fair's opportunities to become successful sculptors. Hopefully going forward, whenever anyone visits these sites, they have the opportunity to think of them as spaces where women visibly and successfully worked and inspired a younger generation of women to continue pursuing artistic professions.

In a similar vein, the trip to St. James Cathedral stands out due to the marble baptismal font created by Augusta Freeman to commemorate the life of Gertrude Griswold Ayer, who died at one year old in 1871 from asthmatic complications following the Great Chicago Fire. As someone who studies nineteenth- and twentieth-century female sculptors, discovering Freeman's baptismal font definitely became the highlight of the trip. While women often found work within communities who respected their talents, the documentation of their artistic contributions usually falls short. Augusta Freeman appears briefly in Charlotte Rubenstein's 1990 book *American Women Sculptors: A History of Women Working in Three Dimensions*. Rubenstein ends her entry by hoping that "scholars will unearth some of the interesting artifacts" by Freeman.

I hope to develop an article on the baptismal font and conduct some more research into Freeman's background as an artist. So far, I know Freeman signed her name on the baptismal font as only 'Augusta Freeman.' Her full name was Horatia Augusta Latilla Freeman. She was born in London to Italian and English parents in 1826. She moved to

Rome with her husband, genre painter James Freeman, around 1845 and began sculpting after meeting Harriet Hosmer several years later. Hosmer's reputation as a freely independent American women sculptor likely inspired Freeman to embark on her own career. She quickly earned a reputation for her bas-reliefs, busts, ideal figurines, and decorative household objects. Little information readily exists on the specific details of her artistic career, but I hope to uncover more when I can dedicate more extended research time to this project.

The Ayer baptismal font's composition represents the artist's preference for cherubs and moralizing symbolism. As a memorial for a young child, the symbolism speaks to the innocence and tragedy of her death. An 1866 *Art Journal* article dismisses the putti motif as the artist's desire for and inability to have



Augusta Freeman's Ayer Baptismal Font in St. James Cathedral.

her own children. The same was said of Mary Cassatt and other women who chose to become artists during the nineteenth century. This dismissal of women's professional accomplishments diminishes their contributions to the medium. I believe the baptismal font actually tells a different story about Freeman's position within her community. The Ayer family trusted her to commemorate and memorialize the life of their young daughter within the sacred space of the St. James Cathedral. I am increasingly

interested in churches as spaces where women held social and artistic power within the United States prior to receiving political power through voting rights. Freeman's baptismal font offers an incredible case study to explore some of these ideas and I never would have known about its existence without attending the Victorian Society's Chicago Summer School.

Chicago as a Nexus of American Modernism: Reflections from the Victorian Society Summer School

—Raeesa Parvez Patel



The city of Chicago, emerging from the catastrophic fire of 1871, offers a distinct laboratory for examining the convergence of technological innovation, aesthetic experimentation, and social ambition in shaping modern American architecture. The 9th annual Victorian Society Chicago Summer School provided an opportunity to engage critically with this urban and architectural environment, situating participants within a framework that emphasized both the formal and cultural determinants of design, and the interplay between the built environment and broader societal currents.

Raeesa Parvez Patel is a graduate student, pursuing an M.A. in Historic Preservation and Planning at Cornell University. Raeesa is exploring the adaptive reuse of sacred spaces, Guastavino vaults, and preservation in the context of climate change. She is passionate about preparing historic structures reports and writing architectural history.

Far from a mere cataloging of structures, the program foregrounded analytical engagement with architectural, urban, and landscape phenomena, drawing upon lectures, site visits, and interpretive scholarship to elucidate the principles and aspirations guiding Chicago's transformation into a center of Modernism.

The historical and technological context of Chicago's ascendancy is essential for understanding its architectural innovations. In the aftermath of the fire, architects and patrons embraced both necessity and opportunity, exploring new materials, structural systems, and aesthetic vocabularies. Steel-frame construction, elevators, and fireproofing enabled unprecedented verticality and spatial flexibility, while civic ambition and economic expansion shaped the programmatic and underlying design rationale of monumental architecture. Within this framework, figures such as H. H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan, Burnham & Root, and Frank Lloyd Wright exemplified divergent yet interconnected approaches to form, ornament, and urban integration, demonstrating that innovation in Chicago emerged from a dense network of professional practice, patronage, and social expectation.

A central insight of the Summer School concerned the relationship between architectural form and cultural meaning. The Rookery, a paradigmatic commercial building, exemplifies the synthesis of structural audacity and aesthetic refinement, in which the steel frame mediates both spatial possibility and symbolic expression, and interior modifications by Wright negotiate light, movement, and experiential sequence. Similarly, residential projects, such as the Glessner House and Maher's Pleasant Home, reveal the deliberate calibration of domestic form to social ideals, balancing

utility, ornament, and spatial hierarchy, while the Prairie School's articulation of horizontality and landscape integration illustrates a philosophy of inhabitation that situates human experience within environmental and cultural contexts. In each case, the analysis underscores a recurrent theme: architecture functions simultaneously as artifact and agent, encoding social values and guiding human behavior through spatial and material means.

Urbanism and landscape further contextualize these formal explorations, particularly in sites such as Pullman, Jackson Park, and the Gold Coast. Pullman, as an early planned industrial community, exemplifies the didactic capacity of architecture and urban design, mediating social relations, labor hierarchies, and civic aspiration within a coherent built environment. Jackson Park and the site of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition demonstrate the capacity of large-scale design to orchestrate public experience and convey ideals of order, beauty, and progress, while residential enclaves such as the Gold Coast reveal the stratification of taste, wealth, and cultural capital through the modulation of scale, style, and material. While the program offered an expansive survey of Chicago's architectural and cultural landmarks, a more inclusive consideration of sites significant to the African American community would further broaden both historical and interpretive perspectives, illuminating the complex interplay of race, community, and urban development in shaping the cityscape. Embracing such inclusiveness ensures that Chicago's architectural and urban experimentation is apprehended as a multifaceted reflection of the diverse communities whose labor, creativity, and aspirations are embedded in the city's built environment.

Informed by the recognition of architecture as a manifestation of social, cultural, and spatial dynamics, preservation emerged as an analytic perspective, offering insight into the continuity of these architectural legacies. The ongoing restoration and curation of sites such as Unity Temple, the Rookery, and Frank Lloyd Wright's Home and Studio illuminate the ethical and methodological considerations inherent in sustaining historical integrity, while simultaneously enabling contemporary study and engagement. Preservation, in this context, is not merely an act of conservation but a mode of inquiry, revealing the layers of material, formal, and symbolic evolution that contribute to a building's significance, and fostering critical reflection on the interrelation between historical authenticity and modern comprehension. The pedagogical design of the Summer School reinforced these objectives. Lectures provided conceptual frameworks for interpreting stylistic evolution, social context, and material innovation, while site visits translated abstract principles into tangible experience, allowing participants to evaluate the interplay between design intention and realized space. Engagement with the program encouraged a methodology in which attentive observation, reflective consideration, and historical contextualization are intertwined with critical assessment, allowing interaction with architecture to be at once interpretive and evaluative.

Ultimately, the Chicago Summer School demonstrates the potential of immersive study to deepen understanding of architectural Modernism, urban form, and cultural expression. By situating participants within sites of historical, aesthetic, and

technological significance, and framing these experiences through rigorous analytic discourse, the program facilitates insight into the processes by which design mediates human experience, communicates cultural ideals, and negotiates continuity and change. Preservation, judiciously incorporated, further illuminates these processes, demonstrating that the ongoing care of architectural heritage provides both material evidence and conceptual access to the forces that have shaped the city's development. In this regard, Chicago serves not merely as a subject of study but as an interlocutor, revealing through its built environment the complexity of Modernism, the dynamism of urban life, and the enduring capacity of architecture to articulate, mediate, and reflect cultural meaning.

In conclusion, engagement with the Summer School revealed the depth and breadth of Chicago's contributions to American Modernism, highlighting the interdependence of technological innovation, aesthetic experimentation, and social intent. The program's integration of lectures, research, and direct study of seminal buildings and landscapes allowed for reflection on both form and meaning, offering insight into the processes through which architecture shapes, and is shaped by, its cultural context. Preservation further illuminated these processes, revealing the interpretive and ethical dimensions of architectural stewardship. The experience underscores the value of structured, scholarly engagement with architecture, demonstrating that the study of built form is inseparable from the broader inquiry into social values, technological possibility, and cultural expression.

VSA London Summer School Essay

—Jamie Centeno

I'm from Las Vegas, a fabulous, yet fascinatingly fake city. I'd always found it ironic that while tourists from all over the world found it to be a place worthy of praise, the residents found it a rather bland place, lacking any of the characteristics that made other cities attractive places to live in. This was one of the reasons I chose to attend architecture school.

While in architecture school, I excelled and graduated at the top of my class, but that didn't stop me from feeling like an imposter in my field. I loved architecture, but I did not love the idea of practicing in a firm 9–5 for the rest of my life, conforming to the status quo. When I first declared history as my double major, I treated it as a fun pastime to take my mind off the intensity of architecture school, but as I took more courses, I realized that it gave me a sense of purpose that I had never felt in my technical courses before. That's when I decided to redirect my path from architect to architectural historian.

My time in architecture school may not have prepared me to be a practitioner, but it did leave me with two things. The first — architecture students in Las Vegas are incredibly pessimistic, and unless something is done about it, they will grow up to become architects complacent with the world around them.

The second thing my time in architecture school left me with was the opportunity to teach after I graduated. The year I graduated was the same year our historian retired, and being her assistant, I was offered the opportunity of a lifetime to step into my dream position for a year before heading off to my doctoral studies. I approached my year as a small research opportunity. My research



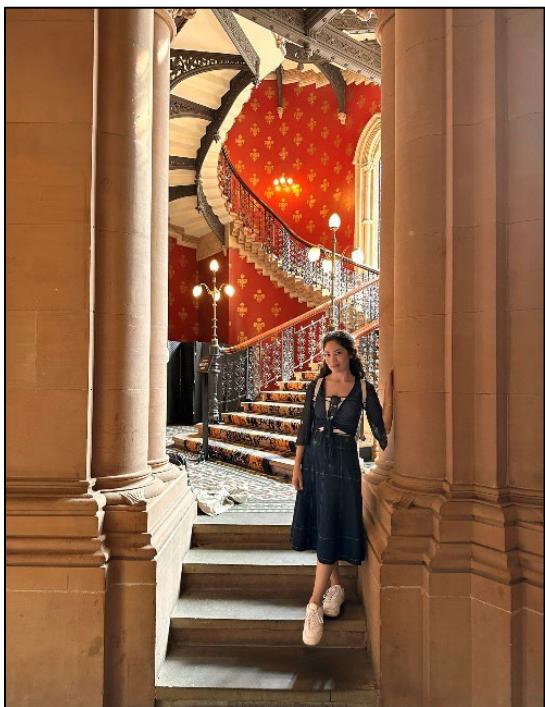
Jamie Centeno is currently a History of Architecture instructor at the University of Nevada, teaching everything from a general survey of architecture to local Las Vegas history and the origins of Modernism in the 19th century.

question: Can students' perspectives on architecture in Las Vegas be altered by the way their history courses are framed? I lectured on the history of Las Vegas, its contributions to hospitality, and its significance as a case study. Students revisited places they had been to, this time with a more profound interest and understanding, and created award-winning collages paying homage to them. By the end of the school year, I had students telling me they had not only changed their minds about leaving the city but were excited to begin improving it. So, the preliminary answer to my research question was yes, framing history in a way that exposes students to stories of resilience, defiance, and innovation did have the power to change their perspectives and drive them to want those things for a city that needed it.

After my teaching appointment finished, I decided to continue researching stories with these same themes to see how I could implement them into future research projects and courses. That's when I came across the Victorian Society's summer school programs. The 19th century had always been a time of great intrigue to me because of its dichotomous nature. From a research standpoint, this was exactly what I needed to explore if I wanted to start exploring other solutions.

My two weeks in the program were an absolute whirlwind. I felt like a kid in a candy store being surrounded by so much history

and meeting so many professors, historians, and enthusiasts like me. Some of my favorite tours were the Crossness Engine, Highgate Cemetery, King's Cross and St. Pancras, Liverpool's docks, and the beautiful country manors. Throughout the trip, my peers joked that Las Vegas would soon have a new Victorian-themed hotel covered in buzzing Pugin-esque neon details. While an entertaining thought (and possibly a successful business venture, who knows!), my takeaways from the trip were the following:



St. Pancras

First, borrowing a vernacular does not mean one cannot make it unique and innovative. Street took the Gothic Revival and gave it a didactic twist at the Natural History Museum; Butterfield used industrially produced bricks to weave bold patterns in his churches; Voysey used medieval precedents and created minimal spaces that preceded Modernism. Despite living in the century of revivals, Victorian architects did not allow that to stop them from continuing to innovate.

Second, the importance of prioritizing human welfare in times of technological growth. A pronounced wealth gap is one of the things that we share with the Victorian Era. Las Vegas, like most major American cities, is undergoing an affordable housing crisis. The summer school exposed students to both the marvels of the "workshop of the world" at the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as the horrific conditions of the working class in places like the Old Nichol. Seeing how developments like the Boundary Estates raised inhabitants' morale by dignifying them with good design and providing simple amenities set an important precedent for contemporary designers. Just because something is affordable does not mean it should lack individuality or quality materials.

Third, the importance of a multidisciplinary education. In Las Vegas, the goal isn't to create good buildings; it's to create them as quickly as possible. One of the first things we learned about in the program was that the Great Exhibition exposed the great amount of cheap and excessive design that was being produced in Britain and how that inspired thinkers like William Morris to counteract it. The Morris & Co. start-to-finish approach resulted in well-crafted, meaningful, and coveted items. This holistic approach is something students are rarely ever exposed to, and as a result, there is a great dissociation between drawings and field construction. While I am not advocating for architects today to be out on the job site pouring concrete, I do think encouraging a more integrated design approach would result in greater care for both the initial design and the end user's experience.

Lastly, I learned about the importance of advocacy for historic preservation. I was unaware of the scrutiny that the Victorian Era was placed under in the postwar era. It was shocking to learn that so many of the

wonders we visited, like the Albert Memorial, were once repudiated and abandoned for demolition. This is an all too familiar problem in Las Vegas, where nothing is safe from implosion. Discovering the Victorian Society and learning that their passion and perseverance are the reasons so many of these landmarks are still standing today taught me the importance of fighting for something even when no one else seems to care. I realized that teaching future architects about local history was never going to be enough if there wasn't an active effort fighting against



Albert Memorial

new developments to set an example. I'm happy to report that I have changed my approach and am now looking to join a local preservation group.

Despite revolving around the 19th century, this summer school experience exposed me to many themes that continue to be relevant today. London and Las Vegas could not be more different, and somehow, I came back with more parallels than I have space to express. I am excited to begin integrating this new knowledge into my lectures and research projects so other students can learn and be inspired by the great minds of the Victorian Era as I have.

Leighton House as a Study in Victorian Orientalism and the Aestheticization of Empire
—Stephanie Polsky

Leighton House, situated in the tranquil streets adjacent to Holland Park, offers a singular example of the aestheticization of the British Empire at its height. Part studio, part salon, and part secluded shrine to taste, it presents the Victorian fantasy of the East with such determined elegance that its ideological scaffolding might remain all but concealed. For Frederic, Lord Leighton, painter, president of the Royal Academy, and consummate aesthete, Orientalism was less a scholarly engagement than a sensory project. As such, at Leighton House, the East is curated, dislocated, and distilled into surface, texture, and spectacle.

In order to appreciate this, one has to discern Frederic Leighton (1830–1896) himself as one of the towering figures of Victorian art and culture. Far from being understood as a painter or sculptor, Leighton was the consummate traveler and tastemaker of his time, whose influence reached beyond the Royal Academy to the drawing rooms of Europe's artistic elite. Educated in Europe and fluent in several languages, Leighton was what we might now call a 'global' figure. Put in the context of Britain's 19th-century imperial expansion, this Victorian concept of globalism came



Stephanie Polsky is a professor at the Pratt Institute in New York, whose interdisciplinary research explores the intersections between Visual Cultures, Media Studies and Cultural Studies.

freighted with privilege, access, and power that flowed through bodies such as Leighton's, whose artistic training transported him through the great academies of Florence, Frankfurt, and Paris, depositing him back in London replete with the accoutrement required to buttress his reputation.

By the 1860s, he had become a central figure in the British art world, known for his lush, classical compositions and his deep engagement with themes drawn from mythology, religion, and exoticized histories. His paintings, such as *Flaming June* and *The Fisherman and the Syren*, points toward a broader fascination with sensuality, theatricality, and cultural otherness that is subsequently reflected in Leighton House itself. By 1878, Leighton would become President of the Royal Academy, the most prestigious position in the British art establishment. Perhaps more remarkably, in 1896, just one day before his death, Leighton was granted a peerage, becoming the first artist to be ennobled in this way. At his close, his full title, Baron Leighton of Stretton, signaled not only his social elevation but also the tight intertwining of art, status, and empire in this period.

Perhaps Leighton's most enduring creation was not a painting, nor a reputation, but a building: Leighton House, constructed over several decades beginning in the 1860s. Designed by architect George Aitchison in close collaboration with the artist himself, the house was conceived as both a working studio and a personal *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This total artwork synthesized painting, architecture, decoration, and collection. The result is a space that moves fluidly between aesthetic disciplines and geographic references, combining British, classical, and 'Oriental' elements into a single, deeply theatrical environment.

Leighton's relationship to Orientalism was shaped by his extensive travels to North Africa, Turkey, Egypt, and the Levant, as well as by the broader currents of imperial collecting that allowed artists and elites to acquire objects from colonized and semi-colonized territories. While Leighton's interest in Islamic art and design was genuine, his use of it, especially in the Arab Hall, was filtered through a distinctly European, aestheticizing lens. He was not aiming to capture cultural accuracy, but rather for atmosphere, for effect, for the appearance of cultivated worldliness. In this way, Leighton is a figure of contradiction: both cosmopolitan and insular, progressive and complicit, deeply invested in the arts yet embedded in the cultural machinery of empire. To enter Leighton House is to confront the entanglement of beauty and power, taste and ideology, and to reflect on how artists helped shape the visual and material imagination of imperial Britain.

The most striking and oft-cited feature of the house is, of course, the Arab Hall, a domed chamber clad in Syrian tiles, pierced by latticed windows, and ringed with gold-leaf muqarnas. The tiles, many of them 16th-century Damascene originals, were acquired through Leighton's connections to the expanding network of British agents, dealers, and imperial intermediaries then combing the Ottoman world for salvageable treasures. What we see today is a triumph of pastiche, a space that evokes Islamic architecture without inhabiting its logic or meaning. The Arab Hall is less a place of worship or dwelling than a kind of visual trophy case, where the plunder of elsewhere is suspended in a vacuum of function.

In the lush tranquility of Leighton House, it's simple to mistake aesthetic immersion for true cultural understanding. The house does not trouble its own gaze; it does not account

for the absences it depends upon. Nowhere in its richly colored rooms are the conditions of imperial acquisition explored, nor the complex economies of extraction that made such collections possible. In this sense, Leighton House performs Orientalism in precisely the way Edward Said theorized it: the East is present, but only as a medium through which the West narrates its own refinement.

But to dismiss the house as simply an orientalist fantasy would be to miss the deeper operation of aesthetic ideology at work. Leighton House is not naïvely romantic; it is strategic. It transforms empire into atmosphere, cultural difference into décor. It is a space where empire is rendered invisible precisely because it is everywhere, baked into the materials, embedded in the routes of acquisition, inscribed in the very logic of display.

To stand in the Arab Hall is to encounter a mirror of imperial desire, gilded, glazed, and meticulously staged. And in that mirrored surface, the contemporary visitor may glimpse not only the legacy of Leighton's vision, but the more extended afterlife of the

aesthetic ideologies he helped to codify. Now a museum, it remains a key site for understanding how Orientalism operated not just in painting, but in architecture, collecting, and the staging of self. On a study tour such as the VSA London Summer School, we must walk through the house not just as admirers, but as critical observers, thinking about what's on display, what's left unsaid, and what these richly decorated walls can still teach us about the visual politics of empire.

Leighton's version of Orientalism is seductive, and that's precisely the point. Unlike the more aggressive forms of colonial domination, the Orientalism of Leighton House operates through beauty, craftsmanship, and the language of connoisseurship. The East is not depicted as dangerous or primitive, but as decorative and spiritually rich, an available resource for the cultivated British subject. This is what makes the house such a vital site for discussion: it exemplifies how imperial ideology was created not only in politics or war, but also in velvet drapes, tile mosaics, and salon conversation.

VSA Scholarship Essay, London Summer School

—Julie Chen

Arriving in London, I expected to see gold everywhere, gold-plated buildings with ornate cornices and grand monuments gleaming with imperial pride. After all, this was once the heart of the British Empire.

But what I encountered was something different. Instead of opulence, I saw the remnants of a fallen empire. A city grappling with its past and its grandeur fading into preservation works. London seems to be holding on to the material traces of power and ambition that once defined the British Empire.

The 20th century brought a series of violent edits to the city central. Fires and bombings plagued the city. The Blitz from the war destroyed buildings, gutting entire blocks. I witnessed these



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remnants first hand during Rosemary Hill's tour of the Palace of Westminster. The building was consumed by the Great Fire of 1834, rebuilt in a Gothic Revival style, then suffered massive blows in World War II, and rebuilt again by Giles Gilbert Scott. Now, the Palace of Westminster faces new challenges like decay and leaks.

As I stood there, I found myself asking: how does a city reimagine itself post war and conflict? How much should be preserved? At what cost? What else can you do besides gather the fragments and forcefully piece them together?

Gradually, through the next two weeks with the Victorian Society Summer School Program, I began to find answers. I learned about the system of preservation in terms of grade one and grade two listings. Grade I and Grade II protections serve as formal recognitions of value. But they are also reminders of fragility. It forces the city to live in conversation with its past, which I think can be both beautiful and burdensome. On one hand, history should be remembered and lived through; on the other, strict preservation can stifle innovation. So where is the balance?

This conversation was especially evident at the Leighton House. Once a private residence, now a public café and heritage site, the building proudly carries its Victorian roots through its red brick facade and custom

furnishings. But what stayed with me the most was the modern extension: a sleek, glass café arm extended gently out from the side, as if it was reaching towards the street. It felt like an architectural gesture of an open hand. The intervention wasn't about hiding the past under glass. It felt like it was about extending the past forward, inviting visitors to take part in its continuity. A similar structure gesture was seen in King's Cross Station. The addition revitalized the public space, breathing life into the Victorian frame. The Canopy Market served as an intersection between commerce and history. These interventions allowed room for renewal yet grounded in the past.

Still innovation within preservation isn't always welcomed. People often feared that new additions might dilute the original character or even erase some part of their memories. They perceived the buildings as almost relics instead of living spaces that needed to be constantly adapting and responding. Of course, when innovation becomes purely for profit, then it feels hollow.

What becomes clear across the city is that preservation does not mean freezing time, more so about how a building can endure, adapt, and resist. London is still in the process of rebuilding itself. I think that's what I find so fascinating about the place—its willingness to live in tension between what it was, what it is, and what it could be.

Victorian Society Scholarship Essay, London

Summer School

—Mary Chen

For two summer weeks, London, and the greater English isle, served as my open-air library. The carefully, layered archive of bricks, alleys, and stained-glass windows whispered the aspirations and anxieties of a nation on the brink of modernity.



Mary Chen is a storyteller, exploring urbanism, climate, and culture through design, history, and community-based research.

Spanning from the industrial grandeur of Liverpool to the elegance of Bedford Park, the Victorian Society Summer School offered a lived experience couched within a historical context of the Victorian Era. Each city, tour, lecture revealed new dimensions of the Victorian ambition, the desire to moralize space (seen across Pugin's ecclesiastical projects), to beautify labor (Crossness Pumping Station's ornamentation), and to arrange urban life into a rhythm of progress and propriety (East End housing, Port Sunlight, and Bedford Park).



Bedford Park Club

What I didn't anticipate, taking me by surprise, was the sheer religiosity of Victorian England, especially with the Gothic Revival style. The church was everywhere: in the floorplans of homes, the spires that perforated the skyline and in the moral vocabulary of planners and designers. Religion permeated the moral and aesthetic framework shaping the Victorian space. Later, Pugin's ecclesiastical sensibilities would carry over into the Arts and Crafts Movement.

My academic background in political science and earth sciences trained me to study systems—power grids, governance frameworks, urban infrastructures. To me, cities are engines and ecosystems. During this program, that perception expanded. I noticed the gestures embedded in design, the ways in which a façade might articulate a worldview, encode social hierarchy. Departing from a sole focus of infrastructural function, architects and artists built a

city with crafted and moral proposition from the industrial utopia to the garden city. Form became vehicle for ethics, often anchoring spirituality.

Beauty, to the Victorians, was ethically ornamental. Figures like William Morris and his contemporaries of the Arts and Crafts Movement challenged the mechanization of life, one marked with moral vacuity, by reintroducing beauty and labor into the everyday. Craftsmanship was a moral duty. This ethos followed us into places like Standen House and Rodmorton Manor, where the details felt like a rebuke to standardization of industrialized England. The interiors, dense with textures and patterns, became case studies for how architecture could resist the spiritual flattening of industrial England. This framing proved critical as we moved through the physical legacy of their ambitions, exploring how Victorians approached urban planning.

Above all, Victorian urban planning was a reaction, a reaction to cholera, to crowding, to the rising visibility of poverty in the modern metropolis. The proposed solutions were not purely functional. They were framed in moral language of elevation, order, and dignity. For example, on our visit to Highgate Cemetery, I began to understand how even death was spatialized ethically. The private cemetery was a response to the growing population and subsequent lack of space for the deceased in local church yards. I found myself contemplating the argument for spatial dignity, how to build a space for those no longer physically here. Ian Dungavell's tour provided the context into how Victorians used landscape design to assert control over death itself. The curving paths, terraced gravestones, chapel axes—all were calibrated to guide grief and sorrow.

Port Sunlight, in many ways, felt like the apotheosis of Victorian spatial ideology. Commissioned by soap magnate William Lever for his factory workers, the model village presented an aesthetically curated social ideal of a "whole" citizen—law-abiding, hardworking, God-fearing. Workers lived in brick cottages ornamented with individual character, surrounded by green spaces. But, beneath its picturesque charm, Port Sunlight was an experiment in social engineering through design with clear boundaries. Cultural amenities like concert halls, churches, and temperance hotels reinforced the ideal of the "whole" citizen. There were no pubs by design, a deterrent of lewd or destructive behavior. Leisure, architecture, and culture were carefully orchestrated to reinforce Lever's values.



The fields at Rodmarton Manor



A standard house at Port Sunlight.



Common black trims decorating the exteriors of houses in Port Sunlight.

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The **Heritage Society of the Alumni Association** supports our efforts to provide student scholarships for future Victorian Society Summer Schools. The Alumni Association is humbled to have an extraordinary group of supporters who feel so strongly about our primary mission to raise funds for student scholarships that they have generously included the Alumni Association in their estate planning. You are invited to join this special group of Alumni by making a planned gift such as a bequest in your will or beneficiary designations of IRAs or retirement plans.

Hank Dunlop (Boston '78; London '81, and Newport '88) has joined the Heritage Society of the Alumni Association with a

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Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) designation from his IRA. **John C. Freed**, a longtime VSA and Alumni Association supporter, made provisions for a \$10,000 bequest to the Alumni Association in memory of his partner, **Paul Duchscherer** (Newport '91). **Paul Duchscherer** very thoughtfully made provisions in his trust for a \$10,000 bequest to the Alumni Association as well as designating the Alumni Association as the beneficiary of all future royalties from his many books and other publications. The **Bob and Carole Chapman Fund** very generously awarded a grant of \$10,000 to the Alumni Association Chapter in memory of **Carole Chapman**. **Robert Rettig** (London '06) recently advised us that he had made provision in his estate planning documents for both the VSA and the Alumni Association. These very generous alumni members have made thoughtful gifts and designations to help ensure that current and future generations of students will be able to attend the educational opportunities presented by the VSA Summer Schools.

You can join these members of the Heritage Society of the Alumni Association and support the mission of the Alumni Association while maximizing the benefits of a deferred gift. Your gift becomes part of your estate planning to protect valuable assets from income, capital gains, and/or estate taxes.

Requests by Will or Living Trust

This common estate planning technique allows you to retain control of your assets during your lifetime and avoid estate taxes. **GIFTS OF LIFE INSURANCE**, **CHARITABLE GIFT ANNUITIES**, **CHARITABLE LEAD TRUSTS**, **CHARITABLE REMAINDER ANNUITY TRUSTS**, **CHARITABLE REMAINDER UNITRUSTS**, and a **POOLED INCOME FUND** are some of the other estate planning techniques you can discuss with your financial advisor to provide funds to the Alumni Association for scholarships to future Summer School students.

To include the **Alumni Association** in your will or trust, the following is suggested wording to take to your attorney: "After fulfilling other provisions, I give, devise and bequeath _____% of the residue and remainder of my estate (or \$_____ if a specific amount) to the Alumni Association of the Victorian Society Summer Schools, a 501(c)(3) organization, to benefit the Alumni Association (tax ID # 23-1710978), located at 2 Kings Hwy West, Suite 108, Haddonfield, NJ 08033.

It is crucial that the **Alumni Association** be identified as your gift will, otherwise it will go to the national VSA organization with whom we share EIN **23-1710978**.

Please let us know about your estate plans if you decide to join the **Heritage Society of the Alumni Association** by contacting Alumni Association President David Lamdin at dalamdin@gmail.com.
