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**Autor:** Nichols, Sarah

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# Taking Stock: gta Dissertations in Review

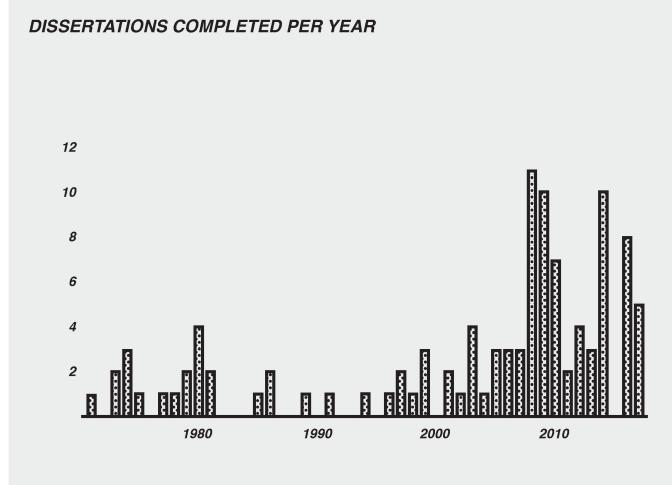
## Sarah Nichols

*Mittelbau*. The term used to describe academic staff – the cadre of assistants and doctoral candidates engaged in teaching and researching – connotes a central role within the institutional edifice. Yet these load-bearing components are often hidden reinforcements, illegible within the overall structure. They cycle through each professorship on temporary contracts, and much of their paid labor is in support of the common goals of the professorship. When looking back at fifty years of the gta, where do we see their traces?

Dissertations provide a clear point of entry, as doctoral candidates have been a part of gta since its founding. Yet, dissertation writing is notoriously solitary, with each project intensely focused on a

different topic – a productive myopia. Dissertations also reflect a mass of scholars and ideas that can be read as clear forms in a nebulous field. What “red threads” run through the dissertations? Are there

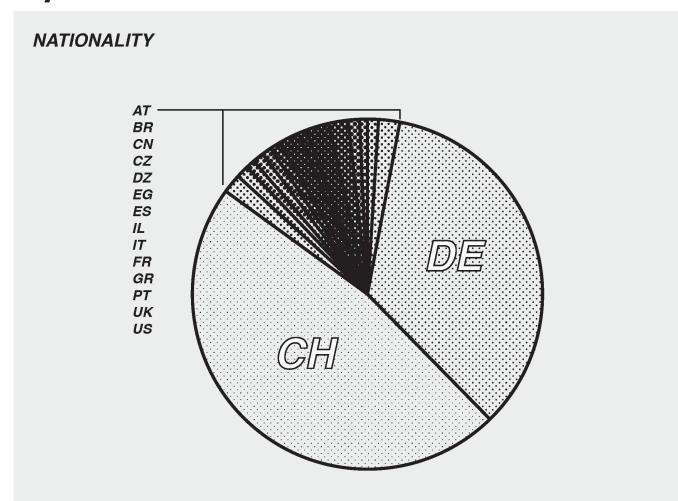
common preoccupations or recurring themes? What longer trajectories are launched by the temporary work of a doctoral candidate? The following considers the 108 dissertations completed in the first fifty years of



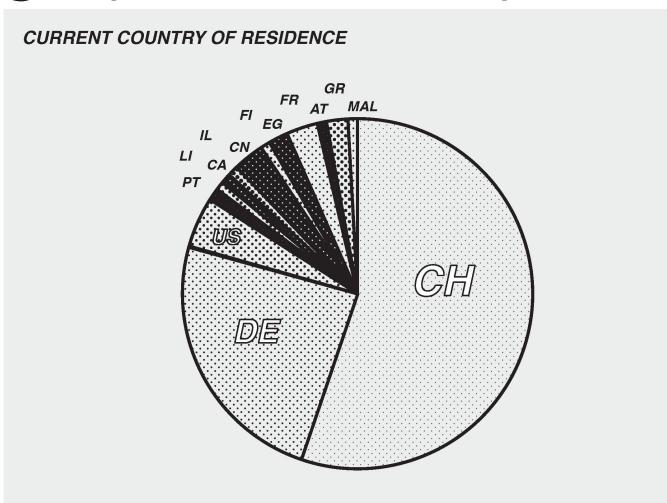
the gta to take the measure—using statistics both significant and arbitrary—of a body of work and people that is both bound together and atomized.

Of the “history” and “theory” in the institute’s name, the former seems to be the dominant format for doctoral research. Only a handful of dissertations explicitly prioritize theory; the vast majority are framed as histories, although historical periods are not all evenly represented. From the beginning, the gta has been writing histories of the not-so-distant past. Two-thirds of the dissertations look at twentieth-century topics. At the same time, a certain temporal distance has been respected: few dissertations look at contemporary architecture.

One-fifth are monographs. Five dissertations have been written about Le Corbusier. Four have been written on the architecture of the Middle Ages and four on topics related to Gottfried Semper. Three have been completed on the architecture of antiquity, two on Aldo Rossi, and one on Sigfried Giedion. The rate of production is increasing. Dissertations have become significantly longer. Those submitted in the first twenty-five years averaged two hundred and fifty pages; in the last twenty-five years their length has been closer to four hundred pages. The shift from typewriter to word processor—and denser



line spacing — may mean that the actual difference in average length is even greater. Placed end-to-end, the pages of all the dissertations combined could plot out a return from the architecture faculty's current location at ETH Hönggerberg back to its origin point, the Semperbau, just over five kilometers.



More dissertations are also being handed in. Well over half (sixty-four) were completed in the last ten years — an eightfold increase from the number completed in the first ten years. And, as of 2017, a

further thirty-nine dissertations were underway. Of the dissertations submitted, about one-half have been published. At least one of these books was financed using a crowd-sourcing campaign.

Just under half of all candidates are from Switzerland, and one third are from Germany. This distribution has remained consistent over time. No other nationalities — including other neighboring nations — are significantly represented. Just over half of the graduates have stayed in Switzerland after the completion of their dissertation. Two-thirds of those coming from Germany have returned to their home country. Subject matter has been more geographically diverse but still with a Germanic focus: 25 percent of dissertations have "Swiss" topics, and 15 percent have "German" topics — loosely

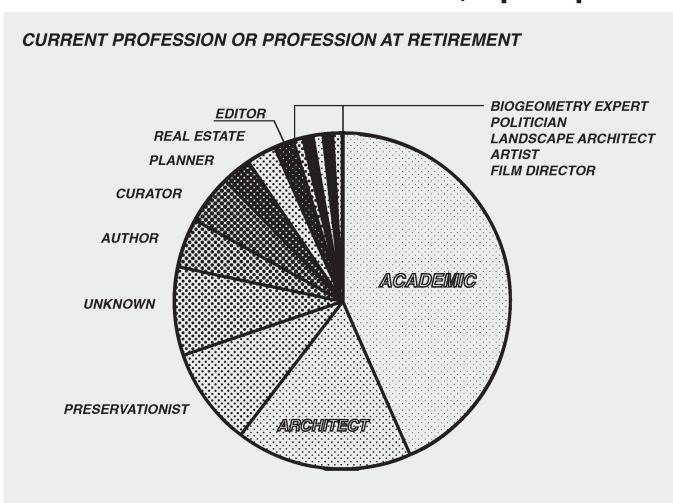
meaning that the architect, institution, or object(s) of study are largely based in Switzerland or Germany respectively. The remaining dissertations – just over half – are centered primarily on European topics, especially in France or Italy, with less than 20 percent concerning topics outside of Europe. Geographic diversity of subject matter has decreased in recent years from a peak around 1999–2008. Of the fifty dissertations completed since 2009, three (all completed in 2016 or 2017) dealt with topics outside Europe and the United States.

One-third of all gta dissertations have been supervised by the same gta professor. Two-thirds of dissertations were completed by men. Nearly two decades passed from the founding of the institute before a female candidate completed a dissertation within the gta in 1986. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the number of male and female doctoral candidates has been about even. In the gta's fifty-year history, however, not a single dissertation has been completed under the primary supervision of a female professor.

The language in which dissertations are written is shifting. Until 2000, most dissertations were written in German. The handful that were not in German were written in one of the other Swiss national languages. The first dissertations written in English were submitted in 2003. Since then, English has become increasingly common. In 2012 the gta doctoral program was established and, with it, dedicated courses

for doctoral candidates. Deviating from the bachelor's and master's programs, English was established as the teaching language. Of the thirteen doctoral fellows who have begun the program so far, all but one wrote or are writing in English.

Four in every ten of the graduates who could be located remained in academia after finishing their dissertation. Of these, half have the title of professor. One person who completed their dissertation at the gta was later named a professor there. After completion, just under 20 percent of graduates went on to practice architecture as their primary profession. Another 10 percent work in historic preservation, 5 percent as curators, and 5 percent as independent authors. One graduate has achieved particular renown as a television host, popular author, and consultant



for state clients studying "biogeometry." The "Dr. sc. ETH Zurich" conferred on completion is commonly referred to as a "Ph.D.," suggesting a dual nature to gta dissertations: philosophical study within the

Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture and the Department of Architecture, yet embedded within the empirical foundation of a technical university.

**Note:** This text is based on a research project and exhibition initiated by Prof. Dr. Ita Heinze-Greenberg, with Silvan Blumenthal, Mikel Martínez Mugica, Sarah Nichols, and Yue Zhao. Assistance from Michaela Pöschinger and Wilko Potgeter. Data and statistics are the sole responsibility of the author.

**figs. 1 a-d** Illustrations by Sarah Nichols, 2019.