This course examines the significance of the diagram to the practice and theory of architecture, both historically and in the contemporary moment. Special emphasis is placed on the trajectory of diagrammatic thinking in the early information age. To what extent do digital and computational practices uphold, transcend, and/or undermine established understandings of the architectural diagram? Is the so-called post-critical era more or less amenable to diagrammatic thinking than preceding eras? What is (or should be) the role of diagram in education and practice today?

The course begins with an introduction to diagrammatic thinking in general, including its theoretical origins in the discipline of linguistics and its practical origins in mapping and early pictorial communication. The modern history of data visualization provides a framework through which to discern how diagrammatic thinking have evolved in response to cultural and technical developments in representation over the past two-and-a-half centuries.

The course then explores the history of the diagram in the design disciplines, primarily architecture, but also urban design, landscape architecture, and planning. Essays by canonical practitioners, historians, and theorists steer the exploration. Special emphasis is placed on the extent to which diagrams resonate with realized works. Does the act of distillation inherent to diagramming necessarily lead to abstraction with respect to “real” architecture? Another significant question is the extent to which diagramming complements and/or supplants other types of graphics (drawings and models) as a privileged mode of design inquiry. Is the diagram an a priori generator or an ex post facto communicator of design ideas?

The course concludes with a consideration of the future of the diagram in design practice. The literature of the post-critical era, in particular the theories of Mario Carpo on the future of practice, frame a survey of diagrammatic practices by contemporary designers. As architecture becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, the traditional role of the diagram is threatened, and its future role is uncertain.

To lay bare the history of diagrammatic thinking both within the design disciplines and more broadly in art and science.

To strengthen students understanding of diagrammatic thinking, so that they may enact more strategic practices of diagramming in their own work.

To create a publication on diagramming that contributes to the post-critical literature on the design process.

The course meets one time per week. Each class period includes a lecture by the instructor, a student-led discussion of required readings, and a diagramming workshop based on the themes of the week.

The course may be taken either as an architectural elective or as a history topical, and it is open to both graduate and undergraduate students. All students produce a midterm project that is primarily graphic, but also includes a brief written analysis. Students enrolled in the architectural elective option develop a graphic-intensive final project that contributes a specific perspective to an envisioned publication. Students enrolled in the history topical option write a research paper on diagrammatic thinking that, again, contributes a specific perspective to an envisioned publication. In addition to fulfilling the basic requirements of the course, graduate students will be assigned class presentations on special topics that fall outside the domain of the assigned readings.