



Emerging  
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Network

# Get to know the ECPN Graduate Liaisons

## Spotlight on Columbia

This latest ECPN Outreach series highlights the Graduate Liaisons in the [ECPN Liaison Program](#), who facilitate the flow of information about their particular graduate programs from their perspectives to you, their fellow emerging conservators. Whether you're pre-program or a graduate of a different program or specialty, they are here to help!

This highlight is an interview with **Gabriela Figuereo**, our Columbia Liaison, who recently graduated from the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University and has agreed to answer questions about her graduate studies, pre-program experiences, and career goals.



Gabriela Figuereo, Columbia GSAPP HP'19

**The Historic Preservation Program at Columbia University**, is a two-year degree program in the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation (GSAPP). Graduate students earn an M.S. in Historic Preservation, with additional dual degree options with Masters in Architecture, Urban Planning, and Real Estate Development. The Columbia program [website](#) has a wealth of information regarding their programs, entry requirements, and information about students and their publications. If you have additional questions and don't want to cold email a program administrator, please reach out to Gabriela at [cu.ecpn.liaison@gmail.com](mailto:cu.ecpn.liaison@gmail.com).

Scroll through below for personal insight, tips and tricks, and valuable information about this impressive emerging conservator, her graduate studies, and her chosen specialty!

### **Outreach Officers' Burning Questions:**

**1. What resources do you consistently reach for during graduate school courses/when approaching treatments?**

When approaching treatments I frequently reference the [National Park Service Preservation Briefs](#), which are publications that outline various conservation treatments for historic building materials. This is a good resource to get an overview on a material I am not familiar with and gives me a place to branch out from with further research. I also often reference the [American Society for Testing and Materials \(ASTM\)](#) standards when conducting material testing.

**2. What is a tool or material that you use everyday/most often?**

The tool I most often use would definitely be a camera, and despite having used one for most of my life I still had to learn how to use it properly in the context of capturing the macro and micro details in architectural conservation. I learned through experience how easy it is to miss important details when documenting a large-scale project. At the same time, when you're so focused on documenting a small test area or the condition of a specific material, it's easy to miss documenting the overall context. I had a professor that frequently reminded us to "take the long shot!" and I still need to remind myself when starting a new project.

**3. What has been your favorite treatment/project you have completed at Columbia (or pre-program)? Why?**

My favorite project was our studio class's study of the Old Essex County Jail in Newark, NJ. The jail was abandoned in 1971 and has been left to deteriorate ever since. Our studio project was an opportunity to help the local community raise awareness on the historical significance of the jail and justify its conservation as a landmark in the city of Newark to their local government. As part of the project, I worked with other students to conduct a conditions survey and document the abandoned structure. It was really rewarding to be able to use my interests in conservation and materials history to help advocate for the preservation of a site. You can find more resources on the jail and see our research on this website: <https://www.oldssexcountyjail.org/>

**4. What has been the biggest challenge for you at Columbia?**

The biggest challenge was only having 2 years in the program and only 1 year to focus on my thesis research. I wanted to take on a lot more with my research but had to cut it down quite a bit. I learned the hard way about setting realistic goals for research.

**5. What has been the biggest highlight for you at Columbia?**

The biggest highlight was the intellectual collaboration between students and faculty. Our ideas and perspectives as students were valued by faculty and we were able to learn through discussion and experimentation.

**6. How do you feel your experience at Columbia differs from other conservation programs/What does Columbia do differently from other programs in art conservation?**

Columbia's Historic Preservation program is made up of students with many different interests and backgrounds. The field of Historic Preservation includes architectural conservators, architects, urban planners, historians,

lawyers, artists, and more. In Columbia's program I was able to study architectural conservation in the context of these different perspectives and it helped to prepare me for working as a conservator in the professional field.

**7. Has Columbia arranged networking for future job/internship opportunities? Are alumni involved with hiring/networking?**

Columbia's Preservation Alumni network is very active with current students. They plan networking events throughout the year. I know several people in my cohort who have found job opportunities through the connections they made with alumni. They also sponsor a yearly scholarship to support student thesis research.

**8. What would you most like ECPs to know about your school/chosen track/specialty?**

Architectural conservation is a unique and challenging field that involves adaptability and compromise. You will have to work with many different groups of people and not everyone will value the same things that you do. A large part of the work you do will be advocating for the best treatment for the materials when it is not the simplest or cheapest option. Most people working in construction are not aware of the special needs and limitations of historic materials despite often working on historic buildings. It is important to emphasize the long-term benefits of proper treatment and maintenance over the short-term solutions they may be more familiar with.

**9. Is there anything you wish you had done before starting your studies to better prepare for graduate school at Columbia?/What did you wish you knew about graduate school/conservation/Columbia before starting?**

When I first became interested in conservation I was worried about my lack of background in the sciences. My undergraduate degree is in architectural history and I thought I would need to take several classes in chemistry and geology before applying to a graduate program. However, architectural conservation programs don't require the same prerequisites as many art conservation programs. While I still wish I had more of a chemistry background, I now know that experience in the field is irreplaceable for an architectural conservator and I've learned more practicing in the field than I would have by taking a couple of extra geology and chemistry courses.

**Thank you so much Gabriela for sharing your experiences at Columbia University!**

**Readers, stay tuned for our next interview in March and please continue to let us know your thoughts and send any questions you have to us or our Graduate Liaisons. Reach us at [ecpn.aic.outreach@gmail.com](mailto:ecpn.aic.outreach@gmail.com)**

**Bio**

**Gabriela Figueroa** graduated from the Historic Preservation Program at Columbia University in 2019. During her graduate studies, she interned at Highbridge Materials Consulting and after graduation, started working as an architectural conservator at Jablonski Building Conservation in New York City.