



Emerging
Conservation
Professionals
Network

Get to know the ECPN Graduate Liaisons

Spotlight on UPenn

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!



Left: **Meris Westberg** at **Tumacacori National Historic Park** observing the condition of lime plaster for a course on the preservation of archaeological sites.

Right: **Héctor J. Berdecía-Hernández** at the **Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials (CAAM)** at the **Penn Museum**.

This particular highlight is a twofor! **Meris Westberg** (current UPenn liaison) and her predecessor (the first-ever UPenn liaison) **Héctor J. Berdecía-Hernández**, have graciously answered a million questions about architectural conservation and their experiences in graduate school.

The **Stuart Weitzman Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at the University of Pennsylvania** offers four concentrations for their master's program: Architectural Conservation, Preservation Design, Preservation Planning, and Public History of the Built Environment. All tracks are within the field of cultural heritage, but we will be focusing on details from the Architectural Conservation track. The [UPenn program website](#) is robust, but if you have questions and don't want to cold email a program administrator, please reach out to Meris at UPenn.ecpn.liaison@gmail.com!

Scroll through below for personal insight, tips and tricks, and valuable information about these impressive emerging conservators, their graduate studies, and their chosen specialty!

Outreach Officers' Burning Questions:

- 1) **What resources (articles/sites/data/books/etc.) were most useful to you before and during graduate school AND/OR what is a tool or material that you use constantly?**

Meris:

JSTOR

The Journal of the Association of Preservation Technology

A decent DSLR camera. UPenn recommends at least an 18-55mm lens. What you need really depends on what you're trying to capture. Don't break the bank until you have to!

Hector:

Giving Preservation a History by P. Max and R. Mason

A History of Architectural Conservation by Jukka Jokilehto

The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation by Miles Glendinning (specific terminology for Conservation courses)

Historic England/English Heritage's Practical Building Conservation Series Collection Preservation Briefs published by the National Park Service

Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation edited by Tom Jester

The articles in the **AIC Journal**, **Conservation Studies Journal** (published by the IIC), and the **APT**

Bulletin: The Journal of the Association of Preservation Technology articles

- 2) **How many times did you apply to graduate school and what do you feel was the strongest component of your application?**

Meris: Just once, to one school. Philadelphia felt right, and UPenn has one of the best conservation programs. I think my work and volunteer experience was the strongest part of my application. I've been fortunate to work in the public history field since finishing undergrad in 2010, starting in archiving and collections care, then in paper conservation, and finally in frame conservation and preventive work (mostly for exhibitions). My volunteerism has been in collections care and architectural rehabilitation.

Hector: I applied to four schools, once, and they were all successful. At the time, I was interested in pursuing a dual degree in historic preservation and an architecture professional degree (M.Arch). At UPenn, I decided to follow the conservation track to become an architectural conservator. I feel that the strongest components of my application were my admissions essay, writing sample, and CV. Even though I did not have strong GRE scores, I made sure that those three components were strong enough to boost my application.

- 3) **Is there anything you wish you had known or done to better prepare for graduate school/your conservation education at UPenn?**

Meris: I wish I had tried to develop my computer-based design and hand drafting skills more before coming to UPenn. Thankfully, my instructors are understanding about differing skill levels. Students have access to virtual training for things like AutoCAD, ArcGIS, and the Adobe Suite, so it just takes a bit of extra time with each design-based assignment to teach myself as I go. My talented classmates are a great help as well!

- 4) **Do you have any advice for applicants/pre-programmers?**

Meris: Just that you should really know why you're 'doing it.' Take the time to critically evaluate the public history, preservation, and museum fields, as well as your own strengths, weaknesses, and biases - it will make you a better student and professional in the long run.

Hector: Pre-program internships are not usually required to become an architectural conservator. Still, I strongly recommend pursuing internships during undergraduate studies that are related to the field, whether it's in a historic house museum, a restoration project, a laboratory, or a preservation government agency. These opportunities will give you a hint of what the field looks like, boost your resumé, and can help you get good recommendation letters.

Students interested in the architectural conservation track, like other programs, are required to take chemistry courses before entering. Besides chemistry, I would say that some architectural history, architectural design, or archaeology courses are a must.

Okay, thank you both for your frank honesty and useful suggestions. Now for the UPenn program-specific questions that our audience has been waiting for...

5) What would you most like ECPs to know about your school/specialty?

Meris: I knew for a while that graduate school for traditional art conservation was not the path for me. I'm grateful for the training and skills I developed as a technician, but I've always been drawn toward the 'bigger picture' when it comes to cultural heritage. UPenn's program allows me to scratch both itches. I still get to enjoy the technical/material science side of things in the architectural conservation track, while having time and space to explore the greater forces that drive preservation.

Hector: UPenn offers flexibility in enrolling in courses from the other concentrations, other departments, and even other schools, such as Wharton [Business School]. Even though I was in the architectural conservation concentration, I took all the courses related to preservation policy (law, economics, public policy) and a course in the archaeology department at the Penn Museum.

6) How do you feel your experience at UPenn differs from other conservation programs and/or what does UPenn do differently from other programs with a track in architecture conservation?

Meris: UPenn's preservation program is not exclusively conservation-focused, like the other programs. All students, regardless of concentration, take required core courses to ground us in the breadth of preservation practice (of which conservation is one branch). A bonus to this system is that I can be flexible about the types of jobs I apply for, in case a purely-conservation job isn't available or what I want after school.

Also, the conservation track at UPenn trains us more in analysis and mitigation strategies than restorative treatment. Since it is impossible to manage all conditions all the time in the built environment, we necessarily take a more preventive approach to conservation rather than a 'curatorial' approach, where every building (i.e. object) is treated to a museum standard. I've heard that other schools prioritize restoration trade skills more - which I'm a bit jealous of sometimes - but I know mastering a building trade can only come with experience, not a degree.

Hector: Penn has a specific architectural conservation tailored curriculum that includes conservation science, masonry, building pathology, building diagnostics and monitoring, wood, architectural metals, architectural surface finishes, etc. While other historic preservation graduate programs in the U.S. have some aleatory building conservation courses, UPenn has a straight-forward curriculum dedicated to architectural conservation.

7) What has been your favorite treatment or project you have completed at UPenn?

Meris: The Philadelphia Register of Historic Places nomination that I developed for my documentation class was very rewarding, albeit a grueling process. We did archival research, photo documentation, architectural drawings, condition assessments, social histories, and identified nomination criteria. I'm looking forward to the projects for my masonry and wood conservation seminars this year.

Hector: Besides my graduate thesis research, my favorite project at UPenn was developing conservation and treatment recommendations for the Receiving Vault on the Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, PA. The Receiving Vault, built in 1913, was constructed using early 20th-century hollow concrete blocks and terra cotta masonry. For this project, I developed a full condition assessment of the exteriors (which included drawings and rectified photography), developed some instrumental analyses and provided recommendations for treatments and further testing, considering the budget constraints.

8) What has been the biggest challenge for you at UPenn? The biggest highlight?

Meris: My biggest challenge has been transitioning to the world of design and architecture. Many of my classmates studied architecture in college, so they already had much of the vocabulary, drafting, and software skills needed to hit the ground running. Also, intellectually zooming in and out from micro to macro scales, i.e. from microscopy to preservation theory, can be exhausting and really have you chasing your tail sometimes. A big highlight has been getting to just sit and learn as my primary job - it's a nice "break" from a 9-5 life. One specific highlight, though, was doing polarized light microscopy on stone and ceramic samples for the first time. It's mind-blowingly beautiful!

Hector: My biggest challenge at UPenn was adapting to a new space and, as a native Spanish speaker, the language barrier. It took me a long time to adjust and learn the terminology and concepts of both the construction industry and the conservation field in English. Still, it was a necessary learning process that helped me to succeed in my studies.

9) Has UPenn arranged networking for future job/internship opportunities? Are alumni involved with hiring/networking?

Meris: Yes, we have a great professional development office in the School of Design and an active and generous alumni base. I chose UPenn mostly because of the alumni I had met in DC. I think that there's a shared understanding and expectation of quality across alumni, even those who graduated decades apart. It gives me a lot of confidence that there are so many UPenn alumni in hiring positions.

Hector: Yes, the Alumni Office, the Department, and Career Services actively organize webinars, happy hours, symposia, etc. during which you can meet alumni. A career fair is held annually with firms, non-profits, and public agencies, which helped me get one summer internship. Still, in the end, it is up to you to actively reach out to professors and alumni (do networking), join professional organizations, and seek out educational and professional development opportunities. Graduate school is the time to make those connections!

Hector, as an alum, a question specifically for you - did you find work immediately after graduating, and if not, what did you do? How did you find work and keep your skills honed?

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has shut down a lot of projects, for many of my colleagues and me, it has been challenging to find job opportunities in the general historic preservation field, but even more so in the architectural conservation field. I was lucky that I landed a fantastic job opportunity (networking is really a huge part of the field). My new job is closely related to architectural conservation and conservation education, though it is not a 'bench conservation' opportunity [in which you work directly in a laboratory and outline conservation treatments]. I'm currently thinking about how to frame my new work experience when applying to jobs and also to do some small hands-on conservation work and treatment to keep getting experience; along with taking seminars, conducting personal research, and writing some peer-reviewed articles.

Meris and Hector, this has been an inspiring set of responses, thank you so much. One last thing...

10) Have your professional pursuits or focus of study changed since entering graduate school?

Meris: Slightly. I came in thinking that I would specialize in masonry, but it turns out that I'm still very motivated by preventive conservation (which is what I was doing in my last job at the National Gallery). I'll be writing my thesis on preventive conservation and emergency preparedness, rather than doing an experiment-based thesis. Hopefully, I won't regret it!

Hector: Graduate school helped me define what I want for my professional life and beyond. In the coming years, I expect to continue gaining experience as an architectural conservator and become an AIC Professional Associate. Then, I would like to pursue the architecture licensure path and become a licensed architect.

Thank you both for your generosity in taking the time to answer all of our questions. We're really glad that you are part of the ECPN and so grateful for your energies on the Board and in the Liaison Program!

To our audience, stay tuned, as these fabulous UPenn grads continue their careers. Please reach out to them with questions about their path, their insights, and anything else you can think of. As homework, check out the resources they mentioned in the first section, peruse the UPenn program website, and let us know what you think of this first installment of the Graduate Liaison Highlights!

Bios

Meris Westberg (she/her) is originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She graduated from American University (Washington, D.C.) in 2010, majoring in French Language and European Studies, with minors in history and philosophy. It was her focus on U.S. women's history and feminist philosophy (along with lots of right-time-right-place luck) that got her her first job with the National Park Service in the archives at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHS. She then worked as a technician on the conservation team for the Iraqi Jewish Archive Preservation Project at the National Archives and Records Administration. After the completion of that project, she was hired back as a permanent conservator technician in the NARA paper lab, where she began doing more preventive work such as building custom housings, environmental monitoring, emergency preparedness training, etc. Moving in the preventive direction, she took a position at the National Gallery of Art as the Preventive Conservation Department's first technician, which was largely focused on frame conservation and modification for exhibitions. While at the NGA, she participated in the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative's 2018 Heritage Emergency and Response Training. That, along with her cumulative work and volunteer experience, and general love of old buildings, inspired her to scale up to architectural conservation and write her master's thesis on disaster preparedness for built heritage sites.

Héctor J. Berdecía-Hernández, Assoc. AIA (he/him) grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico and was the first-ever UPenn graduate liaison and is currently continuing to volunteer with ECPN as one of the Communications Officers. Currently, he serves as the founding Director/Coordinator-General of the Escuela Taller de Conservación y Restauración del Patrimonio Histórico of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP by its acronym in Spanish). Héctor has worked in several architectural conservation and restoration projects at Quinn Evans, the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, and the Historic American Building Survey at the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the Office of the Architect of the Capitol as a Córdova-Fernós Fellow in Washington D.C. As an emerging architectural conservator and educator, his research focuses on the conservation of historic buildings and sites, with an emphasis on traditional building materials and technologies of 19th & 20th Century built heritage. He graduated with an M.S. in Historic Preservation in 2020 with a concentration in Architectural Conservation from the University of Pennsylvania. Before beginning graduate studies, he received a B.EnvD. in Environmental Design-Architecture with a double major in History of the Americas and a Post-Bachelor Certificate in Urban Studies from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. To supplement his graduate studies, he also took Conservation Science courses within Georgetown University and the Università degli Studi di Firenze.