Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I write to apply for [university position]. I will receive my PhD at Harvard University in May 2018, with a dissertation entitled The Stratified City: Military Architecture and Urban Experience in Renaissance Italy. My primary field of specialization is Italian Renaissance art and architecture, but my published and ongoing research spans the late-medieval and early modern periods, covering the artistic production of both northern and southern Europe.

An overriding intellectual concern motivates my scholarship. I am fascinated by how practical technologies of spatial visualization and construction, many long neglected by art historians, catalyzed radical aesthetic transformations in the figural and building arts. Whether Renaissance fortifications, glass windows, maps, or architectural tracings in stone and plaster, my objects of inquiry largely lie beyond canonical art-historical categories. I believe that such objects, scrutinized in all their formal and material complexity, can challenge and enlarge the boundaries of our discipline.

This conviction animates my doctoral project, which I am concluding while a visiting scholar at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome. Drawing upon my archival discoveries, I interpret bastioned Renaissance fortifications as multilayered, multifunctional structures that inaugurated new modes of urban mobility and visual experience. (I discuss some of my documentary findings in an article for the Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz.) I analyze a remarkable repertory of sixteenth-century defensive typologies: projecting forms and vaulted recesses to protect men and firearms; earthen ramparts elevated to command strategic views over and beyond the city; and labyrinthine passages to thwart underground explosives.

Through several thematic sections (Infrastructure, Landscape, Iconography, and Urban Networking), my dissertation conceives and charts interconnections across disparate domains of building practice. I demonstrate how the spatial-constructional principles of fortifications were transferred to other large-scale built structures: palace passageways, subterranean tunnels, and the massive sculpted landforms of terraced gardens. I attend to how such interventions transformed the built environment into stratified systems of observation, concealment, and bodily movement. Above all, I strive to recover the breathtaking artistry and ingenuity of architectures too often sidelined in art-historical scholarship as merely utilitarian products of engineering.

Nearly all my research confronts this interpretive challenge. In a recent article in the journal Art History, part of a second book project on early modern environmental design, I trace the profound aesthetic and perceptual consequences of a seemingly mundane phenomenon: the proliferation of colorless, non-decorative window glass in northern Renaissance dwellings. This material permitted builders in frigid climates to design glazed enclosures that simulated the airy, colonnaded architecture of Renaissance Italy—inspiring painters, in turn, to panegyrize these luminous spaces. My future investigations will enlarge upon the strategies developed by Renaissance architects to manipulate the natural elements, whether for practical or aesthetic effect, centuries before the advent of electrical illumination and advanced climate control.

A similar approach informs my teaching. I encourage students to recognize the quotidian structures and infrastructures that shape their lives. Even those with little exposure to painting or sculpture must routinely negotiate sophisticated building technologies, from elevators and subway lines to plumbing systems and electrical wiring. While often overlooked, these architectures powerfully reframe our perceptions of space, time, and mobility in ways that merit keen visual analysis and deep interpretation. At the same time, I push students to channel such visual thinking toward the imaginative reconstruction of the past, to develop an experiential sympathy with a world that might otherwise seem abstract and remote.
To this end, my undergraduate surveys on medieval and Renaissance art would incorporate close-up study of original artifacts at [institution]. Primary sources will figure heavily in my upper-level courses, including texts from “Picturing and Harnessing the Elements: Renaissance Pyrotechnics, Hydraulics, and Pneumatics,” “Italian Renaissance Art Theory,” and “Early Modern Constructions of Utopia.” With advanced graduate and undergraduate students, I would make generous use of [institution’s] early modern manuscripts and printed treatises, teasing out the complex relationship between word and image in such objects.

Over several years, I have nourished my knowledge in these domains through engagement with an international scholarly network. I undertook paleographic training with an expert of late-medieval vernacular manuscripts from Rome, before continuing research with the Medici Archive Project in Florence. My exposure to cutting-edge work has been enriched at the Bibliotheca Hertziana: a crossroads for Italian and German-speaking scholars that has emerged as among the most vibrant centers of research on medieval southern Italy. Such experiences have broadened my historical and geographical horizons, drawing my attention to such less-studied regions as Naples, Sicily, Apulia, and Lombardy. This has borne fruit in my study, to appear in a volume published by Brepols, on the Renaissance survival and mutation of gothic drawing practices on stone and plaster across the Mediterranean.

I would be thrilled to continue such dialogues in [institution’s] cross-disciplinary environment. In addition to bringing my hybrid interests to teaching and advising, I would welcome engagement with the interdepartmental initiatives of the [institution]. As evinced by my publications, my own inquiry has profited immensely from exchanges with colleagues in literature and the history of science. It would be a privilege to contribute, in turn, to the intellectual ferment at [institution], whose scholars are on the vanguard of interdisciplinary research on the material history of early modern cultural and knowledge production.

Thank you for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,

Morgan Ng