

On Inevitability and Contingency: The Polemics of Neutrality

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Abstract

This paper will focus initially on the current debate among architectural educators as to the use or value of post-structural cultural criticism as a model which serves to focus and direct the development of pedagogical methods and systems of instruction. Second, the paper will attempt to describe a method of teaching that might resist the intellectual inevitability of any of these various pedagogical models.

The intention of this paper/presentation is to examine the role of validating or authorizing structures in the development of pedagogical systems, with particular emphasis on the most recent developments in beginning design education. While it is assumed that any such developments in the first two years of the educational process are being employed elsewhere within the curriculum, it is understood that those early years constitute the principal filter through which all subsequent learning occurs. This overtly or covertly defined filter, under whatever name or -ism might be used to describe it, becomes a system of thought (be it "critical" or "formal" or something in-between) which carries with it the risk of formal or intellectual determinism.

The contention of this paper is that post-structuralist criticism which is used as the intellectual underpinning of studio instruction is just as susceptible to the seductive pull of the very hegemonic power structures it seeks to undermine. In effect, in order to undermine those traditional bastions of validation or authority, the open-ended processes of this method of instruction must first negate and then replace the authorizing agencies of architectural education, in effect all those closed systems of reference which currently occupy the high ground in this battle of words and images. The empowerment of student as critic leaves closed rather than open the space of critical discourse in the studio. If all decisions are essentially subjective, internally process-driven decisions, then the fundamental role of the studio critic is negated as well.

This paper proposes an alternative strategy to either model described above: that it is not so much the question of politicized "criticism" which provides the grounding structure for design decisions, but rather *what* one chooses to be critical about which grounds the process of design. If there *is* any neutral ground in this intellectual battle for authority, perhaps it lies not in the violence of cultural criticism's parasitical program, but in the contingent and symbiotic relationships between site and program, individual desire and collective responsibility.

The paper will present the work done during the first two weeks of Tulane's M. Arch I program (students entering with degrees in other fields) as a tentative alternative to either the teaching models of deterministic modernist dogma or vague post-structural criticism.

Georges Bataille defined architecture as the "expression of the true nature of societies", a description and expression not only of the nature of the individual, but in particular to the expressive "physiognomy of officials". His description is a portrayal of prescription: that "only society's ideal nature -- that of authoritative command and prohibition -- expresses itself in actual architectural constructions. Thus great monuments rise up like dams, opposing a logic of majesty and authority to all unquiet elements; it is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that church and state speak to and impose silence upon the crowds."

Bataille's comment holds significant metaphorical weight when applied not only to architecture, but also to the very process of architectural education. This educational process, particularly the first two years of that process, is undergoing some fairly significant change. The "unquiet elements" are beginning to react against just such an authoritative system of imposed silence and prohibition. In the past, power, and thus, control of the pedagogical direction of the studio environment has traditionally been in the hands of the profession, the administration, and the studio critic. In the context of the studio, the critic, as a representative of the authority of the profession has been viewed by the student as the ultimate arbiter of success and failure.

In contrast to this pedagogical model, one of the most pervasive changes in studio teaching in the early years has been the recent effort to directly empower the student as both critic and maker. This effort marginalizes the authoritative role of the studio critic. And this marginalization of *external* critical authority produces a question-filled space around and within the nature and form of authority.

It is this marginalization, or denial of central authority about which I wish to speak in the context of beginning design instruction, for it is as dangerous as it is seductive to release our responsibility for the education of future architects to the necessary (and hence, authoritative) indeterminacy of post-structural forms of cultural criticism. Post-structuralist criticism which is used as the intellectual underpinning of studio instruction is just as susceptible to the seductive pull of the very hegemonic power structures it seeks to undermine. In effect, in order to undermine those traditional bastions of validation or authority (that is: the accepted canon of architectural knowledge, form and compositional rules), the open-ended processes of this method of instruction must first negate and then replace the authorizing agencies of architectural education: all those closed systems of historic, symbolic or formal reference which currently occupy the high ground in this battle of words and images.

The appearance of such dogmatically indeterminate and subjective methodologies in the beginning design studio, however, need not be seen as inimical to the responsibilities which the beginning design instructor has to challenge a student's learning process. His/her active pursuit of architectural knowledge through the use of both subjective and objective decision-making capabilities can form the basis of a student-directed and critical decision-making which identifies both process and product as equivalent educational elements, in that both the application of method and the acquisition of knowledge occur as a part of and as a result of the making process.

Put simply, indeterminacy does not necessarily mean indecisive: such open-ended and exploratory attributes of the design process and the fact of the *critical* architectural product can actually broaden the student's understanding of the myriad facets of architecture. And it is this open-ended characteristic of applied post-structural criticism in the design studio which leads to the presentation of the work done by a group of first professional degree graduate students (M. Arch I) and undergraduate transfer students in the first week of their first design studio, during the summer of 1993. The work done in conjunction with this studio explored the notion that there were no "sides" in architecture: that the purportedly dualistic qualities attributed to architecture since the enlightenment, of "art" and "science" were inaccurate, misleading, and inhibiting to a broader understanding and application of architectural ideas.

In New Orleans, the median strip that separates the two opposing directions of traffic on a boulevard street is commonly called the "neutral ground": something in-between. It is the space that, in fact, defines the street, it is both central and marginal. The neutral ground always operates simultaneously to both divide and conjoin two apparently opposing spaces. The neutral ground of the studio, then, is that charged space where neither "side" has ultimate authority, but where both authorities can quite equally move in opposite directions simultaneously without the direct conflict of authorizing agents or philosophies.

It is this space of non-hierarchical "neutrality", in which both sides -- the student and the critic -- bring ideas and actions of equal value to the processes and products of critical design thinking. A critical proposition, then, is that neither "side" must, of necessity, be in authority. Whether these "sides" are constituted by process/product, idea/form, subjective/objective, student/critic, or any of the other generally operative dialectical instructional systems, I contend that both can operate simultaneously as mediative and meditative responses or reactions within the collective notion of "design". The central proposition of neutrality given to these students lies in the contention that neither program nor site are neutral, but that, instead, it is the interpretation and critical questioning of the value or content of those two central edifices of architectural design which constructs the ground for an authoritative and purposeful neutrality.

We began with two programs, which were not programs in the conventional sense of named spaces and allocated square footage:

The first was an effort at eloquent and suggestive vagueness, more about what architecture was not, or what it might be, rather than what *Architecture* with a big "A" was. The program statement began with two quotations, one about innocence and one about the Sirens' promise of simultaneity. The first from that most innocent of modernists, Louis Kahn:

Strip yourself of the established means and begin again in those primitive ways to catch the spirit of learning. . . .

The second from from Richard Brilliant's Visual Narratives:

The beginning is connected with the promise of the end, and retrospectively, the end is connected with the promise of the beginning. Temporal succession in these works can be conceived as a road that neither comes fro somewhere nor goes anywhere, but is comprehended, as if fro far away, as a whole. The various actions and events, . . . thus seen, are connected by a network of overlapping descriptions bound up in a present that incorporates past and future together.

This program statement described a process of investigation which required simultaneous actions on the part of the student: of interpretation and critical thinking, of intuitive making and intentional thinking -- of the conjunction of form as idea and matter as an element of substance.

The first week then was intended to introduce the student to architecture as a discipline of thinking and doing simultaеously, and thus, as a discipline in which the clean and precise as well as the dirty and vague, were both necessary and equally significant components of the design process. Hence the second program statement, given at the same time as the first:

OKAY:

Here's the Program in a nutshell.

We're gonna make some boxes out of plywood, glue and screws.

We're gonna fill 'em with sand.

We're gonna read some stories.

We're gonna carve up the sand to portray something in the stories.

We're gonna fill up the carving in the sandbox with plaster. Til it dries.

We're gonna take out the plaster.

We're gonna do it again, and again, and again. Only a little different each time.

In-between times we're gonna talk about this architecture stuff.

In-between times, too, we're gonna do some drawings.

Some of the drawings will be crude, dirty charcoal drawings like cave people did.

Some of the drawings will be more carefully done by hopefully more sophisticated hands.

Some of the drawings will be even more carefully done using technical pencils, triangles, scales, and French curves (very sophisticated hands).

Then we will maybe read some more stories and make more plaster casts and do more drawings.

Somewhere in there we go to the beach (and make more plaster casts, in real sand).

Oughta be fun..

In another nutshell, there *wasn't* an **original** given site. The students ultimately created their own sites from interpretive reading in combination with concrete or material action. The students read Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*; selected one of the stories to draw/construct in sand; they cast them in plaster and then drew the results in a decreasing sequence of time from 30 minutes to 30 seconds as charcoal sketches on newsprint. Neither process was clean.

The drawings they did in two ways: first as a "site plan", looking down from above, and, second, as a series of perspectival views in which they were required to imaginatively inhabit the spaces created. The first drawing objectifies the product, the second forces them to see subjectively, to interpret or translate from one medium to another. As the time allowed for drawing the same thing decreased, each student began a process of editing, of making notations on the paper which describe only essential lines or characteristics of the space. While not equivalent to a "parti" diagram, this method of "drawn sight" makes the student aware of essential characteristics of form and organization, of what seems to them to be most important.

Overnight, they were required to redraw these constructions as conventional measured architectural plans, sections and elevations. This process was repeated for the first five days of the week, changing stories or scales, amplifying particular spaces already constructed: in effect, inhabiting the space which they had constructed. The function of the critic was to envelope the students' work with questions of form, representation, composition and intention in an effort to refine the efforts of each student relative to both their verbal and graphic interpretations of these "sites".

Implicit in this technique of drawing, casting in sand, redrawing, and redrawing again, is a quality of imprecision: rather than the precision or inevitability of science, there is the contingency of the failed pour, or the inaccuracy of translation because each drawing is, in fact a reverse or negative of the actual object produced. Students must confront the necessity of failure and seek to refine each failure by experimentation with the various materials used to draw, from hands to molds, to pieces of angle-iron.

At the end of the week the students were asked to select one of their casts for the final project which would be their first exposure to "architecture" as a constructed engagement or response to a given site. Fifteen 12" x 18" casts were

aligned in a single row with a 2" space between each cast. Each student was given one of the spaces between two casts, neither of which was made by that student. They were then asked to construct a space of passage and/or a space of view which would mediate between the two opposing sites. Essentially, they were asked to design the "neutral ground" between two new sites. The design response became a reactive response to, first, the topographic, formal or compositional conditions of each side of the site, and, second, became an interpretive response to the spatial necessities of "program" in a more conventional sense. Each activity built upon the translating or interpreting operations through which they had been working for the previous five days.

The results were gratifying in that the students were introduced to architectural thinking and making, as well as to the conventions of architectural drawing and craft, with the minimum imposition of external authority. There was no right or wrong response, only a set of questions which might be raised based upon that response.

In the end, the case for neutrality must be made based on the recognition that all design decisions are contingent upon some limiting factor or factors, and it is the contingent condition of the process and its result which therefore defines and illuminates the limits of architectural thought. In reality, no program or site is left uncharged, no student a *tabula rasa*, no critic an unbiased observer. In reducing the hierarchy of distinctions commonly held or made within the context of the studio, however, one can begin to construct a beginning studio in which all the traditional bases get covered in very unconventional ways. Student and teacher occupy the neutral ground of contingency and question, open to the traffic patterns of both sides, and free to cross the lines that demarcate "sides" with equanimity.