

# UNSTAKED TERRITORY: Frontiers of Beginning Design

Proceedings of the 19th National Conference on the Beginning  
Design Student, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma  
April 3-5, 2003



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Challenging The Boundaries I  
Challenging The Boundaries II  
Integrating The Boundaries  
Obscuring The Boundaries  
Various Terrains  
Initial Terrain

*Offered through the Research  
Office for Novice Design  
Education, LSU, College of Art  
and Design, School of  
Architecture.*

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Published by Oklahoma State University,  
College of Engineering, Architecture and Technology  
512 Engineering North  
Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-5714  
f: 405-744-5369

ISBN 0-9746642-0-0

## Incorporating Narrative into Beginning Design Solutions

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I define the use of narrative in architecture as a written document that conveys the meaning of an idea, person, or event through the description of a form, space, light, color, texture, or scale. The narrative is not a literal representation of what something is physically, but rather what it means to be. The use of narrative in the design process is not new. Architects such as John Hejduk, Lebbeus Woods, Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi, Rick Joy, Tadao Ando, as well as others have incorporated the use of written narrative into their design process in various ways. However, the use of narrative as a method to explore the design process and to develop ideas about program, form, and space might not be commonly presented as an option for design development to students at the beginning design level. The use of a written narrative can be employed in a wide variety of ways when approaching the design process, and in an academic setting can be used by beginning design students to help explore and shape a solution to a given design problem (Murff, Interview).

John Hejduk, an architect often associated with the use of narrative, used writing to explore architectural ideas to an even greater extent than he used narrative to create works of architecture (Hays, "Architecture" 780-782). While my use of narrative in my beginning design project was focused on achieving specific design solutions, Hejduk's narratives addressed a much more macro scale and sought to explore larger issues in architecture than what would be encountered by a beginning design student in a studio course. However, introducing narrative as a way to explore the creative process can introduce the beginning design student to a method of thinking and working that can expand in its application as the thinking and experiences of the student expand. What begins as a way to help think about and construct spaces can lead into a method of exploration of the meaning and theory of architecture.

Hejduk's use of narrative was essentially taking another discipline – writing – and using it as a way to approach architectural knowledge (R. Hejduk, Interview). He used narrative not only to explore spatial arrangements and possibilities, but theoretical issues as well (Hays, "Architecture" 780-787). While narrative can be used to facilitate the exploration of ideas pertaining to architecture at this level, its use can also be condensed to generating more specific ideas pertinent to the level of the beginning design student.

I first used narrative as a way to approach the design process during my third architectural studio course. Through the narratives I created I sought to describe and explore not necessarily the exact dimensions and descriptions of the spaces to be used in the project, but the ideas and meanings of the spaces and what the experience of these spaces should be.

Our project was to be a community complex for Tempe Sister Cities located along the Town Lake in Tempe, Arizona. The Sister City Program, started by former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, is an international program designed to help promote cultural understanding and world peace through the exchange of ideas, cultures, and people. In this program, municipalities in the United States are paired with international cities of similar size. The cities are supposed to exchange ideas in the areas of economic issues, education, government, and social programs. Cities in the United States can have any number of Sister Cities around the world, but no two U.S. cities can be paired with the same international city.

The Tempe Sister Cities project began in 1971 when the city of Tempe, Arizona, was first paired with the city of Skopje, Macedonia (then Yugoslavia). This was the first Sister City connection between a U.S. city and a city from Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Bloc. Since then, the cities of Tempe and Skopje have held numerous exchange programs between volunteer groups, government officials, school children, and private citizens, and have paved the way for the pairing of other American cities with communities in Eastern Europe.

Since the successful pairing with Skopje, the city of Tempe has established Sister City relationships with six other communities around the world. These cities include Regensburg, Germany, in 1976; Hutt City, New Zealand, in 1981; Zhenjiang, China, in 1989; Timbuktu, Mali, in 1990; Beaulieu sur Mer, France, in 1997; and Carlow, Ireland, in 1998 (<http://community.tempe.gov/sister/>).

The community complex for the Tempe Sister Cities was supposed to be a location where the Tempe Sister Cities organization could have offices and meeting rooms and could interact with and inform the community about the Tempe Sister Cities program. The program for this site included a meeting hall that could also be used for dining, four classrooms, two offices, a kitchen that could allow for various types of cooking (such as Asian and African cooking methods as opposed to European and American), a gift shop, four resident artist apartments, seven pavilions or nodes representing each international city, a pathway connecting this site to the footpath that surrounds the Tempe Town Lake, and space for parking as well as the necessary service areas. I also added the programs of an art gallery and a small café. This community site was to be the primary location where meetings and cultural exchanges would take place when representatives from the seven Sister Cities came to visit Tempe, as well as a place of education and awareness for the residents of Tempe seeking to learn about the cultures of the Sister Cities and the Tempe Sister Cities program.

Early in the research phase of this project, I became interested in studying the mythologies and folk stories of the cultures from these seven Sister Cities as well as the city of Tempe as a way to better understand the underlying values and beliefs of these eight different cultures. Believing that this would be an effective way to learn about the needs and expectations of the people from these various cities as they visited this site, I wanted to explore the true cultures of these eight cities rather than the image of the culture that a particular city might want to convey of itself. For example, the city of Tempe attempts to create an image of itself as a commercial center and tourist attraction with the focus of the city being on economic growth and expansion. I felt that this image was not exactly in connection with the true culture of the people of Tempe. I believed that this image ignored the focus on education brought about by the presence of Arizona State University, the fifth largest university and research institute in the United States, as well as the rich history of the indigenous peoples of the region. I realized that by examining the mythologies and folk stories of a people, I could gain a better understanding of their historical values and beliefs, and that by understanding these beliefs and values visitors to the Tempe Sister Cities site would gain a greater understanding of the cultures and people themselves.

I then began researching stories from each of the eight cities, and finally chose one story from each city to represent that culture. My intention was to then take one element from each story, and from this create the idea of an architectural or spatial element that would represent this culture. These eight spatial or architectural elements would then be incorporated into the Tempe Sister Cities site itself. While they might not

be evident to visitors to the site, the elements would nonetheless be present and would be combined together to form a new, single story of the site as a unified element and experience. As the project progressed, I found that some spatial elements were stronger than others, and these came to have more influence on informing the design process and shaping the site and the buildings themselves.

For each of the eight cultures, I researched and found eight myths or folk stories teaching lessons or cultural values. While not directly representing the lesson being taught by each story, I used the narratives to arrive at certain ideas about an arrangement of space or a particular architectural event that I wanted to happen.

For the city of Skopje, Macedonia, I chose the story of “The Legend of the Bats,” condensed and rewritten into my own words:

Once, there were no bats flying through the night skies. Then one night, some mice stole into a church and ate the sacrament. Doing this caused them to grow wings allowing them to fly. To punish them for the sin of eating the sacrament, God took away their ability to see in the daylight, and the mice became bats (Dimoski 2002).

From this story I took the idea of an architectural or spatial element that would celebrate the night. I decided that the bats would need a landing place, and that this place would have to be open to the night as well as be away from the noise and presence of people. This idea became a place high on the flood control berm located on the site that is removed from the buildings and overlooks the lake to the north and the city of Tempe to the south and southwest. This place is open to the night sky and could be a place where people can sit and view the stars above (or the lights of the city that are the urban stars). The bats would also need hiding places, and these became the nodes along the pathway that represent each of the Sister Cities. Each node has its own secluded space separating it from the path so that the visitor might sit there undisturbed and reflect upon that particular city and culture.

From Regensburg, Germany, I chose the story of “The Dream of the Treasure on the Bridge.”

A man dreamed that if he went to the bridge in Regensburg he would find a great treasure there. He went there and spent fourteen days on the bridge but did not find any treasure. A wealthy merchant came by and asked the man why he was spending so much time on the bridge. The man told him about his dream, and the merchant told him he should disregard dreams because they are just fantasies. The merchant told the man that he had even once dreamed of a treasure buried under a tree nearby. When the merchant left, the man went and dug under this tree, and there he found a large pot of gold and became very rich (Grimm 2002).

From this story I took literally the spatial element of the bridge. The site of the Tempe Sister Cities community center is located along the Tempe Town Lake, which is a manmade lake created by damming the Salt River. Tempe Town Lake is separated from the shore and people who might be walking there by a low concrete wall. All the seven international Sister Cities have either a river or a lake associated with them, and in all the cities except Tempe the body of water is either revered or constituted an integral part of the daily lives of the citizens who lived there. Since the Salt River was

until only recently an important aspect of daily life in the Salt River Valley where the Phoenix metropolitan area is located, I thought it was important to bring people back into contact with the water itself rather than having it be something distant and inaccessible. To break across the concrete barrier and allow people to actually come in contact with the water, I designed a low bridge connected to the circulation pathway of the site that would allow people to walk out over the water, providing a place to view the lake as well as the shore and the skyline of Tempe.

The story from Hutt City proved to be one of the most influential on the design of my project. Here I used an adaptation of the creation myth as told by the Maori people indigenous to that area of New Zealand.

The earth god, Rangi, and the sky goddess, Papa, loved each other so much that they hugged each other and would not let go, allowing no space for light between them. Eventually they gave birth to several children. One of these children was Tane, and he and his siblings wanted to escape from the tight embrace of their parents so that they might see light and move about freely. Tane's siblings encouraged him as he started to push their parents apart. This took Tane many years, but finally the parents were separated and the children were free. Light came into the world and plants began to grow, but Rangi and Papa were very sad about being separated, and they cried and cried. The children turned Papa away so Rangi could not see her face, but he still cries, and his tears are the dewdrops on the grass every morning, and the mists are Papa's sighs (Maori 2002).

From this story I derived the ideas of allowing light to enter spaces in a controlled manner and of something that breaks free from the ground to create an opening. Throughout the site there are areas where the natural light transitions between being very intense and direct in the more public spaces, such as the main footpath leading to the buildings from the parking area, to a condition of light that is barely visible and controlled in places where a greater intensity is required, such as in the gallery. Breaking free from the ground are the buildings themselves, with excavations into the earth creating the pathways connecting one building to the next. Visitors to the site would therefore be able to find their way from one point of interest to the next by following the negative spaces of these voids in the earth rather than more clearly delineated sidewalks or pathways.

The story of "The Great Yu Conquers the Flood" from Zhenjiang, China, yielded general ideas that should be addressed by the site more than it provided actual spatial elements.

Yu was appointed to control the flooding Yangtze River. His fiancée, Nu Jiao, waited for him for thirteen years while he fought the great flood. He passed by her three times during these thirteen years but did not stop once. Finally, Yu stopped the flood and returned home and married Nu Jiao, but three days later Yu left again for his job of stopping floods and building dams on the river. His father, Gun, had also spent his life trying to control the river. Like his father, Yu was well respected by others, but they plotted against him at the same time because he neglected his wife (Yu 2002).

This story reminded me of the fact that the Salt River is known to flood its banks at least once every one hundred years. Although the developers who created Tempe Town Lake have said that the dam and the surrounding berms can withstand such a flood, it is still a threat to buildings constructed along the banks of the Salt River. Knowing that minor flooding will occur during the monsoon seasons, I decided to celebrate this event rather than trying to control it by creating open-air classrooms that face the lake. In my project, the building that holds the classrooms is located on the top of the berm that runs through the site, and the classrooms are located on the north side of the building on a lower level just below the berm. Facing north and shielded from the sun to the south by the mass of the building itself, these open-air classrooms would receive breezes off the water and would still be cool in the summer months. Since they are intended to be open to the elements of nature, the classrooms would not be damaged by floodwaters as would be a typically enclosed and finished building.

Perhaps most influential to my design was the story from Timbuktu, Mali, combined with the story from Beaulieu sur Mer, France. From Mali came the story of "Chi Wara."

Chi Wara was born of the snake and Mousso, the first woman. He worked very hard and farmed the earth, and taught humans to do the same. Eventually, the people forgot about the teachings of Chi Wara and became lazy, letting their crops turn to weeds. Chi Wara was so disappointed in them that he buried himself in the earth. The people grew hungry and became sorry that they had forgotten about Chi Wara and his teachings. They returned to their ways of hard work and farming, and occasionally Chi Wara would emerge from the earth to visit them and observe the fruits of their work. The people remind themselves to this day of Chi Wara by honoring him through dance and wearing a headdress created in his honor. The people also constructed a mound in which Chi Wara's spirit could reside forever (Curriculum 2002).

From France came the story of transformation of "The Wolfmaster and the Werewolf."

A wolfmaster is a person who can call wolves and control them to do evil deeds. The wolfmaster's magic power comes from a potion he must drink every night, but if he does not continue to drink this potion the wolves will eventually kill him. A werewolf is a person who has the demonic power to transform themselves into wolves at night. A person who is a werewolf can only be killed when in their human form by enchanted weapons or silver blades (Beaulieu 2002).

From these two stories I combined the ideas of transformation and of moving from within the darkness of the earth into the daylight that can be so strikingly intense in this location and climate. My entire site became this emergence, the buildings transforming themselves from being partially buried within the earth to taking on forms resembling the nearby mountains surrounding the site. Visitors to this site would experience this transformation themselves as they move through the site from one building to another as well as from one part of a building to the next. The visitor would move from areas of spatial compression and controlled lighting and views to areas of open sky and unlimited lines of sight.

For example, the entrance to the gallery building begins as an open outdoor foyer area that moves indoors into a slightly lower and more shaded entry space. From here, the gallery becomes progressively more compressed in both plan and section, and the natural light entering the space is increasingly more restricted. The interior of the gallery is very compressed spatially, and has almost no natural lighting. From this interior space a small, rectangular inner courtyard can be accessed, bringing the visitor suddenly back into the open air and bright sunlight. The walls of this inner courtyard are made of metal, allowing for a celebration of the event of the rare thunderstorm as the sound of the rain echoes off the walls and enters the gallery space, and the water itself flows outside under a grating in the gallery floor. From the interior of the gallery the visitor can also move into the café area, where the walls gradually open wider and the ceilings become higher, providing natural lighting and an open view to the north of the nearby lake.

Another manifestation of the idea of transformation in this site is how the desert transforms itself subtly from a natural landscape into a surface of stabilized granite in the parking area. The land is also transformed into buildings as the structures emerge from within the earth and back into the ground and then the landscape again, following the contours of the site.

Another strong influence on my project was the story of “The Sidhe” from Carlow, Ireland.

All around us live Otherworldly beings know as the Sidhe, or Good People. They are a separate race from humans but have been known to come into contact with mortals throughout the centuries so that they might help them (MacDonald 2002).

Although this was condensed from a very short story, it generated many ideas. From this I thought of creating elements in my site for “the people that are not really there.” I decided that this could mean that spaces should be designed for events that have already occurred or are yet to happen (meaning the space is designed for the people who have already been there or who will be there, but are not present right now). This led to ideas of timelessness and of creating a continuity of the events occurring on the site, dictating that the spaces should be flexible in their programmatic usage and possess an ability to adapt to the changing needs of those who may use this site.

Another manifestation of this story is the “Gallery for Thoughts,” which is the metal courtyard located within the gallery space as previously described. There is only enough room for one person to occupy this space at a time, and in this gallery space the artwork is actually the thoughts and meditations of the person who is sitting here rather than actual paintings or sculpture.

Finally, I indirectly incorporated into the site a belief of the Navajo people indigenous to Arizona.

The Navajo believe that building a house with corners will invite evil spirits to come in since they can hide within the corners where the walls join together. This is why traditional Navajo hogans are round, allowing no place for evil spirits to hide.

This story was included indirectly into the site through the nature of the Sister Cities program itself. Believing that all people whose lives are touched by the Sister

Cities program are interconnected, the circle of this story becomes the circle of lives connected through exchange of people and knowledge, and the dispersal of the evil spirits is the dispersal of the ignorance of other cultures.

Ultimately, narrative can be incorporated into the design process in a variety of ways, and in this paper I have described how a beginning design student could use a descriptive form of writing to explore ideas about spaces and events, and to further develop a definition of spatial ideas relative to the program of the site. Such narratives can be further used to develop more complex and theoretical ideas about space and architecture and the creative process as the student's knowledge and experiences increase. The use of narrative can progress from simply trying to isolate and explore the experience of a specific site, such as described here, to the exploration of the greater significance of architecture as found in the work of architects such as John Hejduk, and may progress in its form from descriptive text into more exploratory poetics that can become works of architectural ideas in themselves.

Narratives can also be used as a method of finding a purpose to a work of architecture, or may be used as a method of exploration into structure and context. For instance, it could be interesting to examine the relationship of one word to another in a poem, thinking about how the words are arranged to form the structure of the idea being conveyed. The way that the thoughts of a poem are constructed could be used to inform how a building is constructed. Narrative can be a useful tool to help define ideas and explore possibilities, and can be used to help expand the scope of imagination and understanding of beginning design students.

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