

# 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

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***In the beginning, the end is everything; in the end, the beginning is nothing...***

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### **What?**

Architecture school is an organism in which all of the parts are mutually dependent; the features of its surface are interconnected, presenting a series of actions and influences, of cause and effects, and where effects react back upon causes, as in the case of any well organized organic body. Assuming this to be an accurate description of architecture school, any discussion of a beginning curriculum cannot be complete without equal emphasis on the structure and delivery of content in the following years. The symbiotic relationship that should be sponsored between the first and final years of school deserves a particularly focused attention. Implicit in this position are two points that run counter to the traditional models of architectural education. First, the separation of studios into disconnected year levels that subsequently results in the exploration of scale-specific problems and issues is an artificial construct and should be abandoned. Second, the now ninety year old German model of architectural education that relies on a linear set of processes and protocols stands in direct opposition to the development of an *emergent ecology of production* within the architectural curriculum and should, at the very least, be questioned.

### **How?**

In our program we propose an alternative model, in which problems and assignments increase in *resolution*, moving from loosely grained projects to projects that are more finely grained. This increase in resolution is achieved through the development of a sharpened attention to detail, rather than simply increasing the complexity of a problem through the implementation of exponential scalar shifts at each succeeding year level. Simply put, project typologies remain similarly complex from year to year, increasing in detail development, while actually *decreasing* in scale. Employing a variety of strategies, we submit this theory to rigorous testing. Evidence supporting the successful implementation of this model is presented through the collective work of both a first year studio and a fifth year studio. In the first group of representative examples, both studios are assigned the same project: the design of an airplane hangar for two medium sized aircraft. The first year students are concerned primarily with issues relating to form, integration with the landscape, conventions of representation and most importantly the emulation of basic structural principles. While the fifth year students are naturally expected to deal with these same issues, their starting point for the project is one of tectonic, material and detailing issues, precisely the topics they are prepared to deal with after the various material and methods, structures, and studio design classes. This is the "grain" of discussion the students should be having at this moment of their education, countering the typical Bauhaus model that assumes a progression from material experimentation to formal development from the beginning design studios.

In the second group of projects, this model is extended through adjusting our focus away from the singular, isolated typologies of building. Instead we readjust our gaze to the multitude of complexities and disjunctions found in the urban environment. Urban design projects are developed in the first year, suggesting the social importance of architecture followed by detail and material projects in the following years. While continuing the development of a clear understanding of fundamental design principles, strong visual facility, and articulation through the craft of making, we in addition begin to foreground the notion that design is a *collective* activity; collaboration is viewed as a key necessity in any design endeavor. To successfully plan a complex environment (such as a city) ultimately demands an intense engagement with and negotiation of a wide variety of disparate agendas, positions and desires. In order to develop the desired collaborative habits of work early on, large scale (re: city) design projects replace the traditional cubes, spots and dots, houses for mystics, and other similar detritus that litters our own educations. These projects are developed by the entire studio *en masse*, with each student bearing personal responsibility to both their own

work as well as the larger collective project. Our mantra becomes "We can do more together than we can alone." In essence, this belief is the definition and founding principle of the activity we call *Studio*.

In the Fifth Year, this process is emulated; each student is responsible for the development of their own body of work, but with the added requirement that they all do so within the same specific urban context. Birmingham, Alabama was selected this year as the site for all thesis work. Through both analysis and student discussion, sites were chosen within a strict area centering around the Greater Business District, recognizable for its gridded street pattern bounded by rail lines and interstates. This focus allows for two positive consequences. First, the studio may begin to share research, site analysis, and other resources that subsequently begins to enrich the collective effort of the studio. Second (and perhaps more importantly), a certain dynamism is interjected into the design processes of the studio through the very fact that each student's design decisions impact directly the very context and subsequent content that all of the other students are responding to. For this reason alone it is in every student's best interest to become actively engaged in their classmates' projects. Finally, thesis students have a reason to talk to one another. By initially studying the context of individual projects, and selecting sites based upon knowledge of the area and its history, students also have the opportunity to discuss these choices with their classmates. The relationship between the thesis research and site selection is again filtered through this collective activity. The competition fostered by the notion of "independent thesis" projects and the studio model of one site with forty projects is intentionally questioned. Fifth year students quickly learn that they have more in common than they would otherwise believe.

### **Why?**

One of the peculiar aspects of architecture school is that the first year of any program and the fifth year are more similar than any other year levels. This is not to say that the relationship between students are closer, or that the material covered is inevitably the same, but rather that *structurally* these year levels operate within the program in an almost identical fashion. These are the year levels where the faculty has the opportunity to be the most experimental in terms of content delivery. Evidence of this point is clear in that most architectural programs have multiple ways of entering into the curriculum and multiple ways of finishing. Auburn University has three modes of entering school; the traditional year long program (the primary focus of this conversation), the ten week "boot camp" Summer Option Program, and the opportunity to transfer from another NAAB accredited institution. Options for fifth year credit are equally as diverse, allowing for projects to be completed at the Rural Studio in Hale County, at the Urban Studio in Birmingham, through faculty supervised design-build projects in the Auburn area, and finally the traditional argument-demonstration thesis completed in the on-campus studios. In contrast, the remaining three year levels are highly structured in terms of the knowledge students are expected to acquire during this period.

So, what makes first and fifth year so similar? One line of speculation is that this unity is actually a reflection of the fact that both years are beginnings filled with possibility and optimism. While it is clear in first year that the student is beginning the study of a new realm of knowledge, the fifth year student is actually at the beginning of transforming their knowledge into a form of professional practice. While the fifth year may be a time of celebration for successfully completing school, it is more importantly the first opportunity many students have to clearly define the boundaries and aspirations of their own personal design methodologies and aesthetic systems. This activity will then sustain their own personal practices upon leaving the University.

Additional evidence of this First Year/Fifth Year coupling is reflected in our continued admonishment of students to seek out habits of work in other year levels. For example, first year students are prepared for the trials of school by pointing to fifth year students and suggesting that the role models for their future development are only a flight of stairs away. Similarly, fifth year students are often asked to look at first year students for their naiveté,

their sense of wonderment and their spirit of optimism. But at the same time, we want first year students to understand the value of beautiful drawings and well crafted models, the power of representation and the fact that mastery of these tools often takes five years of time and patience.

In the traditional model of architectural education, first year students design houses and other familiar small architectural projects, often with a metaphorical twist so that it is not quite the space of their childhood memory. We typically also prepare first year students to anticipate an increased resolution in the size, scale and complexity of the projects assigned to them over the course of five years. By extension, fifth year students then advance on to master plans, urban blocks, complex programs and we often praise them for their ability to deal with this complexity in an intellectual fashion. First year students are often warned against engaging complexity and “conceptual” thinking until they are ready. When this traditional model of “parts-to-wholes” content delivery is analyzed, it is no longer shocking that it is most often first year students who are the most willing to seek out design solutions that they could have never imagined before, while fifth year students have often settled into predictable although highly competent project solutions.

It is no small irony that the similarity between these two year levels is also exhibited in the fact that they are often felt to be the most expendable year levels. If the experiments in content delivery do not work in first year, not to worry – we still have four years of school to get it right. There are plenty of second, third and fourth year faculty members who actually believe that their primary responsibility is to correct the errors of the preceding years. In a similar vein, if fifth year fails, it is often assumed that the students were probably already damaged and clever content delivery is not going to help matters further. Our Alternative model attempts to bypass these rather worn and trite notions through the tight coupling of the otherwise polar year levels into a pair of complementary beginnings. The strategies of content delivery at the extremities of the formal architectural education have much to learn from each other.

### **So What?**

A successful program should always be considered and developed as a reticular structure of processes, acculturations and mimetic imprinting strategies, rather than simply the traditional linear coupling of hierarchical year levels. In the proposed model, a clear tendency toward the development of an *emergent collective practice* amongst the students (as well as the faculty) is nurtured. Content delivery is considered as a contiguous field, first year reflects upon fifth year and vice versus. While this is not a new and astonishing concept – of course what we teach in first year impacts what the students do in fifth – we believe that the impact of the first year education may in fact resonate *instantaneously* upon the fifth. In other words, we traditionally think of this active field as if it were the surface of a pond upon which we cast stones, the impact of which ripples outward through space and time: we teach something in first year (a skill or a concept, say) that then affords certain skills and/or knowledge to that student in later years. Perhaps a better model would be that of a heavy body in the field of space, whose gravitational forces deform the fabric of space at all points simultaneously and instantaneously, like a bowling ball placed on the surface of a mattress. In *our* model, the First Year Program is the bowling ball – rather than assume our beginning students know nothing, we assume that they know *everything*. We treat them as we want them to be from day one – as knowledgeable architects – of which the sense of wonder is an active participant. From day one we begin with the general, with the complex, and ultimately end with the specific, the direct, and the impossibly difficult *simple*.

In one year’s time, this notion of contiguous project delivery between First and Fifth year has already engendered profound, observable changes in our program, and has even led to some astonishing and unpredictable cultural shifts in our school. First Year students and fifth year students are actively engaged in each other’s work. Fifth year students feel the pressure exerted by the first. The first year students view the work of the fifth as a foundational knowledge base upon which to build, and are energized by the role that they

play in pushing their upper classmates. Culturally, our beginning design students have taken over the school, with first and second year students even holding all of the current AIAS positions.

Clearly, there are areas where this experiment can continue to improve. The relationships between first year and second year would appear to be the more obvious connection to make in terms of coupling year levels, and improvements are expected. The suggestion here is that the shift from a model of collective practice to a model of individual practice (one site forty projects) is the real topic of discussion, and may be maintained. The shift happens in reverse from fourth year to fifth year, another obvious choice for year level and content coupling.

Additionally, the cultural shift spoken of earlier has left the first year students in a position of leadership and the current fifth year class scrambling for some type academic identity. Fifth year students realized the pressure was on the moment we assigned the airport project. First year students, having never done a project before relished the opportunity to exhibit their previously contained design talent. The Fifth year students immediately suspected the faculty of "experimenting with them" and somehow belittling their education. The results were unexpected. The first year projects attained a level of form making and structural understanding in only a few short days. The fifth year projects, in several instances, approached levels of conceptual complexity in both the generation of form and representation that could not be achieved by first year students. The accumulation of knowledge over five years of school was evident. But the conditions had been revealed. First year was influencing fifth year, and fifth year was forced to respond.

#### **And?**

So, where does this leave us? We intend to continue to extend our model of collective practices out into the wider landscape of architectural education by forming partnerships with other programs outside of our own. We already are working with first year students in our Masters of Landscape Architecture Program, and have forged an alliance with our College of Engineering across campus. Next year we will begin a program of working with other first year architecture programs and are actively developing content, strategies and resources to support this effort. In addition to these efforts of the First Year Program, fifth year has also begun to sponsor these relationships through the use of thesis advisors and student consultants in other departments; Theater, Animal Husbandry and Electrical Engineering to name a few recent collaborations.

Finally, what do we expect the future to hold? Is it possible to continue to exert consistent upward pressure on the subsequent year levels? Hopefully. At the very least, however, we expect that the first year students, already accustomed to applying pressure to their peers will have nowhere else to push when they reach fifth year except back down through the year levels. We believe that this outward focus has long been missing in the traditional education of an Architect.