

# 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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## Tangible Forms: Representation & The 1<sup>st</sup> Semester 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Pedagogy

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Seldom does the current practice of architecture, including architectural education, directly engage in the “gravitational” processes of building or the tactility of habitation: the tectonic assembly of materials, the experiential implications of these assemblies, and the visceral interactions between user and material space. Inversely, architectural practice is (so often) exclusively a representational act, a process of abstraction—relying on graphic codified symbols, the substitution of material systems by written notation, and the replacement of material boundaries with synopsisized geometries. Though architectural drawings may allude to *spatial* experience, tactility and *material* experience are removed. It has been suggested, abundantly, that this “representational exclusion” opposes the education and development of early design students. Abstract representation does not permit students to critically, realistically, and tangibly question the sensual implications of their proposals. This becomes increasingly important in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of 2<sup>nd</sup> year studio at the University of Arkansas, as the pedagogy centers on the implications of surface tectonics on spatial articulation. The question becomes this: How can the faculty establish projects that allow students to question the experiential environment of their projects, to allow them to “inhabit” the *process* of design?

Two distinct projects in this semester attempt to pursue these objectives. These projects treat representation, not as an abstract geometric image or a scaled stand-in for a structure, but as an analogue to temporal cognizance and as an *analytique* for design. The first project, *La Tela: Integrated Storefront System*, requires students to design an “integrated system” of entry, display, day/night-lighting, and signage for the ground floor of a narrow seven-story retail building. Throughout the project, students produce large-scale ( $\geq 3/4"=1'-0"$ ) isometric, oblique, and perspective renderings. These representations ground each project in time and place, and force students to deal with the three-dimensional reality of surface tectonics—corners, assembly, intersections, thicknesses, etc. Later, diptych-like projections—a juxtaposition of interior/exterior section obliques—become analytical and comparative mechanisms, allowing the students to engage in other experiential dialogues: day/night lighting, interior/exterior space, etc. These are not drawings to be “looked at,” but to be penetrated; they establish a clear link between surface assembly and spatial volume.

The second project, *Spaces of Species* (the title is an inversion of Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces*), engages processes of *character development* and *spatial production*. Character development occurs through the following linear process: 1) the use of Perec-like narrative techniques to describe a moment of reciprocity between one’s body and one’s environment, 2) gestural sketches of this moment, and 3) wax carvings derived from the sketches. Students then employ a repetitive casting process (latex and hydrocal) of these “characters,” and exchange them with other students. Each student obtains three diverse figures and produces a space which allows the characters to co-exist. Students establish this spatial co-habitation through cast surface textures and “cast” light/shadow. Similar to the storefront project, this project allows students to discover and evaluate corporeal experiences. In the *Spaces of Species* project, however, this association occurs through the narrative process and the ability to *imagine one’s self* as a “character” within that space. These projects are directed toward an experiential process of design—grounding students in a tactile (and often visceral) understanding of architecture; it is the pursuit of a literal, visual, and tectonic *tangibility*.