

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



Shannon Chance, AIA, Editor

PROCEEDINGS of the
20th National Conference on
the Beginning Design Student
Hampton University Department of Architecture

Copyright 2006 Hampton University Urban Institute
/individual articles produced and edited by the authors

Printed proceedings produced by Shannon Chance, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Hampton University.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

Published by:
Hampton University Urban Institute
Department of Architecture
Hampton University
Hampton, VA 23668
757-727-5440
fax 757-728-6680

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chance, Shannon
Not White: Diversity in Beginning Design Education
(Proceedings of the 20th National Conference on the Beginning Design Student)
compiled by Shannon Chance
1. Architecture - Diversity 2. Teaching - Architecture 3. Teaching - Diversity 4. Teaching - Design
5. Diversity - Design

ISBN 0-9785172-0-2

The Postcard Project: The Role of Ready Made Objects in the Design Studio

A well crafted basswood model and a beautifully rendered drawing on good quality *white* paper have been traditional sites for the dissemination of architectural knowledge. This essay compares these sites to other representational models, such as the montage of ready made objects. Walter Benjamin and the Surrealists offered two critical models for dealing with the discarded and overlooked objects of the everyday world: the former is based on historical awakening and collective dreams; the latter on individual dreams and making familiar objects strange. The Core Design Program at Iowa State University embraces these unconscious models through its interdisciplinary art and design strategies of “making strange.” The Core Design Program opens with the Postcard Project, an introductory learning experience centered on the (re)production of the space of a postcard within a small box. Reflecting on the Postcard Project, this essay examines intersections between theories of representation and modes of instruction within a design studio. These intersections are explored based on a dialectic of *whiteness* and *grayness*: a *whiteness* that is embodied in labor intensive drawings and models from the Beaux-Arts tradition, and *grayness*, embodied in the diversity of found objects.

abstract
Igor Marjanovic

Director, Core Design Program
Assistant Professor of Architecture
Iowa State University
email: igorm@iastate.edu

Igor Marjanovic is Director of the Core Design Program and Assistant Professor of architecture at Iowa State University. He is also a partner in the Ready Made Studio, an interdisciplinary art and design practice. Marjanovic’s work—as a teacher, a designer, and a writer—focuses on the appropriation of montage practices and critical theories in design, particularly in the context of global migration, travel, and diaspora. He has co-authored two books: *The Portfolio* and *The Practical Experience* (both from Architectural Press, Oxford). Marjanovic graduated summa cum laude from the University of Belgrade, Serbia, and completed his diploma thesis at the Moscow Institute of Architecture. He also received a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he was awarded the UIC/Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill Scholarship.



Figure 1 - Michael Krominga: The Postcard Project, front.



Figure 2 - Michael Krominga: The Postcard Project, back.



Figure 3 - Reinaldo Correa: The Postcard Project, opened.



Figure 4 - Carol Wu: The Postcard Project, opened.

Let a ready-made reality with a naïve purpose apparently settled once and for all (i.e. an umbrella) be suddenly juxtaposed to another very distant and no less ridiculous reality (i.e. a sewing machine) in a place where both must be felt as out of place (i.e. upon a dissecting table), and precisely thereby it will be robbed of its naïve purpose and its identity; through a relativity it will pass from a false to a novel absoluteness, at once both true and poetic: umbrella and sewing machine will make love!

Introduction

All first year students enrolled in the College of Design at Iowa State University go through a Core Design Program—a two-semester common learning experience derived from the collaboration of a breadth of professional design and art disciplines within the College. In 2001 the college community engaged in an envisioning process of self-reflection and emancipation of its programs. Central to this envisioning process is a substantial revision to the introductory design education, and the development of a Core Design Program as an integrated course of study for all first-year students enrolled in the College of Design. Aspiring to develop a unique interdisciplinary core program, the College wants to prepare its graduates to influence innovations in science and technology through integration of design.

At Iowa State University, core design studios meet twice a week for three hours each time, in section groups of about fifteen to eighteen students. Core courses are open to all university students aspiring to apply to one of the professional programs within the College of Design: architecture, city and regional planning, graphic design, integrated studio arts, interior design, and landscape architecture. In order to better serve the needs of such a diverse student body, the core design studio focuses on the commonality of design processes and methods across various design disciplines, while at the same time addressing a broader range of history, theory, and criticism issues. The studio experience is therefore complemented by a one hour lecture each week, in which instructors introduce various theoretical discourses of the twentieth century. Like the students themselves, the faculty members also come from all four departments within the College of Design, thus creating a truly interdisciplinary learning experience. The Core Design program is staffed by teachers with multidisciplinary interests, not necessarily in the realm of beginning design education, but capable of a vertical integration between the first year and subsequent professional programs, providing unique opportunities for academic advancement. The studio projects and lecture vocabulary are developed through a carefully constructed common language that is able to overcome the boundaries established through disciplinary specialization. Standing against this endless fragmentation—sub-specialization, autonomy, and economic rationalism—the Core Design Program seeks to embrace synthesis, rather than division; it seeks to expand the scope of beginning design education through a critical interdisciplinary inquiry. (See Figure 1 and 2.)

The Postcard Project

The first project that students encounter in the Core Design Program is the Pattern Project,² in which they analyze a common household tool through a variety of media—drawing, writing, and model making—until they feel they know it intimately. This project is followed by the Postcard Project, a three-week learning experience centered on the (re)production of the space of a postcard within a small box. First, the students are asked to purchase several vintage postcards and to discuss the visual language of the postcards and how it relates to the production of the built environment. Issues discussed include regional identity, modes of production, human inhabitation, and booster photography. After selecting the most intriguing postcard, the students use it as a departure point to design a three dimensional container of space which will serve as a three-dimensional postcard from Iowa. Unlike traditional postcards, this is an unconventional greeting device that they can send to their families or friends. Each box should contain at least one popular picture postcard of Iowa (or the student's home state) and at least three found objects that are either from the space of the postcard or have some kind of relationship to the postcard itself. Those found objects should be ready made objects—objects that are found on a highway, in a rest area, in a fast food place, in an alley, in a back yard, on campus, or in a mall. Since the box is rather small, the students may be able to use only a fragment of their found objects or reproductions of those objects (such as photocopies or scans).

The wooden box itself is strictly defined, measuring 8 ½" in width, 11" in height, and 5 ½" in depth. It is made of 1"x6" standard lumber (such as F.I.R.). The connections are

achieved with white glue, carpenter’s glue, or finishing nails. The container itself is NOT the subject matter of this design project. Rather, the focus is on the careful reading of a postcard and the three dimensional elaboration of its forces within the box itself.

In the first phase of the project, the postcard is carefully read, its imagery dissected, and meaning analyzed through critical discussion. Students are asked to define:

- How is the urban or rural environment depicted in the postcard reflective of social and economic forces?
- Which postcards are actual representations of a site and which are metaphorical representations?
- What is the relationship between regional identity and its imagery?
- Define how stereotypical the postcard is—what is missing in it, how real it really is—and, what are the unheard voice not represented in the postcard? (See Figure 3, 4, and 5.)

This discussion isolates the postcard from the superficial consumer culture of the everyday, transforming it into an academic object of study. The postcards are taken seriously, revealing a multiplicity of meaning through intersections of visual, material, and cultural relationships. In the second phase of the project, the students are asked to communicate this multiplicity of meaning through a carefully crafted composition of ready made objects placed within a box. The compositional strategies of montage, collage, and “making strange” are discussed in the studio and lecture. For many students, the notion of taking a postcard seriously represents a significant challenge. In order to facilitate this transition from the everyday reading of the postcard, to a more critical reading of it, the lectures introduce various strategies for the appropriation of popular picture postcards in architectural culture. Two postcard collections are examined as precedent studies, namely those of Rem Koolhaas and Alvin Boyarsky, Koolhaas’s teacher at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, and the strategies of their dissemination in the work of those architects are discussed.

Deriving from theories of collecting and popular representations of cities, we recognize postcard collecting as a valid form of writing architectural history. Reflecting the city’s economic and social context, when postcards are displaced from the context of consumer tourism and placed into architectural discourse through their revalorization, interpretation, and juxtaposition with other types of urban imagery, they generate meaning through the new discourse around them and offer many possibilities for criticism and appropriation. Such images are representative not only of the sights they depict, but they also speak through what they leave out. This anonymous yet carefully assembled history is revealed through juxtaposition of postcards with other popular images, such as newspaper clippings and photographs. Through their arguments from silence, these montage strategies tell a history of social conflicts which moves beyond the traditional vision of modernity based on economic, social, and technological progress. In the final phase of the project, the students are asked to collect found objects that further elaborate those arguments from silence.

The students are encouraged to look at these ready made objects as strangely familiar artifacts—objects that have familiar form and a function that is somehow questionable or at least changeable and culturally constructed. The insistence upon meaning is again critical, as students are asked to negotiate between the message of the postcard and the message of their box. This requires constant oscillation between the flatness of an image and the volumetric of a spatial container—such as the wooden box. In addition, students are challenged to capture the viewer’s imagination through a metaphorical narration based on found objects. The rules of the game prohibit the use of commercial miniature objects, such as little trucks, toys, and vegetation available at large commercial chain stores. This is the culminating phase of the project; the students are looking for their design vocabulary within the discarded objects of the everyday. The basic three dimensional compositional principles and a careful selection of the most appropriate objects are introduced as powerful tools for telling the story of the project. (See Figure 6 and 7.)

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes represent an educational approach increasingly deployed in the accreditation of professional programs. They represent a cultural change—a shift away from the traditional teaching content and objectives (knowledge and skills) toward learning



Figure 5 - Carol Wu: The Postcard Project, detail.



Figure 6 - Marjorie Gacloch: The Postcard Project.



Figure 7 - Marjorie Gacloch: The Postcard Project, detail.



Figure 8 - Cameron Puetz: The Postcard Project, detail.

outcomes as measures of student learning. The goal of the Core Design Program is to offer opportunities for students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and life-long intellectual curiosity that will help them become more aware and productive citizens. The project-based learning environment ensures a critical level of invention, awareness, and self-direction, while at the same time, directing our inquiries toward a particular social, economical and ultimately cultural context. The cultural relevance of the project is developed through the postcard itself—a site-specific interactive visual medium that reveals layers of natural and cultural influences. Although fairly short in its duration, this project nevertheless represents an important site of learning for the beginning design students. They learn how to read interactive visual media, such as the postcard, and to construct a meaning based on that reading. They also learn that the meaning might or might not be completely accurate, i.e. that there is nothing scientific about the way we visualize the built environment. The majority of images represent cultural constructs, which are in many cases important sites for discourse on identity and the importance of difference in a multicultural society. The project oscillates between formal and analytical principles, on the one hand, and the creative and impulsive drives of a young designer on another hand. Within this friction between the analytical and the creative lies invention—a design strategy based on creativity and rooted in the careful reading and dissemination of meaning. (See Figure 8.)

Conclusion

The Postcard Project explores intersections based on a dialectic of *whiteness* and *grayness*: a *whiteness* that is embodied in labor-intensive drawings and models from the Beaux-Arts tradition, and *grayness*, embodied in the diversity of found objects. It explores issues of visual order and strategies of avoiding formal chaos within a simple three-dimensional container, while at the same introducing the paradoxical strategies of “making strange”—the estrangement of everyday objects and the questioning of the often uncritically accepted visual connotation and use value that is associated with them. This estrangement is used as a way to learn about the complex relationships that shape our built environment, its forces and their representations in popular picture postcards.

This strategy does not represent a novel finding. It is derived from a long history of modern discourses that have sought to displace objects from our everyday lives into a dream-state condition, thus inhabiting a magical and critical form of urban imagination. The Surrealists called this condition ‘estrangement’. Estrangement consists of, on the one hand, ‘enchantment’—the experience of the city as a redeeming, liberating world—and, on the other hand, ‘alienation’—the experience of the city as a debasing, oppressive world. Walter Benjamin elaborated further the surrealist project of liberation:

Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one. They are the first to liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom, because they are convinced that “freedom, which on this earth can only be bought with a thousand of the hardest sacrifices, must be enjoyed unrestrictedly in its fullness without any kind of pragmatic calculation, as long as it lasts.”³

The Postcard Project attempts to achieve this concept of freedom, by revealing the multiplicity of relationships that shape our built environment. In doing so, it embraces the diversity of everyday media—such as the postcards—reading them as cultural constructs that generate meaning not per se, but through a discourse around them. The project also traces back the missing script in these media, thus questioning the modernist omission of minority cultures, immigrants, migrant workers, etc., and their non-representation in everyday imagery. The Core Design program embraces human diversity by bringing together students and faculty from diverse disciplines and mobilizing them around greater cultural and social causes. Finally, the use of ready made objects as a valid design medium displaces the production of the work of art outside traditional institutions—namely in the public realm of the everyday life—thus extending the liberating aims of the historical avant-garde. Peter Burger made a distinction between the art institutions and the institution of art, in which the former are only a fragment of the latter. A similar analogy can be applied to design; the Postcard Projects aims to disturb the perceived and institutionally received notions of design by introducing critical questions and diverse media as valid forms of studio production in the beginning design education.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to John Cunnally and Karen Bermann for their help and support in various stages of the Core Design Program development.

NOTES

¹Max Ernst, “Comment on force l’inspiration,” *Le Surrealisme au Service de la Revolution* 6 (May 15, 1933): 43-45. Translated and adapted by Dennis Raverty.

²For a detailed discussion of the Pattern Project see Karen Bermann, “Pre-Architecture Studio: The Pattern Project,” *Journal of Architectural Education* Volume 55 Number 4 (May 2002): 268-271.

³Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) p. 189.