

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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

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

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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

Harnessing Diversity through Integrating and Improving Upon the Work of Others

This paper examines the pedagogical implications of beginning design students assimilating, enhancing and ultimately celebrating the work of their classmates and other designers. Tom Peters, author of *In Search of Excellence* and *Thriving on Chaos*, calls this process of integration and enrichment “creative swiping” which he champions as an essential ingredient for successful innovation. Charles Moore described a similar process as “playing chicken with a master.” Using Peters and Moores’ accumulative design methods as a model, portions of studio time are dedicated to the development of fellow students’ designs. During this time, students can momentarily step-out of their own work and view the project from a fresh perspective. In using various forms of this method for 5 years, I have found that the more talented students assume the role of teachers, which helps them become more articulate, while slower student’s learning rates accelerate. Additionally, the less talented students find validation in their ideas because their enhancements contribute valuable insights. The process also helps beginning designers loosen their egocentric grip on the preciousness of their own designs (what Peters calls “the not invented here syndrome”). This helps create empathy towards the validity and diversity of other students’ ideas which prepares them for upper level team projects. As the semester progresses, the class as a whole starts to take-on the diverse and dynamic characteristics of what systems analyst Peter Senge calls a “learning organization..”

abstract
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Phillip Mead AIA, M.Arch. University of Texas, Charles Moore Program. Phillip has practiced and taught in San Diego, Texas Tech University and the University of Idaho. Over the past 10 years he has taught history and theory, health and design issues, site analysis, environmental control systems and all levels of studio design. His research focuses on design and wellness issues, (in particular light, air, exercise and view qualities) and beginning design studio. Professionally, Mead has contributed to works designed by Charles Moore, Antone Predock and Bertram Goodhue.

“...uniqueness most often comes not from a breakthrough idea, but from the accumulation of thousands of tiny enhancements.” Tom Peters

Introduction

Conferences like these allow us to share a diverse range of ideas and give us a chance to compare and perhaps improve upon each other’s work. Similarly, teamwork can be described as a phenomenon where a diverse group of people play off each other’s talents to achieve a greater goal. Systems analyst Peter Senge would call this synergy the beginnings of a “learning organization” resulting in the group’s IQ far exceeding the IQ of the individuals.

Beginning design studio provides many opportunities for students to play off each others talents in order to achieve a higher level of design. However, desk crits and final reviews limit these opportunities due to their infrequency and lack of peer review. This paper argues that beginning design should provide a richer venue for knowledge exchange where pin-ups are frequent and students are given the opportunity to work on each other’s ideas. This venue harnesses the tremendous impact that peers have on each other and provides a forum where a wide range of ideas can be shared frequently by all levels and varieties of talent. The outcome of this process broadens and diversifies student’s limited design vocabulary; celebrates and expands upon each individual’s unique talents and helps loosen student’s grip on the preciousness of their own work.

Tom Peters, author of *In Search of Excellence* and recent AIA keynote speaker calls these methods of idea exchange, “creative swiping.” In his book, *Thriving on Chaos*, he devotes an entire chapter to this concept which he asserts is how most progressive companies innovate and stay ahead of their competition. In the chapter summary he writes:

In today’s ever-accelerating business environment, you must: put NIH (Not Invented Here) behind you—and learn to copy (with unique adaptation/enhancement) from the best! Do so by aggressively seeking out the knowledge of competitors (small and overseas, not just tired old foes) and interesting non-competitors. Become a “learning organization.” Shuck your arrogance—“if it isn’t our idea, it can’t be that good” – and become a determined copycat/adapter/enhancer.

Historical Creative Swiping

From a historical perspective, creative swiping occurs frequently. In Roxanne Williamson’s book, *American Architects and the Mechanics of Fame*, she describes how the majority of influential American architects worked under notable architects. In many cases, these architect’s early works took on similar design traits as their former employer’s. Take Frank Lloyd Wright for example. His ornamental freeze on the Winslow house is hard to distinguish from what his employer Louis Sullivan would have created. Sullivan, in turn was influenced by the complex ornamental patterns of his brief employer Frank Furness. From Wright’s prairie style, we see influence from Japanese buildings and paintings. In his German Warehouse project, he nearly copied the ornament and proportions from the Chicago Worlds Fair replica of the Temple of Uxmal. From Wright forward, we see his mark on his protégés Griffin, Schindler, Dow, Lautner and Jones. If we look at Wright’s influence outside America, we know that Gropius, van’t Hoff, Mies and Rietvelde adapted and enhanced different parts of Wright into their own designs. Wright in turn improved upon these Europeans’ work which resulted in Falling Water with its unique adaptation of the de Stijl’s intersecting and floating planes.

Recent examples of creative swiping are present in the design processes of Charles Moore and Rob Quigley. Moore used to describe a method of creative swiping where students play a game of metaphorical “Chicken” with a master. For the neophyte, s/he closely imitates the master until time comes when the student pulls away at the very last minute leaving behind the master to look like a pale imitation. (Keim) A more bottom-up example of Moore’s creative swiping occurred with his clients and students. In his graduate studios, he, like many professors, used the class to incubate his own ideas. As a student of Moore, my class provided ideas for his upcoming book *Chambers for a Memory Palace*. However, Moore was better known for his method of piggybacking off the design ideas of client participatory groups. As a student intern, I watched in amazement as he turned what were thought to be crude and garish client ideas into engaging designs.

Rob Quigley of San Diego is also known for enhancing the design ideas of participatory client groups. Additionally, he plays off the design ideas of his fellow San Diego architects. This was recently demonstrated in his design process for the San Diego downtown library commission where he sponsored workshops with the community and a short design exercise with San Diego's most respected architects: Ted Smith and Teddy Cruz among others. After absorbing this input, Quigley then borrowed upon the ideas of his San Francisco based collaborator Kathy Simon of SMWM. In their design process, Quigley and Simon first worked separately on their own individual designs. Then the two traded their solutions and each worked on improving the others'. They continued this swap a number of times until the final product emerged.

Beginning Design Studio as a Learning Organization through Creative Swiping

Creative swiping methods can be implemented several ways in the beginning design studio. Through frequent pin-ups, precedent studies, transformations of precedents and design swapping, students can benefit from multiple exposures to different design solutions.

Creative swiping is greatly accelerated through frequent reviews. Pin-ups at the beginning and end of class regularly expose students to a diverse palate of design solutions. For these reviews, the drawings speak for themselves without further explanation from the student. Fifteen to twenty minutes is devoted to commentary by both students as well as teacher where the majority of remarks focus on the characteristics of well executed designs while typical mistakes are given a few minutes time. After commentary, students are then given five minutes alone to closely examine their classmate's solutions.

As early Wright creatively swiped from Sullivan, students are also encouraged to abstract and enhance from an influential designer. This is fostered in two quick exercises where an existing plan, section or component detail from an architect is transformed into a graphic or pavilion. The first exercise takes one studio period and involves building-up the plan of Mies's Brick Country House into a sculptural pavilion. The de Stijl plan serves to break students away from thinking about architecture in terms of box like spaces. Afterwards, students are shown Mies's solution ... which pales in comparison. The second exercise calls for the abstraction of a master architect's plan. This project is an adaptation from Vladimir Tatlin's series of sculptures in the late 1910's which transformed Renaissance Madonna paintings into a modern sculptural gestalt. Similar to Tatlin, students are immersed into the fertile soil of a master architect's floor plan or section where they quickly discover and transform its underlying composition into a black and white graphic.

The third way students absorb ideas is through trading their project with another student, just as Quigley and Simon exchanged their designs for the San Diego Library. This helps beginning designers loosen their grip on the preciousness of their own designs (what Peters calls "the not invented here syndrome") and may help create empathy towards the validity of other students' ideas. When work is traded with other students, both the talented and less talented are given the chance to contribute interesting ideas and enhancements. As Tom Peters points out "...the average person can be of great service, if he or she is given a mission, a sense of urgency, and a forum in which to be heard." So in the case of design swapping, both the talented and less talented are urged to become teachers and to provide an alternate direction.

All these methods allow the class to behave similar to what Tom Peters and systems analyst Peter Senge call a "Learning Organization" Here everybody has a voice and everyone is able to contribute. These learning organizations, whether they be companies, clubs or classes, are where people continually learn how learn together. From this, the work of the class outperforms the work of the most talented student.

Since this process requires few desk crits, class size is not critical. In many cases a larger studio guarantees a better outcome. This may be because students are exposed to more design options and the odds are in favor of capturing a critical talent mass. As a result, this greater talent pool provides more opportunities to point out the characteristics of excellent design. However, the talented and the swift do not always create the most exemplary work, for on many occasions, slower and more methodical students will produce exceptional solutions which are also spotlighted.

Conclusion

The romantic notion of the original genius designer is a fantasy in today's team design climate. Systems analyst Peter Senge reinforces this notion when he writes:

"It's no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the entire organization, a Ford or a Sloan or a Watson. It's just not possible any longer to "figure it out" from the top, and have everyone else following the orders of the "Grand Strategist."

Senge refers to a similar statement made by quantum physicist David Bohm in his book *The Special Theory of Relativity*: "Since thought is to a large degree collective, we cannot just improve thought individually. As with electrons, we must look on thought as a systemic phenomena arising from how we interact and discourse with one another."

When the studio behaves like a learning organization, a dynamic is created that is both diverse and pleasantly unpredictable. As a result, project outcomes and class morale are high. Although a large part of this methodology is borrowed from the unlikely and seemingly dull field of business management, through the adoption of this learning model, design teachers can better harness the infectious creativity that lies within a diverse range of student talent.

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