

not  
white

*diversity in beginning design education*



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PROCEEDINGS of the  
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## Shades of Gray; Diversity and the Beginning Design Student

Viewed not solely in provisions of black or white, we believe the issues of architectural education, especially the beginning design student, must be approached in architectural terms. Terms we feel can be approached by an analogous discussion concerning gray. This presentation will assess these points from both theoretical and practical angles, first questioning the areas of gray and then providing examples where ambiguity is both important and valid, discussing how they blur, and uniting the division between black and white.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines gray as halfway between black and white. A conference on the beginning design student that is entitled *Not White* suggests how other shades can infuse to make a landscape that is not entirely white. As an analogy, gray can represent the diversity of students where they are a mixture of black and white, brown, red, tan and yellow. But more importantly, we may ask for clarification of the role of architectural education in this equation. Architectural education is never absolute, it is constantly evolving, rules are not steadfast and can be broken. In some cases, we may even question the most definitive concept of gravity. Especially when teaching beginning design, our role as educators is to break down preconceived ideas and allow students to explore and transform. The more tightly controlled the rules, the less students are able to grow and develop. Obviously direction is necessary, with the rules of black and white carefully considered sensitive solutions should be the primary goal. Beginning design students must learn to think in architectural terms instead of memorizing rules of the past. Thus learning to view in shades of gray allows for questioning, balanced by responsibility.

Gray is neutral, not black nor white. Gray might evoke the marginal, where things are more exciting and dangerous. Existing on the edge, the margin, describes the place of uncertainty and also the place of diversity. The margin represents the undefined, the yet to be defined. In the case of illuminated manuscripts, the edge constitutes the boundaries open to interpretation and the opposing comments. Gray might also represent the melding where the two (black or white) do not abandon their identities, but may find a common ground.

Architecture and architectural students are not a matter of *either/or* but rather *and*. We believe this extends to issues of media for representation, not just the hand, not just the computer but all as appropriate. As an inclusive issue concerning students, design ideas should also be inclusive and tolerated. This does not mark the end of criticism, but instead suggests a way to view ideas through context to assign appropriateness. Understanding diversity of ideas must also stimulate the diversity of humans.

abstract

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## paper

We believe that it can be detrimental for beginning design students to think only in terms of black or white. To say that one sees things only in terms of black and white is an analogy that describes a belief in overly defined and clear concepts. However, architects, especially designers, are constantly working with the in-between gray areas of undefined things. For example, architects must define, from the gray area of the unknown, future buildings as places of inhabitation. Developing beginning design students' abilities' to successfully work within such gray area of undefined things can be greatly affected by how we as educators approach the pedagogy of the studio. This discussion may best be approached by an analogous discussion concerning gray, and subsequently ideas of play as opposed to freplay, and the phenomenon of governing.

We can define gray as between black and white. A conference on the beginning design student that is entitled *Not White* suggests how other shades can infuse to make a landscape that is not entirely white. Instead, this field should represent the mixture of all shades. When applied to a value scale, black is definitive with little variation, white is also singular in its interpretation. But the in-between area inhabited by gray contains a full range of values, where multiple shades are possible. Certainly gray evokes reference to words such as depression, dismal or dull, but the symbolism of the word gray suggests neutral. The color gray has been symbolic of death of the body, and Hebrew tradition relates the color gray to wisdom. While recognizing the meanings and associations of the word gray, we would advocate that looking at aspects of the word gray will give us, as educators, insight into diversity for the beginning design students, both ethnic diversity and diversity of ideas.

One definition of gray indicates 'neutral,' but it can also mean 'having an intermediate and often vaguely defined position, condition or character,' such as the gray area where things are less defined. This ambiguity may question the definitive position of beginning architectural education. Once totally defined, the project for the student loses mystery and potential. A common problem in studio arises as students refuse or are unable to bring their projects to conclusion. The fascination with the architecture in its ambiguous state is attractive. This state of process emphasizes its potentialities and 'pure possibility.'<sup>1</sup> Reveling in ambiguity concentrates on the fluidity of the project and allows for constant reworking. In another analogy, this ambiguity might make the students less definable. This neutrality of the in-between may suggest a commonality or a 'color blindness,' that ignores individuality. Forfeiting individuality is hardly a goal for architectural education, but when viewing students, a common ground or less extreme position might be advantageous. This position is not necessarily advocating conservative architecture, but rather we are proposing a type of maturity that represents a well-considered architecture. When Icarus flew too close to the sun, it was acutely evident that the design and construction of his wings were faulty. A mature or 'medium' in-between position can also be one of mediation. In this instance, it may be the central position that can mediate between extremes, allow individuality, but provide the 'give and take' that encourages both to prosper. This mediation helps promote dialogue, vital to learning.

But more importantly, we may ask for clarification of the role of architectural beginning design students' education in this equation. Architectural education as a whole is never absolute, as constantly evolving rules are not steadfast and can be broken. In some cases, we may even question the most definitive concept of gravity. Especially when teaching beginning design, our role as educators breaks down their preconceptions and allows students to explore and transform. The more tightly controlled the rules, the less students are able to grow and develop. Beginning design students must learn to think in architectural terms instead of memorizing rules of the past. Obviously, some direction is necessary, with the rules of black and white carefully considered; sensitive solutions should be the primary goal. Thus learning to perceive within the in-between shades of gray allows for questioning, balanced with responsibility.

We might view a dichotomy between the unquestioning faith in and the open questioning created by gray areas. In architectural education we should consider how much flexibility is allowed within the gray. In other words, in order to define within the gray, rules formulate the structure but we must recognize the fluctuation and recalibration that can alter

these tenets. Allowing for diversity created by gray areas also permits those rules to be indeterminate. They must have flux, or evolve, as canons, for the educational system to take new elements into consideration. We might not be able to say that architectural education is progressing, but it is certainly evolving.

In another analogy, we might liken the typical approach to beginning architectural education to be similar to a pendulum. The pendulum, constantly in motion, swings between trends and movements of philosophy or approach. With the change, new opportunities are realized, as the voids left by the pendulum's movement can be filled by the in-between/gray areas of undefined thought. The gray, in-between areas are appropriate moments for allowing diversity of ideas. These moments are particularly poignant because the changes can happen at moments of turmoil and then become integrated into the design process. The use of gray areas can be integrated into the studio allowing diverse concepts to flourish. The diversity of gender, ethnicity, approaches to design and basic tenets can move into and influence the design of our beginning design students.

This combination of movement and diversity may be likened to play because the degrees of play can be loose for flexibility or tightened to limit tolerance. If we consider a meaning of play that involves room for movement, we find as Joel Weinsheimer writes, that play is dependent upon limits and restrictions. "[I]t is also true that the limits imposed are themselves restricted by the need for play."<sup>2</sup> A game that is too restricting has no movement or flexibility; consequently, the play is no longer interesting and it could be said it has no play. Marco Frascari expresses this seizing up of play by the example of play versus tolerance in a joint.<sup>3</sup> The joint must have play in order to move and work. Tolerance is either something that is required or a mistake, and is not built into, or designed, to allow for free movement and play. To leave some play means to leave some vagueness.<sup>4</sup> In addition, play as a philosophical movement has many approaches. It can be the "give and take" of dialogue in a design process. It constitutes a mode of learning, where an understanding can be found through this dialogue. It is also representative, as it is the less serious situation that stands for another more serious action. Being playful requires an amount of seriousness and should not be construed as frivolous. Play needs tremendous work to try alternatives and build successive refinements. This visual dialogue also must involve careful consideration, especially the commitment to listen to the information emitted by the media. This interpretation utilizes the playful intervals. Play comprises an activity that loses its potency when discontinued. It can not be repeated exactly the same way, and when the action is finished the mood changes. For example dance is a manner of play, once finished the dance may exist as choreography notation, but it is no longer the dance. Play is guided by boundaries that make the play an activity in which to stretch against these boundaries. More creative solutions stem from irregular boundaries. The gray areas of vagueness need restrictions for dialogue. Although the play is never static, it adjusts to the game as it is played. In other words, it tests the tolerance. Through play, the players adapt to a changing world and it is this change that enriches the play.<sup>5</sup>

Boundaries that are too restrictive can limit creativity and stifle diversity of thought. Conversely, too much freedom can be compared to 'free-play'.<sup>6</sup> Without boundaries or criteria, it is impossible to make decisions. The gray area is best for functioning, where students may find solutions themselves, not in fear of experimentation. They learn through their own dialogue of making and remaking. This learning process, of course, requires direction. But as we know, the more open and vague project statement produces the most varied solutions, and often the most creative and less expected outcomes. To stretch this analogy further, the playful diversity of the student body enriches the dialogue and allows interaction and infuses architectural thinking with the different. Here the shades of gray have been altered by changing attitudes and preconceived ideas. A mixture of gender economic and ethnic groups enriches the experience, allowing for play and the activities of play. Boundaries can be stretched and new discoveries occur as diverse groups relate.

Gray is neutral, not black nor white. However without gray you cannot find and understand the black and white. Gray might evoke the marginal, where things are more exciting and dangerous. Existing between edges, a gray area, describes the place of uncertainty and also the place of diversity. Gray represents the undefined, the yet to be defined. In the case of illuminated manuscripts, the edge constitutes the boundaries open to interpretation and the opposing comments. A margin is "that part of the surface which lies immediately within its boundary, especially when in some way marked off or distinguished from the rest of the

surface”. A margin is “a condition which closely approximates to the limit below or beyond which something ceases to be possible or desirable.”<sup>7</sup> It is also something additional that can account for unseen contingencies. A margin is the edge of a text, often used for summary or commentary.

When beginning design students’ first engage a project, they typically inhabit the gray areas of the marginal in that it is incomplete and undefined. Such projects hover on the edge between being something and being unintelligible for they contain a yet to be defined vagueness. Entering students themselves are the ambiguous and architecturally undefined. Similar to the concept of play, which does not have clearly defined boundaries, they may coincide with haphazard action. The rules for play are those contained in the play, and a developing design must also play within certain confines.

The gray areas of the margin are also that which is ‘on the boundary edge,’ both literally and figuratively. It thus connotes danger, revolution, pure possibility, fantasy and irresponsibility. The margin also suggests the doubtful, the unknown and fearful living. ‘Living on the edge’ is distinctly living in a state of the unknown, not within the lines of accepted behavior, and it can be risky. The field of architecture is filled with ‘risky’ behavior. Defining the future is risky, as is architectural education. We are never certain of the outcome and we must trust in our ‘product,’ the student.

We believe the beginning design student, must be able to successfully engage the gray aspects of the ambiguous. Encouraging our beginning design students to engage gray areas in their designs can also allow a diversity of ideas to flourish. For this to happen beginning studios should not be a place full of absolutes but constantly evolving where rules are not steadfast but gray and can be broken. It is our role as educators to break down preconceived ideas and allow students to explore and transform. While some structure and direction for studio is necessary, generally the more we overly restrict, the less students are able to grow and develop as designers. Beginning design students must learn to think in architectural terms instead of memorizing rules of the past. Thus learning to work within shades of gray allows for questioning, balanced by responsibility.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Casey, E.S. *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*. (Indiana University Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Weinsheimer, J.C. *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, (Yale University Press, 1985). p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> From a seminar by Dr. Marco Frascari at Georgia Tech on Representation (Spring 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Design needs ‘allusion’ to allow for the activity of play.

<sup>5</sup> Ideas on play from; Hans, J.S. *The Play of the World*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) ; Bateson, G. (1987). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Jason Aronson; Gadamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and Method*. Crossroad. and Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. (Beacon Press, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> Hans, J.S. “Hermeneutics, Play and Deconstruction”, *Philosophy Today*, 1980, Vol. 24

<sup>7</sup> Oxford English Dictionary.