

A Beginner's Mind

**PROCEEDINGS
21st National Conference
on the Beginning Design Student**

Stephen Temple, editor

**Conference held at the
College of Architecture
The University of Texas at San Antonio
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Situating Beginnings
Questioning Representation
Alternative Educations
Abstractions and Conceptions
Developing Beginnings
Pedagogical Constructions
Primary Contexts
Informing Beginnings
Educational Pedagogies
Analog / Digital Beginnings
Curriculum and Continuity
Interdisciplinary Curricula
Beginnings
Design / Build
Cultural Pluralities
Contentions
Revisions
Projections

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The Riddle of Design

The *Open Project*: Poetry + Making in the Present Tense

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abstract

The process of design is not linear, linking, through a series of points, the known with the unknown, but rather, design is fragmentary, proceeding in fits and starts. Along this circuitous route, design is marked by enjambments, simultaneities, and coincidences. Essentially it seems a rather tangled tale, or perhaps a riddle. It is from this premise that elements have been gathered to inform the trajectory of this paper. Drawing from Umberto Eco's studies of language and interpretation, which have been tainted by a not uncertain fascination I have with the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, this work proceeds from the act of misreading.

Rather than the presentation of accumulated images representing student work, which inevitably read like so many beads on a string...

Rather than reviewing what would inevitably be construed as a linear process situated on the line between cause and effect...

Rather than definite products and measurable accomplishments...

This paper is situated in the realm of conjecture. What I offer here are a few disparate fragments that allude to the potential exploration of a speculative territory.

Yet, somehow there is always a value to be found in sequentially reviewing the process of design. Following such reviews, fragments seem to remain salient in our minds; passed back and forth in memory. In a process not unlike design, they are reformed, taken apart, recombined, and drawn into a dialogue with what has come before. During this process of flux, through which they are informing prior images and thoughts, they become tainted, contaminated. It is this riddle of design that intrigues me, and serves as a fulcrum or starting point for understanding the importance of the *open project*.

The *open project*, defined as an uncertain, vague terrain within this paper, becomes the vehicle for misreading -- for dialogue and discovery. Subsequent to this definition, is an exploration of the ramifications of such projects within the course of beginning design. It is here, in the foundation of education, that the *open project* is the most critical for it establishes a mode of radical practice. The design laboratory becomes the engine for radical practice. The projects conjectured within the body of this paper are projections, or provocations -- as such, they remain enigmatic and, of course, *open* to misreading and without clear boundaries. What is suggested, is that perhaps it is the search for boundaries conducted within an unknown and *open* territory, which needs to be the central core of the design laboratory.

To begin, perhaps, with a misreading...

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time, there were

many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, 'When I grow up I will go there.' The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven't been there yet, and shall not try now... Other places were scattered about the equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres... But there was one yet -- the biggest, the most blank, so to speak -- that I had a hankering after. True, by this time it was not a blank space anymore. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery -- a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land... The snake had charmed me.

-- Joseph Conrad

Published in 1902, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, nonetheless, seems to resonate with the faint echo of J. L. Borges' work, *Dreamtigers* (first published in 1960). Every time I return to Conrad's exploration of unknown recesses, I discover, as if for the first time, images and elements of Borges' language, salient, emerging through the text. Indeed, the text, a palimpsest, has been tainted by this misreading. Contorted. Transformed. And somehow I am drawn into the vague regions of this contamination. Unlikely connections are formed as one text mingles with the other. At some point, I look up, surprised at the inextricable relationship between the two. This new text, which is neither wholly one or the other, has been generated through the act of reading. An act that is neither passive or inert, but is rather, active and poetic -- a coincidental enjambment which is a making of sorts.

Likewise, I am intrigued with the image presented in the passage above. An image of maps and territories, and of the unknown that resides there... an image that seems to search the tensions between memory, desire, and the potency of exploring the unknown. This unknown territory is, at once, formed of the fundamental elements of the world, and serves as a reflection of the self: both a window and a mirror. Somehow this speaks to the idea or process of beginning and presents the elements necessary for discovery. In other words, the foundation of education is founded on the premise of the unknown.

An alternate beginning...

Igor Stravinsky's book, *The Poetics of Music*, offers itself up to a multiplicity of readings. Perhaps more than any other text, I have brought these six lectures into the foundation design laboratories. This serves as no text book for the beginning design student -- there are a couple of worthy texts that could be mentioned -- but rather, it is a vehicle for thinking about the process, methods, means, and materials of making. Of course we are talking about design education rather than music education. I simply substitute the word "architecture" or the word "design" in the place of the word "music" in Stravinsky's eloquent work. This intentional misreading has always struck me as meaningful. An analogy is formed between these two categories of making (making present). Music is, after all, a parallel art. Listening to the *L'Oiseau de Feu* or *Sacre du Printemps*, one can begin to perceive the "architecture" of the music. Yet we understand the use of the word, "architecture" in this case, as an analogy. This justifiable misreading becomes intriguing when we find how potent Stravinsky's words are when brought into a dialogue with architecture. Even as other texts on architecture lose my interest -- becoming predictable, their authors overly didactic -- *The Poetics of Music* continues to present new readings, new correlations between map and territory. Here the territory in question is foundation design.

What remains critical to our question of *beginnings* in both of these examples (Stravinsky and Conrad), is not so much their content as their *openness*. Obviously, the layers that emerge through reading (and misreading) speak of something both universal and particular. Universal in that the ideas are not confined to the text -- they speak to certain over-arching patterns, forces, or processes. Particular in that when read in the context of the text, a certain logic seems to unite the part to the whole: a cohesiveness becomes apparent.

Marlow's fascination with the unknown becomes our fascination with the place of discovery, of confrontation. In Stravinsky we read:

For the phenomenon of music is nothing other than a phenomenon of speculation... It simply presupposes that the basis of musical creation is a preliminary feeling out, a will moving first in an abstract realm with the object of giving shape to something concrete.

Following this, our misreading:

For the phenomenon of architecture is nothing other than a phenomenon of speculation... It simply presupposes that the basis of architectural creation is a preliminary feeling out, a will moving first in an abstract realm with the object of giving shape to something concrete.

Stravinsky's own words are powerful, and today, obvious to any student of 20th century musicology. Following on the heels of Freud and the rediscovery of primitive culture, concurrently explored by Cubism, Stravinsky sought to reveal something primary and creative within the unconscious mind. Yet, artifice requires that the maker navigate between the abstract and the concrete -- between the search for a language and its equivalent artistic representation.

Stravinsky's approach has had a profound influence on the development of 20th century music.

Our misreading, however, seems tainted with a certain affectation, an awkwardness that eludes a singular and clear reading. We find ourselves passing these few sentences back and forth in our minds. Turning them over. Examining their minutest detail as well as their general trajectory. As the exactitude of their meaning escapes us, we search for the patterns that reveal the hidden nature of connections proposed in the reading. The first thing that strikes us is the definition of architecture as a phenomenon. Rather than as an object, we must understand architecture as a field of which we are a part. We engage this field through the whole of our senses. The thought of architecture as a "phenomenon of speculation," suggests an even deeper engagement, one that involves the maker in both conjecture and surmise. It is as if we are searching for something other than architecture, and that architecture serves as the vehicle for exploration, and becomes, necessarily, the resultant. It is this speculation that demands of the maker the search for an equivalency between drawing and building. In this reading, the text has been colored by post-structuralism and clearly influenced by the late work of Merleau-Ponty and Umberto Eco's semiology.

The design studio

Every time I confront a new semester, or the blank page that seems to precede each project statement, I have a need to rediscover making, or perhaps, the process of design... a process that I have long understood as poetic. What this paper proposes exists in the realm of conjecture. I offer no litany of student projects to support and verify the program of study, the pedagogy, or the philosophy that serves as structure for the design studio or school in general. When confronted with such papers, we admittedly, find a certain joy and are tempted by the

linearity of purpose and effect, to break off a little piece and walk away satisfied. Such evidence is “plastic” anyway -- conforming to the container into which it is placed... our current trajectory of thought. And also, most all student work in foundation design seems to me seductive. I seek to reach beyond this way of thinking that substitutes one project for another, or one sequence of projects for another sequence. In the effort to find the appropriate project, we lose sight of the purpose of our work as teachers. What is needed is a radical rethinking that restructures our understanding of the design project and foundation education in general.

I have seen students puzzle over project statements, attempting to “decode” them as if the answer to the problem was somehow hidden within the text. An answer known to the faculty and intentionally kept from the students. The results of the design process are often understood by the students as being measured against the a priori, “correct,” or known solution. This odd archeology of the project statement seems to arise when the project statement describes the end result -- an object which serves as the focus or intent of the project. Once the goal or object is unearthed from the initial statement, the student proceeds in a more or less linear fashion. The instructor’s prior knowledge of what the project should “look like” shapes the structure and content of the design studio. This training process is far from educational and involves no dialogue and discovery.

If the project statement is configured as a beginning... place from which to set out... a definition of a certain field [of relationships] to explore... a subject which, although obvious at first glance, remains unknown, untested... Here the studio can best be understood as a laboratory :

- an estuary
- an organism
- a vehicle for discovery
- as nourishment

open to establishing connection between...

What I am conjecturing is a design laboratory centered on the structure of the *open project*...

the open project

The *open project* does not posit the student in a linear process or a certain sequence leading to a known end. The awareness that there is an answer presupposes a single passage, a particular and successive sequence of design, from a known position to a projected end result. Once the end is named and defined it becomes an instrument of measure, a performance standard, against which the student’s results are laid out and compared. In this linear process, the student’s are not learning how to think, but rather, how to act, how to perform. Oddly enough, the product of this objective process, is not an object, but is more similar to a sign. That which results from these successive actions is not so much a work of design as a simulacrum. Design must become a process of designification, a dialogue through abstractions which draws the student into direct confrontation with the concrete world.

I am advocating the active role of the student in “reading” the project. The statement drafted by the instructor, though a springboard, is not a point of origin of the design process anymore than a map is the origin of the territory. There is a trajectory incorporated within the project statement that allows the student to venture out into and begin to engage the *territory* of the project... or rather, the statement *is* the trajectory. The *territory* of the project consists of the body of elements that define the field of inquiry: materials, operations, subjects, and objects, as well as certain concepts that are often expressed in dichotomies. The *interplay* between these elements is

critical. An analogy to the project might be a game of chess, which is also a labyrinth. With every “move,” a range of new possibilities come into view. The trajectory of the project, organized through the elements that constitute its *territory*, provide the criteria against which each decision is made.

The interpretation of the *territory* is discovered through the process of direct engagement. We learn through our hands. Yet this must be distinguished from craft. More akin to bricolage, the material and operations at hand begin to inform the student’s thinking. The potential within the *territory*, its structure, order, character, and the range of possible relationships among its elements, becomes understood through engagement. The patterns that emerge are corollaries to patterns of thinking. Through the reciprocity of making and thinking, operational, spacial, and material structures allow the students to perceive and grasp patterns of ideas and principles. The student establishes connections that begin to form a constellation, a pattern that reveals itself along the trajectory of the work.

interpretation

Unlimited semiosis does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria.
(Eco, *IO*, p. 23)

Umberto Eco proposes three theories of interpretation:

- 1 radical reader-oriented theory
- 2 original intention of the author
- 3 the intention of the text (Eco, *OI*, p. 25)

The first theory suggests that what the student brings to the project becomes the focus of their discovery. The studio, then, can offer no criteria for review, nor any trajectory for learning. Likewise, I am rejecting the second theory as serving only as a means for students to mimic the a priori understanding of the instructor. Discoveries, in this case which is akin to training, lie outside of the student. Within the third theory, *the intention of the text*, is a middle ground. The work is situated in the contested space between the *territory* of the project and the student. Through their engagement, which forms a dialogue with this *territory*, the student navigates, making judgements and responding to the changes in the conditions at hand.

The student’s work is an exploration, not of the text or project statement, but of the *territory* as prepared by the instructor. The exploration of the territory uncovers certain patterns and principles that are understood within the framework of making. The possible resolutions inherent in an *open project* are never fully explored. However, certain categories become apparent when reviewing the students’ work. These reflect the inherent order within the *territory* of the project. These types of resolutions can serve as a vehicle for the initial discussion with the students.

The boundary or envelope of the project is critical for it defines the field of the project. “If boundaries are not recognized, then there can be no civitas.” (Eco, *IO*, p. 27) The boundary becomes the place of exploration... how many, how few, how far, how thin. Of course it takes a violation in order for the students to recognize the extent, position, and structure of the boundary. The project statement describes a *territory* whose boundary conditions are unknown. The intention of the *open project* implies a certain stretching out as the student explores the boundaries following the trajectory of the work. What comes together along this arc are the discoveries of certain interconnections and relationships among the elements of the project. The

different work in the laboratory leads to a singular body of discoveries, where each student's work informs (and often questions) the others.

a partial taxonomy of the *open project*

The *open project* is a complex field of forces that configure possible events (Eco, *OW*, p. 14). The project statement remains incomplete, a fragment, left open for interpretation. As the end result is never named as a definitive solution, it cannot serve to prefigure the student's work, but more often poses a question. The center of reference for the student becomes the work itself as it plays against both their thinking and the *territory* described by the project statement. The following is a partial taxonomy of the *open project*, and may serve to suggest a range of particular projects.

- i narrative structure
A narrative structure organizes the project's *territory* -- defining a series of certain boundaries and centers, each of which begin to inform the trajectory of the work. The work takes place within this constellation of forces and limitations of tools, operations, materials, subjects, and objects. The work results from the exploration of the consequences of the constellation. The resistance encountered guides the decision making process and subsequent actions. [construct an orderly support for a rock]
- ii field of possibilities
The project's *territory* is a field of elements whose relationship, position, place, and influence, remain uncertain. Navigating through their work, the student finds patterns which suggest a whole, and direct the decision making process. [contain 4 found objects]
- iii site of study
A particular site is given in conjunction with certain operations. The site is explored through a series of analytical exercises that allow the student to understand the constituent elements of the site and their organization or potential organization. [paper, folding + cutting, tower; 1 sf of a surface, mapping]
- iv the object as analogy
The project defines its object in terms of another object. The tension between the known categories and the possibilities, suggested by the analogical bridging between them, serves to define certain questions, which are enmeshed within the *territory* of the project. [wall/room; plaza/room; place/joint]
- v contested space
The project's *territory* is positioned between two or more conditions, materials, elements, or spaces. The student seeks the orderly resolution of the contested space between. [inside-outside; beam-column; object-table]

closure

To [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out...

I believe that the deeper intent of this work is actually the surface or envelope that it presents,

rather than the particulars that are drawn together. The envelope of this paper is a project[ion] itself... put forward as a conjecture. In order for the beginning of design education to remain vital, its projects need to be open for dialogue and discovery. Somehow, this has been largely lost to the comfort of assured ends. Although aspects of the *open project* have been explored over the last decade in foundation laboratories I have taught at Virginia Tech and UTSA, I am only beginning to draw the fragments of these experiences together into a coherent model. Perhaps the desire will always exist just beyond what I am able to put into practice. In this sense, my understanding of the *open project* will always be evolving, incomplete, and open to interpretation.

[The title of this paper is drawn from Borges' first lecture in *This Craft of Verse* entitled "The Riddle of Poetry."]

afterward: the open project is...

The *open project* is "...an act of improvised creation..." (Eco, *OW*, p. 1)

The potential for the student's exploration, for dialogue and discovery, is a function of the structure established through the initial project statement.

The *open project* proposes a field of possibilities as an invitation to explore the unknown.

The *open project* has no singular solution. It is structured as a map, not a set of instructions. What is discovered of the territory may well be unique for each student.

The *open project* can be configured as a matrix that allows multiple readings and suggests a multiplicity of possible connections.

The *open project* is not an open-ended or meandering process. Its closure is informed by the discoveries and decisions made throughout the process.

The *open project* is an interplay of stimulus and response where the project statement serves to initiate this dialogue and define the field of study.

The *open project* offers "...itself not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition along given structural coordinates but as 'open' works which are brought to conclusion by the [student] at the same time as he experiences them on an aesthetic plane." (Eco, *OW* p. 3)

The result of the *open project* is the growing awareness of patterns inherent in the design process, material structure, methods of composition and assembly, and comprehension of overarching ideas.

The *open project* provides a wealth of different resonances and echoes that intertwine, recede, and emerge again within the next project.

The *open project* is open to differing interpretations, misinterpretation, as well as over interpretation -- all of which may contribute to dialogue and discovery.

The *open project* is uncertain. It is this uncertainty that invites us to enter the project.

The student must be conscious of particular decisions and how they form a body of coherent thought whose focus is a point discovered in a field of interrelations.

Any program, project statement, or exercise could be considered *open* -- what is critical is the means the instructor chooses to convey the project. Misreading the project is what transforms it into a vehicle for dialogue and discovery. The foundation student is in no position to transform the project. The student must know that the project is open. There must be a prompt of some kind.

The *open project* is similar to Heraclitus' river -- always in flux, changing. The lack of a definitive point opens the project and the student to discovery. Interconnections are made which are understood only through the direct exploration of means, materials, and methods.

The object of the *open project* becomes its subject.

The *open project* describes a beginning.

The *open project* exists in the present tense. It is never *about* some thing or some idea, but always *is*. It is here that the *open project* becomes analogical: in its ability to suggest that which is outside of the project.

The *open project* is not directed or burdened by preconception. Often, the *open project* is not named. To name some thing is to call it into being and to fictionalize it at the same time. The name can falsely suggest a predetermined end. The object of the project is set before the student as if some kind of grail.

"The important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process. Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spacial composition in the page setting... of the text -- all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities." (Eco, *OW*, p. 8)

"This search for suggestiveness is a deliberate move to 'open' the work..." (Eco, *OW*, p. 9)

The *open project* needs to be considered as a vehicle or apparatus through which or by which work and reflection proceeds.

The *open project* outlines a field that is a "...complex interplay of motive forces... a configuration of possible events, a complete dynamism of structure." (Eco, *OW*, p. 14)

Every act of making explains the *open project* but does not exhaust the project's possibilities. Each work by an individual student illuminates the work of the others, complements it, and suggests further permutations, possibilities, potential trajectories.

The *open project* offers no privileged points of view. The instructor must surrender their position of knowledge of the outcome and concentrate on establishing and nourishing an environment conducive to serendipity.

The *open project* encourages students to make connections between seemingly different things. These connections serve as a framework for the project as it proceeds.

The *open project* is not a conglomeration of random activity with an amorphous outcome.

The *open project* sets an organizing rule that governs the design process. It provides a structure through which the design process takes shape. The structure establishes a dialogue between pattern and material.

The *open project* provides a territory and a structure for interpretation (and misinterpretation).

the matrix

operation	material	dichotomy	subject	object
order	chip board	surface + structure	order	place
draw	newsprint	structure + event	space	support
scribe	white paper	object + field	figure	structure
cut	black paper	figure + ground	field	drawing
record	paperclips	open + closed	transformation	graphic
transform	corrugated board	light + dark	rhythm	print
abstract	cover stock	inside + outside	series	poster
paint	wire	solid + void	system	container
measure	mesh	concave + convex	proportion	chair
multiply	plaster	same + different	ratio	room
collapse	found objects	one + many	symmetry	street
fold	found material	general + particular	movement	building
diagram	paint	fixed + moving	point	city
sketch	ink	pattern + material	line	intersection
model	wood	object + subject	plane	light modulator
assemble	plastic	vocabulary + syntax	volume	bridge
build	metal	center + boundary	enclosure	joint
construct	bristol board	part + whole	scale	column
compose	fabric	house + city	event	wall
define	thread	light + shadow	frame	roof
frame	linoleum	structure + event	geometry	floor
join	dowels	tension + compression	structure	stair

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