

t r a n s l a t i o n

from understanding to misreading and back again

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Beginning in the midst: Drawing on the potency of life experience

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We find that there is an accepted, and generally unquestioned notion, that architecture is a specialized form of knowledge. The debate surrounding the application of this knowledge, as Dalibor Vesely has pointed out, is generally limited to questions concerning the relative merit of technical efficiency versus that of aesthetics.²¹ This 'instrumental' thinking, governing much of professional practice at present, often becomes the gauge of appropriateness in determining contemporary architectural education. In so doing it prompts a debate as to whether pedagogy should be limited to a conception of architecture as an explicit, and therefore detached, specialized knowledge, one that is administered to students as a sequential development from simple concepts to complex formulae as they progress through the program.

Curriculum

As an alternative possibility for beginning design studio we have attempted to draw upon a knowledge embedded in the cumulative life experience of each student, itself a very real and meaningful embodiment of issues and agendas that form the background of the 'responsible citizen' engaged in a shared cultural setting. From the onset students are encouraged to understand that their creative work calls for the exercise of personal responsibility in challenging preconceptions, passing judgments, and adopting positions that matter, not solely to a subjective will, but as a projection of new possibilities for lives well lived. Architecture is introduced as, fundamentally, an art offering a primary form of embodiment to a community of human beings, a form of shared expression that creates meaningful settings for diverse and complex human situations, contributing to the transformation and continuity of cultures. Since it gives shape to an environment where human activities are made possible, it has a responsibility to respond imaginatively to the ongoing drama of human existence, engaging with the mundane detail of everyday life at the same time that it addresses the difficult questions of who and what we are as individuals and as communities.

As such, architecture is never merely the production of buildings, or the manufacture of large, useful objects. Architecture is a medium for the creation of cultural meaning; it is a remaining shell of thought. Actual thought is of no substance. As John Hejduk put it: "We cannot actually see thought, we can only

²¹Vesely, Dalibor. "Architecture and the question of technology." Educating Architects. Academy Editions 1995, Great Britain

see its remains. Thought manifests itself by its shucking or shedding of itself; it is beyond its confinement.”²² In the course of history, architecture developed as a special form of human activity, a unique means of making inventive propositions that challenge the status quo, throwing new light on familiar situations, and offering opportunities to generate original insights about how we might live a good and fulfilling life.

Above all else, this introductory studio curriculum is designed to stimulate creativity. It accomplishes that by requiring imaginative engagement with certain fundamental themes, not exclusive to architecture, but nonetheless crucial in their influence and effect on architectural possibilities. Students are encouraged to experiment with material and form through modeling and drawing and in so doing to develop confidence and dexterity in multiple media. Robert Irwin, a prominent contemporary artist and educator put it this way:

“You have to begin with students’ expectations. You have to develop their confidence and prove to them in their own performance that there isn’t anything they won’t be able to accomplish technically, eventually, given a lot of application, before you can begin to convince them that that kind of technical virtuosity doesn’t deserve the kind of focus they have been led to believe it does by a performance-oriented culture.”²³

They are encouraged to look at ‘buildings’ less as objects in space, and more as settings for a choreography of human actions; as places rich with experiential qualities, as opposed to just practicality, size, geometry and image. They are encouraged to look beyond the obvious and visible shape of architecture, to the hidden, invisible background of meanings and interpretations. They are encouraged to see architecture anew, to understand its potential as an artistic and poetic medium productively involved in the networks of myths and stories that coalesce into the identity of a culture, and to begin to make an architecture that is fascinating, challenging, moving, and enriching to those who might use and experience it.

Situations and intermediaries: four object lessons

In order to bring a measure of clarity and focus to the proposed inquiry, the studio work is organized around four ‘situations’ or ‘object lessons’, otherwise seen as sets of focused activities. These activities are further composed of ‘teachable moments’ or questions. The object lessons are just that; lessons situated in culture, space and time. They are not cumulative or instrumental but instead they offer points of view that can be re-visited, enlarged upon and revised at any time as the educational process unfolds. Both instructors and students should guard against the introduction of a dogmatic stance. Instructors begin with

²² Hejduk, John. “Education of an Architect”. Rizzoli. New York 1988

²³ Irwin, Robert. “Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees”. University of California Press. Berkley, Los Angeles. 1982

a series of significant questions arising out of the proposed inquiry. These questions should lead to a new set of questions developed by the students as new 'horizons' open. According to Robert Irwin, again:

"You want (students) to understand that 90 percent of the things they take for granted are cultural solutions embedded in a history of such solutions: facts, but not necessarily truths. You want to give them a real historical awareness, not in terms of names and dates but rather in terms of a progression of ideas, leading to an understanding why certain questions are now being asked by their contemporaries..."²⁴

The learning process is somewhat improvisational in nature but nevertheless supported by the introduction and practice of certain skills and dexterities fundamental to the communication of ideas in architecture. Having ideas demands means of communication that can make those ideas available to others, and means of communication demand to be fabricated from media (whether gesturing with your body, crafting with words and grammar, or constructing with bricks and mortar). The stuff of the world, matter, material, is our partner in every act of communication and getting familiar with its diverse qualities, its idiosyncrasies, and its contribution to the rich repertoire of possible manipulations is key to success in any art, and no less so in architecture.

The four object lessons focus attention on familiar human situations and the fabricated intermediaries that enable the issues and concerns that abound within those situations to be communicated amongst participants. Human situations are not closed, factual and objective entities; they cannot be spoken of in terms of certainty, or captured once and for all by formulae. Though often deeply familiar situations, since they comprise the unfolding involvement of human beings in action, are open and interpretative, each fully embedded in a history of continuing traditions at the same time that they remain open to original insight, that is, to creative transformation that renews their significance to the issues and agendas of contemporary life. Without this imaginative renewal they can become anachronistic, dogmatic, or just simply fade into irrelevance.

This studio invites students to engage with human situations, gather and explore their multivalent richness, and fabricate intermediaries to communicate their response. Somewhat like stretches before a big game, students begin with a short, potent, collaborative assignment to remind them of the communicative extent, and limits, of their own body through gesture. In this assignment students communicate an allocated human condition in silence by means of bodily gesture augmented and extended appropriately by the creative employment of a single medium (corrugated cardboard). They consider how to make a cardboard intermediary, something between a prosthetic and a costume. Following that they

²⁴ Irwin, Robert. "Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees". University of California Press. Berkley, Los Angeles. 1982

explore the potency of four common intermediaries: a drawing, a window, a threshold, and a path.

1 The Deep Drawing

The object lesson begins with fundamental questions such as: What is a drawing? Is it a visual simulation of an object or subject matter? Does it attempt to replicate things? In its attention to detail does it fool the eye into believing it sees the thing itself rather than a representation? Is the goal of a drawing to attain a photo-realistic clarity?

Undoubtedly, a drawing engages the visual dimension of things, how something looks to one who gazes. But, as the cubists dramatically demonstrated in their experiments in the early years of the 20th century, things are always more than their appearance can account for. A thing's visual reality, how it looks, is but one particular layer of a 'depth' that is populated by a rich array of characteristics comprising the identity of a thing: these would include all the other experiential aspects of a thing such how it feels to touch, to hear, to smell, to taste, but also what we 'know' of the thing. Knowledge is powerful and yet it is predominantly invisible. It includes the visual characteristics alongside all the non-experiential aspects of a thing's identity, encapsulated in the immaterial dimensions of thought such as concepts, formulae, mathematizations, rationalizations, as well as opinions, judgments, attitudes and prejudices. This depth of identity of a thing also consists of its story over time, what could be called its 'effective history', since the way something is known to us now is never disconnected from how it has been known in the past or how it might be known in the future. In other words, a thing's history and its potential cannot be ignored for fear of extracting it from the current of unfolding life.

To make a drawing is to perform a special kind of analysis, more like the telling of a story, more like a biography. To draw forth the richness of identity from its latent depth, this is the challenge of the first object lesson.

Students begin by selecting one of their drawings completed in a previous basic drawing course. It is usually an 18 x 24 charcoal, pencil or conté crayon on bristol board/newsprint. This drawing is, in a sense, a 'site' for this exercise.

Work begins by performing an 'analysis' of the drawing to explore the depth of identity of its subject matter. This analysis takes the form of multiple written annotations across the drawing and beyond its edges if necessary. This is not a formal analysis: compositional strategies, geometric disposition, formal structure can be ignored. Instead students are encouraged to ask multiple questions in interrogating the subject matter, questions whose answers will undoubtedly lead to further questions as they mine the content of the drawing somewhat like an archaeologist, or a forensic crime scene investigator, gathering evidence, making connections, putting forth interpretations.

2 The Analogical Window

Here the study of a basic architectural element begins with a set of questions intended to introduce this element as a phenomena rather than an object. Students are encouraged to see the window as an eye of a building, and mouth, ear and nose concurrently. Unlike the drawing, which speaks of depth through visual suggestion, the window is a manipulator, it reveals as it hides, it frames a portion of reality of its own making. It offers greater opportunity to be engaged and experienced by our bodies. A window is perhaps never an innocent bystander. It is a small stage for everyday human 'dramas' as well as for the profound and immense dramas played out by light, weather and time, to name just a few of the phenomenal actors in the employ of the theatrical troop of unfolding life.

The window invites a perception of in front and behind, this side or that, inside or outside, inclusion or exclusion, here or there; it is clearly an intermediary in a more literal sense than a drawing. It is a framing of a world and no less an opportunity for interpreting that world; a means of communicating it to others. A window has dimension, scale, depth (of jamb), and constructed materiality, each of which can address the body of the onlooker with meaningful gesture alongside its most obvious and perhaps unduly prioritized aspect, its view. As a challenge to the transparency of a window that frames a view through, students consider the window as an opaque revelation, one that holds the gaze of the viewer within its thickness, communicating the identity of the beyond by analogy as opposed to clear, unobstructed sight.

Students begin this inquiry by conducting a photo survey/study of windows in their familiar environment. They proceed by creating a window that mediates between an onlooker and the setting for one of the following familiar domestic activities: dining, bathing, or sleeping. Standard 2x6 lumber is used to construct a 24"x24" window frame. Within the depth of the constructed aperture, students construct an 'opaque revelation' using an assemblage of any appropriate media such as wood, plexiglass, metal, plastic, masonry, fabric, wax, found objects and so on. Students are expected to consider what they know of their allocated setting beyond its mere visual appearance and explore the human situations that give the setting its specific identity: everything from the alleviation of hunger to a Thanksgiving feast; the immediate ablution to the long hot soak; the necessity of rest to the nuptial union. The exercise is a response to the events, the rituals; the expectations; the relationships between participants (spatial and otherwise); the comportment of the body, its actions and movements; the contribution of props, devices and implements, and the wider implications of the activity to life in general. The window becomes an interpretation of the marriage of activity and

setting; its depth of meaning translated into the depth of a jamb; meaning made manifest by the intermediary we call a window.

Following fabrication students make a precise measured drawing of the 'elevation' of the window half-size, using the conventions of orthogonal projection, graphite pencil on one sheet of good quality drawing paper, rendering textures and the disposition of light and shade.

3 The Characteristic Threshold

In this object lesson we are concerned with the 'thin' slice of space at which all that is on one side communicates with all that is on the other at the place of breach in the boundary. More specifically we are interested in experiencing the threshold, which means passing through, interpreting the transition from one domain to another, noticing the change as an introduction, a prelude, a place where something gets left behind and something is welcomed, where two sides negotiate their relative identities, or two identities agree upon the shared gap that separates and connects them. This side or that, territories are configured in response to the human situations that take place there, where a cast of characters plays out the drama of their coexistence, where definitions are laid down, and claims are staked. Passage into bounded territory becomes an opportunity for the celebration of difference, an event of expressive clarity, like a greeting, to counter the sense of vulnerability at the opening, the event of entry.

Students are to imagine a masonry wall four feet thick marking the boundary of a special domain of activity related specifically to a particular protagonist from a supplied list. (physician, teacher, gambler, meteorologist, astronomer, gardener, lawyer etc.) They choreograph the event of entry and configure the threshold that will provide passage through the wall. They examine the character of the protagonists, their activity, their bodily actions, their comportment, their priorities, their professional relationship with others, as this content will provide the inspiration for how to proceed. The differences between characters reveal themselves in the scale, configuration, material and detail of each opening?

The character of the protagonist becomes evident in the corporeality (the body's conversation with space and material) of the act of passage accommodated at the threshold. "Who wants to become acquainted with man should listen to the language spoken by the things in his existence."

4 The Eventful Path

"To satisfy his inner sense of orientation, man needs to situate himself in space."
Rudolf Arnheim

In this assignment students ‘travel’ the paths created by music. Music presents us with ‘landscapes’ of stunning beauty, sometimes serene and plain and sometimes chaotic, threatening and complex. It defies a firm interpretation while simultaneously affirming (suggesting) possibilities of multiple interpretations, generating sequences of poetic images and metaphors. Music shares with architecture a need for order. This order comes through the act of composition. It requires, as learned in previous assignments, certain ‘self-knowledge’, then by means of rhythm, theme, figure, background, scale, proportion, (a)symmetry, etc., it takes form and finally yields a satisfying rich setting. Musicians of various cultures across the world, and throughout history, have used music for the telling of creation myths which begin with the transformation of a primordial chaos into the first ‘distinction’, that between the earth and the sky, articulated by the horizon. The trace of this first creative impulse remains to this day, ever present and forever being redefined as we change perspectives upon it.

The assignment leads toward discovery and development of three events in transition. The events are discovered in the piece of music assigned to students but they are not derived directly from the compositional structure of the music, nor do they necessarily rely on the related principles of music theory. The three events in transition may be seen as the beginning, middle and the end; they unfold toward a horizon that “builds itself” as a series of unfolding events. Students begin by listening to an assigned short musical composition, making notes about their thoughts and observations and ‘translating’ it into a ‘map’, a tablet sculpted out of malleable material. The map reveals a ‘topography’, identifies locations and places for particular activities, gives context within which possible actions are set forth. The remainder of the assignment deals with ‘place making’ built around three events in transition, identified by students in their analysis of music. Some aspects of the previous three object lessons such as ‘Deep Drawing and ‘Characteristic Threshold’ are revisited at this point through a set of drawing requirements in order to introduce students to the possibility of growth, discovery and development within each of the four object lessons.

Pedagogy

The curriculum attempts to shift the emphasis of studio experience toward developing a sense of responsibility on the part of the student. We agree with Robert Irwin that: “the most immoral thing one can do is have ambitions for someone else’s mind.” The most difficult part of implementation of this curriculum has been in making students aware that they are responsible for their own creative propositions and that they already embody much of what they have to contribute. We strongly resist the temptation to give students methods that would quickly reduce this curriculum to a technique, and instead keep them on the edge of each question. This curriculum, as stated at the beginning, draws upon a knowledge embedded in the cumulative life experience of each student and therefore encounters deeply embedded learning methods, habits and expectations acquired over the years in educational system. Changing or

breaking habits quickly becomes the crux of studio activities and that, coincidentally is prerequisite for creative work.

We find the traditional methods of evaluation of student work highly problematic as they measure the performance against external standards and therefore contradict the fundamental premises of the proposed curriculum. Some qualitative evaluation of work is retained but strictly tied to the depth and quality of thought preceding and arising from the work. To an extent, a portion of responsibility for evaluation has been shifted onto students and serves as a measure of 'growth' or maturity of the student. The quantitative evaluation along with a student's level of engagement with the work and participation in-group discussions completes the spectrum of evaluation criteria. Students are required to keep a visual journal/chronicle/sketchbook throughout each class. It is reviewed at intervals throughout the term and submitted for assessment at the end of the studio.

There are no textbooks for architectural design studio. It is a creative activity that requires not only imagination, graphic communication skills and intellectual argument, it also requires a persistent desire to research and gather material from the full breadth of literary genres; from novels and poetry, to publications on the arts (including architecture), history, philosophy, cultural theory, science and technology. This research must, in many ways, be self-directed and responsive to the themes and issues involved in ongoing design assignments. Readings are suggested throughout the studio, sometimes discussed in class, and often presented as a catalyst to inspire further excursions into the very potent world of cultural knowledge embedded in books and journals.