

# A Naive Visibility of Things: A First Year Interdisciplinary Studio Project

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This studio project—a collaborative effort between first year students in architecture and landscape architecture—engages issues of symbol, visibility, form, and theory through a critical understanding of place. This potential rests in a conviction; that the question of our place, of “an America,” is a subject which demands to be introduced to beginning students, and that its debate not only encourages reinvigorated formmaking, but also demonstrates the fundamental sameness within environmental design disciplines.

Set upon undergraduate students whose experiences of form, space, and symbol are largely rural, the project confronts American imagery by exploring the physicality of form beyond the symbolic. This work realigns student awareness of their indigenous environment toward a larger vision of deconstructing boundaries; the paradigmatic ones of symbol, and the disciplinary ones of practice.

The project develops through the work of American artist Edward Hopper and French theorist Jean Baudrillard. Together, Hopper’s imagery offers an expressive vernacular reality for our students and Baudrillard’s *America* provides a provocative reconsideration of our place. While Baudrillard acts to frame the project’s theory, its methodology explores Hopper’s paintings through a complex series of physical studies. Using sequential analyses of form, space, light, and color, the studio relies on interactive group learning and individual accomplishment to establish facts about Hopper’s work. The lessons about this physicality are then used in the creation of new space.

The studio project is structured around a rich observation by Baudrillard about the paradox that is America: “. . . a naive visibility of things . . .”

**Our studio project engages the “naive” to demonstrate the limits of symbolism, the potential in direct experience, the universality of form, and the spatial equivalency between object and landscape.** Naive implies a lack of artificiality; something unaffectedly simple. Baudrillard recognized that the naive sits in opposition to the symbolic, which pointedly defined the difference between American reality and the abstract structure of European thinking. Disavowing western theory and history, it is the naive which accesses the simple, the real, the physical.

As Edward Hopper created form directly from the material specifics of his place—America—his paintings are emblematic of consideration for the physical. His painting technique shows no differentiation from built form to landscape to human figure because he chose not to see any as a symbolic language. The naive, as Hopper represented it, allows the consideration of what the physical *is* over the conceptualization of what the physical might *mean*. In this sense, the skills necessary for this kind of invention are not the critical capacities of intellect but the direct and inclusive effort of experience.

**Our studio project explores “visibility” to understand**

**the analysis of form in light, the theory of color and its contrasts, and the effect of color on spacemaking.** Visibility is the fact of being seen. Baudrillard offers the word visibility in contradistinction to its opposite—the hidden density of conceptualization—and asserts that America has an “obviousness,” predicated by elemental physicality and accessed by simply being seen.

Hopper’s artistic techniques are lessons for those who would try to “see,” as designers must do. Clearly, there was great attention paid to the manifestation of light and color in his subjects. At times he would build models to record the exact patterns of light and shadow in direct sunlight, or would note color temperatures and the intricacies of their relationships on his sketches. The stunning accuracy of Hopper’s pictures creates the extraordinary effect of undoing the distinctions exhibited by traditional painting techniques. This method was wholly created by how the world was visible to him, that there were no artificial distinctions between one thing and another—be it flesh or brick. All were revealed by the intricacies of color, all were seen in light and shadow; in the end, all became a manifestation of visibility.

**Our studio project investigates “things” to learn about the undifferentiated nature of form and space, the related manipulation of vertical and horizontal surface, and the skills of language, discussion, and critical interpretation.** Things is perhaps the most difficult term, but is seen to hold the most promise. Defined, it is that which exhibits tangible objectivity and is distinguished from its conceptual potential. Together, “naive” and “visibility” create the potential of objectivity, of “thingness;” a full knowing of the physical undifferentiated by conceptualization. Baudrillard saw the dissolution of difference—and all its implications within theory, language, and history—as the identifying mark of the modern.

Seen in this light, it is no wonder that Hopper often portrayed his America through integrated aspects of built form and landscape. He constructed objects, “things,” out of every element in a painting to clarify relationships through physical fact rather than conceptual intention. It is also notable to consider the classic criticism of his work; the charge of “silence” or “emptiness.” This reading suggests that identity is not available through differentiation—through language—and so finds its lack to be the work’s ultimate content. This reaction reinforces the claim that Hopper’s pictures were fully in the realm of “things;” tangibly objective and without words.

These terms—naive, visibility, things—eliminate the boundaries that conceptual structures have instituted to order the world, and bring a uniquely American potential to the beginning design studio. Perhaps most notably, these possibilities allow us to think of form through *extra-disciplinary* means; beyond the presumption of difference yet implied by the word “interdisciplinary.”