

On the Surface: The Studio Turned Inside-Out

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Universities are under increasing pressure to provide service to their communities. This trend potentially endangers the academic's fundamental freedom to determine course content and a research agenda. This paper advocates a proactive model of community service in response to this public mandate.

In the traditional model of community design studios, local organizations bring projects to the university. Because the projects arrive by happenstance, their research and pedagogic value are predictably uneven. In the alternative proactive model, the faculty first establish their pedagogic and research agenda, and then seek out the most appropriate client, program, and site in the community. This alternative model for community service retains all the meritorious qualities of the traditional model while optimizing the educational experience for the students.

Academic community service serves implicitly as a model for professional practice. While the reactive model of service perpetuates a reactive model for practice — one in which the problems are framed by others — a proactive approach offers the students and the community a model in which professionals assume the lead.

To illustrate the potential of this proactive model, this paper will describe a studio conducted at the University of Technology in Helsinki in the fall of 1996.

TURNING THE STUDIO INSIDE-OUT: REACTIVE VS. PROACTIVE MODELS FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE

Traditionally, community design studios within schools of architecture are approached by organizations and individuals seeking some form of architectural service. While the nature of this service varies from school to school, the faculty and students are typically responding to problems framed by others. Clearly, these community design studios serve several important functions. First, they satisfy the university's charge to engage the local community. Secondly, they provide pro bono architectural services to those who might otherwise not be able to afford them. Finally, they offer students and faculty experience with the demands and opportunities of working with real clients, sites, programs, and budgets.

But, because the projects are formulated by members of the community at large and not by the faculty, their pedagogic value is predictably uneven; the needs of a community group at any given moment and the ongoing requirements of a curriculum may simply be incompatible. In the proposed alternative model, the faculty play a truly proactive role. Instructors first clearly establish the pedagogic aim of the studio within the framework of the curriculum, and then actively seek out clients and sites best suited to their particular agenda. This alternative model for community service retains all the

meritorious qualities of the traditional model while optimizing the educational experience for the students.

ON THE SURFACE: COURSE OVERVIEW

In the fall of 1996, I was a guest professor in the Masters Program at the University of Technology in Helsinki where I lead a studio entitled "On the Surface." The course began with two projects executed within the studio, and concluded with full-scale installations in the downtown commercial district. The subject of the studio and the accompanying seminar was the space of the city's surfaces, which like the space of a book, both depends upon, and transcends, its physical presence. We studied how the city's surfaces shape the immeasurable space in which a building constructs the city's inhabitants and the inhabitants in turn give the city meaning. Discussions ranged from the narrative potential of surfaces and the allure of masking, to the nature of transparency and the problem of ornament. The ideas generated by the readings and seminar discussions directly informed the studio work.

Project One

In the first project, students were asked to add a surface to the Cable Factory, the industrial complex which housed our studio. They first identified sites in need of programmatic intervention: a long corridor without relief, a bridge without views, a remote space without function. After programming their interventions, the students designed and built 1:1 scale constructions that contained the essential qualities of their proposals. The constructions, framed by prescribed dimensions, were to be built with the same materials and the same tectonic strategies that would be employed in a full-scale realization. The pieces were then re-sited and presented in the Cable Factory gallery as a public exhibition.

One German student, struck by the excruciatingly slow movement of the freight elevator, proposed painting an obscure, but provocative image of a woman's body on the exposed interior concrete walls of the shaft. The image, alternatively revealed and concealed by the sliding position of the elevator platform and the counterweight, was intended to alleviate the anxiety of waiting. Less pragmatic, an American student, fascinated by the play of reflections in the thick, double casement windows of the factory, wanted to further extend the reflections living between the panes by adding additional layers of framed glass, windows upon windows upon windows.

A Finnish student proposed replacing the existing metal partition between two urinals with a surface of white silk laid over a gridded frame. The new surface mirrored the white ceramic tiles of the room, but presented an unfamiliar fragility. It was his intention to encour-



Fig. 1. Project One

age the users to take care in a place they normally use (and abuse) without regard. A student from Ljubljana proposed stripping an existing pedestrian bridge, and recladding the structure on two sides with yellow lacquered steel panels open to the sky. She commissioned an auto body shop to paint the steel panels of her construction in order to get precisely the quality she envisioned. The students, half of them foreigners, proved to be remarkably resourceful.

Project Two

In the second project, Dan Hoffman (formerly the director of the Architecture Studio at Cranbrook), continued the study of surfaces. For two weeks, he and the students discussed the confluence of commercial imagery and building tectonics. He began with an exercise using what he calls the "white-out" process. The students were asked to white-out an advertisement until it was just unrecognizable. What remained was the "tone" of the image. This was then applied to a second task: the design of a construction fence around a commercial lot. To quote Dan Hofmann from our interview published in the Finnish architecture magazine, *Arkkitiehti* (411995): "The idea is to design the fence in such a way that it evokes the 'tone' of the advertisement . . ." The site in Helsinki was given, and each student designed a fence with a specific commercial program. The completed designs were presented as small-scale models and full-scale details.

Project Three

For the final project of the semester, we took our interest in

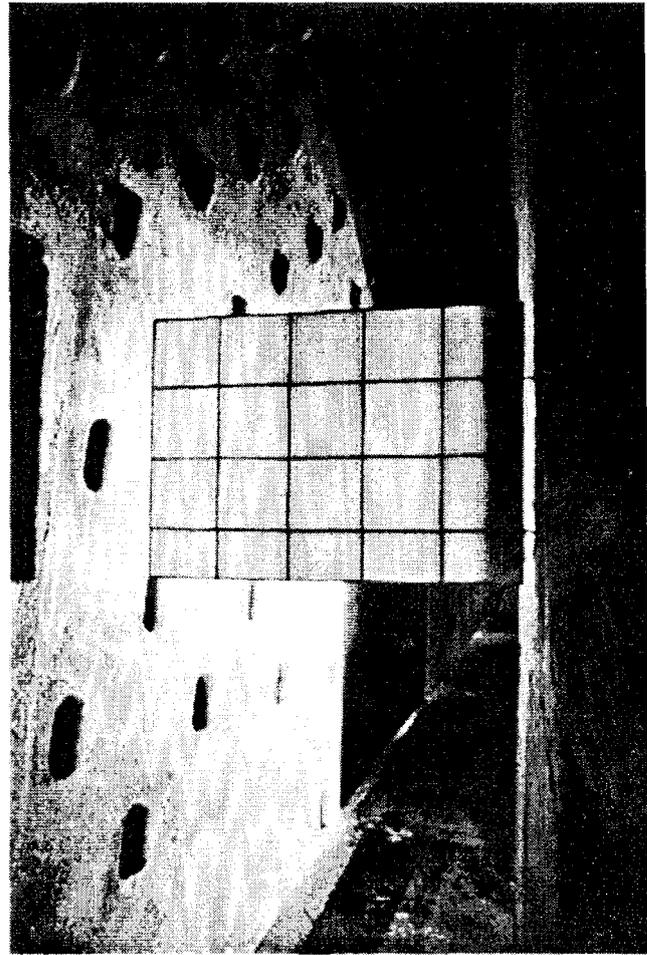


Fig. 2. Project One

programmed surfaces out of the studio and into the community. Peter MacKeith, director of the Masters Program, approached an association of merchants on behalf of the studio to request the use of their storefronts. Eleven shopkeepers agreed to allow us to continue our studio explorations on their property during their critical Christmas season.

By lottery, each student in the class was assigned to a client (a shopkeeper) and a site (a storefront) and given a budget of \$300 (paid equally by the shopkeeper, the student, and the Masters Program.) Armed with ideas generated from the first two studio exercises and the seminar discussions, the students had seven weeks to program, design, and build the storefronts.

The process began with group meetings attended by all the students and the shopkeepers. After the initial groundwork was laid, the students met often with their clients individually to present their designs for review. There were many challenges for the students, language barriers and cultural differences not the least among them.

In order to minimize disruption to the businesses, all of the projects were conceived as pre-fabricated installations. Most of the actual construction was carried out in the workshop at the Cable Factory. The prefabricated pieces were then brought to the site and installed just prior to the opening block party. The installations ranged from literally paper thin solutions on the shop windows to thick solutions that extended through the depth of the shops. Several of the projects brought humor to bear, others used a strategy of mystification. Some were extraordinarily labor intensive, others were built from start to finish in a few days.

The projects were distributed over two blocks, on both sides of Korkeavuorenkatu, a narrow street in downtown Helsinki, brack-

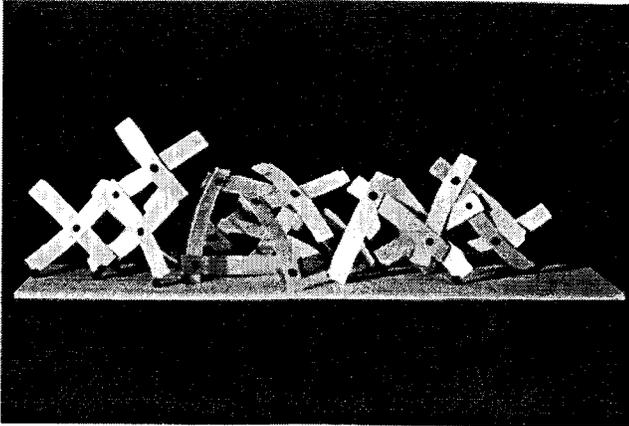


Fig. 3. Project Two

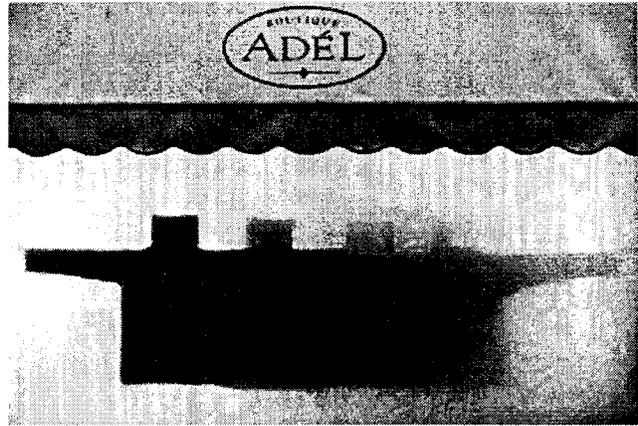


Fig. 5. Project Three

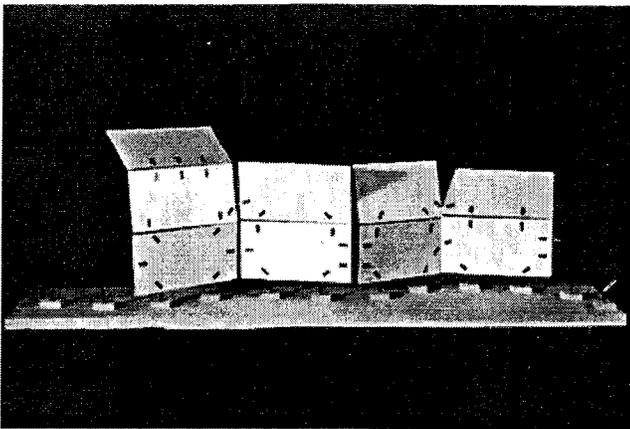


Fig. 4. Project Two



Fig. 6. Project Three.

eted by a woman's clothing shop on one end and a vegetarian restaurant on the other. The small odd-shaped windows of the boutique cast a bright orange light into the dark December air, falling with the snow on the passers-by. Articles of clothing from the store were folded into unrecognizable, sculptural forms and then backlit by glowing Plexiglas panels. At the other end of the street, a student made curtains to enclose the restaurant, curtains printed with sequential sections of cut vegetables forming patterns on the silk. In the vegetarian food store next door, the windows were transformed into surreal vision reminiscent of a Magritte painting, with loaves of bread floating like clouds against a bright yellow "sky."

Only two students choose to display the goods of their assigned shops. One filled the window of the bookbinder's shop with a new display case. Its shelves opened alternately to the inside of the shop and to the sidewalk. The other student, assigned a fur and hat shop, choose to display the peculiar handmade hats by creating a display case that functioned as a Christmas calendar. At the start of the season, all the hats were obscured in individual boxes clad in translucent fabric: only their silhouettes were visible. With each day, another box was opened, until finally on Christmas all the hats were revealed.

Most students chose to obscure, rather than display, the goods on sale, a strategy which naturally took a leap of faith from the shopkeepers. In a second woman's clothing shop, the usual entourage of garbed mannequins were replaced with alternating layers of white silk and sweaters. By layering the fabric through the depth of the thick exterior wall, the sweaters became increasingly obscured and a moiré pattern trapped the eye. Another student, assigned to a shop that sold stained glass lamps used a similar strategy, but

extended the layers of screens through the depth of the shop. The screens later served an additional purpose: the shopkeeper, who often sold her wares to fairs, used the portable screens in her traveling displays.

An American student assigned to a visually chaotic discount shoe store, constructed a curtain from the remnants of stamped rubber soles. A Finnish shoe manufacturer allowed him to stamp the soles himself and gave him the scraps without charge. The resulting facade advertised the merchandise while effectively obscuring the view into the shop. On the windows of the Italian deli mid-block, rice paper was used to obscure the view of the shop interior. Behind each screened window, the student placed a backlit turntable. On one, he put a bottle of oil, on the other, he attached an industrial-size beater. As the objects turned around and around, their distorted silhouettes were thrown through the screens and into the street.

Finally, a student designed a wall of wax for the window of an upscale knickknack shop. After many failed attempts, the student found a supplier willing to sell him enough wax to make a wall. It was winter in Finland, and with the holiday season in full force, candles were in great demand. After many experiments, he managed to cast five enormous aqua-colored wax panels, transport them across town to the site, and install them in a steel frame propped against the window without serious incident. Pedestrians passing by the shop would be bathed in soft green light as they peeked through the portholes for a glimpse of the shop interior.

CONCLUSION

This community design project was rewarding for all parties

involved. The university was credited with having provided the shopkeepers with a project that helped to strengthen their community, the shopkeepers received publicity in the press during their peak season, and the students gained experience juggling the demands of a client, the limitations of a budget, and the realities of construction. In addition, the foreign students gained extensive exposure to the notoriously reserved Finns, successfully crossing a cultural divide that is hard to bridge. From the perspective of this educator, the act of turning the studio inside-out gave weight to our theoretical investigations by successfully testing them in the public realm.

Implicitly, community design studios serve as a model for architectural practice. A traditional community design studio perpetuates a reactive model for practice, one in which the problems are framed by others. The proactive community design studio offers both the students and the community a model for practice in which the profession take the lead.

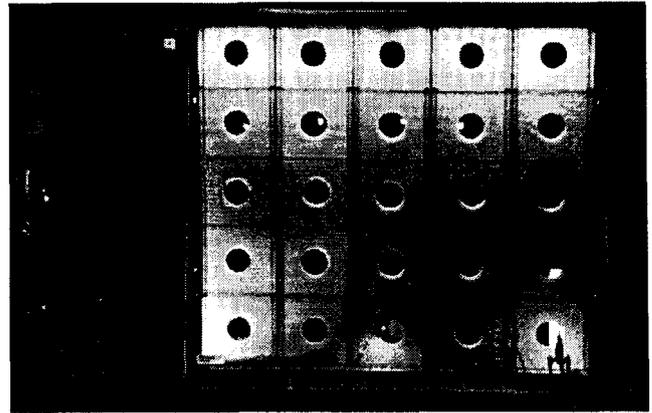


Fig. 7. Project Three.