

Fabricating a Pedagogy While Mending Tears

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"Schools are not here just to produce the kind of people needed by a society. They are meant to educate people to the responsibility that is, of course, practical, ethical, and political for the work in architecture and planning. Students should be given the chance to question and to respond in contemporary ways to the changes in society."

-Daniel Libeskind¹

Theoretical Context

The degradation of our natural and built environments has reached such extreme proportions that social critics are identifying it as the primary factor for the accelerating retreat into an aggressive, rapacious and unsustainable consumerism. They also argue that since the world outside has less and less to offer, there has been this manic escape into the seductive, home-entertainment-and-web-based existence. According to Mark Slouka our movement indoors is an environmental issue:

"As the natural world disappears from our lives, we are forced inside. Our move indoors [cuts] us off from a life rooted in a physical community and a particular, local landscape."²

Another such critic is Richard DeGranpre who observes:

"Without question, it's clear that the fabric of social reality has been torn apart in the last century, with our thought and actions driven by imperatives of an increasingly individualistic social order. As this has taken place, we have not sought to repair the tears in the social fabric. We have attempted

instead to adapt at the individual level-a kind of (mal) adaptation that just happens to fit the offerings of 'lifestyle' capitalism. We have no life, only 'lifestyle' -an abstraction of life, based on the sacred symbolism of the Commodity."³

Whether this state of affairs is called the *advertised life*⁴ (Lewis Lapham), or the *culture of distraction* (Mark Slouka)⁵ or the *culture business*⁶ (Thomas Frank), or *behavioral inertia*⁷ (Paul Virilio), we believe it is the dominant context for designers today. The aggressiveness of the prevailing market ideology has become the inescapable atmosphere with which the design professions must contend.

It is therefore indispensable to the future of the profession of architecture and the allied professions that professional practice be a *critical* practice. Architects and designers must become proactive participants in the process of identifying, reflecting upon and making relevant choices regarding contemporary issues. Only out of such lucid engagement will come responses that frame meaningful and timely concerns. Non-critical approaches are non-starters, if not down-right irresponsible. But being critical is just the beginning; the mental maneuvers responsible for the creative act must also be *poetical* and *ethical*; excellence in design can only be achieved by posing questions that embody all three dimensions: *the critical, the poetical and the ethical*.

In the search for legitimate contributions to society, most designers have neglected *the poetics of the ordinary in daily life*, finding in them little or no basis for their ambitious and heroic quests. Alberto Perez-Gomez asserts:

"The poetical content of reality which is the ultimate frame of reference for any truly meaningful architecture, is hidden beneath a thick layer of formal explanations. Because positivistic thought has made it a point to exclude mystery and poetry, contemporary man lives with the illusion of the infinite power of reason."⁸

Finally, with regard to ethics, the dehumanizing process of sprawl and indifference has reached extreme levels of irrationality that borders into the absurd and the insane. Tragically, it shows no sign of abating. It is the ethical responsibility of all design educators and professionals to resist the environmental degradation of the planet and the erosion of community that surrounds us. But what form does this resistance take, and what offers hope for an effective strategy of resistance?

It is our conviction that the critical, the poetical and the ethical *together* offer us a true reading of reality, and that these *alone* can help us designers and educators envision an alternative way of being in the world, an *otherwise*. The thesis of this paper is that, *that hope*, the *otherwise* can be the next generation of architects, and for that, we need to teach them differently.

"Students have a tremendous role to play. They are not only the respondents, but also the creators of awareness. They have always challenged the prevailing opinions and are the catalysts in transforming knowledge."⁹

-Daniel Libeskind

A Summons to Forge a Pedagogy

According to the 2003 Internship and career Survey, conducted by Arch Voices and the American Institute of Architects most (58%)¹⁰, of our interns and students stated that engaging in community and professional service is a high priority for them. Indeed, if you ask students why they enter architecture schools, they typically mention the desire to help their communities and/or a childhood predilection towards making, building and construction.¹¹

Fusing the altruistic desire by our students to help their communities with the impoverished

context of our physical and social settings, one can discern an educational summons – a call for the academy to forge a pedagogy that situates our students in real-world conditions where critical reflection, ethical commitments and poetical outcomes become common practice.

This paper describes a response on the part of our School of Architecture. Known as the Building Institute, it is a design/build studio committed to the type of practice outlined above.

Pedagogical Precedents

"They say that a good teacher will take you to another place . . . a great teacher will show you a new place, right where you stand."

-Bruce Lindsey referring to Samuel Mockbee¹²

The history of construction in architectural educational is long and varied. The German Bauhaus returned to an emphasis on craft. Architects were expected to learn and practice ceramics, textiles and printmaking. Through the internalization of "making" at all scales and media, design of buildings could be broached. Equally important to the Bauhaus was technology and the efficiency of new construction practices and materials. Architectural education also held a political agenda. The expertise and creative talents of designers presented an opportunity for social equality.

Even though the Bauhaus pedagogy was introduced to America through the immigration of Mies van der Rohe, Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius, actual full-scale building fell out of favor in the mainstream architecture schools.¹³ The American Institute of Architects even went so far, in their first code of ethics, to condemn the architect-builder, seeing this as somehow a conflict of interest.¹⁴

It was not until the advent of Auburn University's Rural Studio, spearheaded by the late Samuel Mockbee, FAIA that socially-conscious design-build has been reborn. According to Mockbee, "the social development of the architect is at the heart of our program."¹⁵

Direct interaction with the rural poor families of northern Alabama is the fire which fuels the Rural Studio. Public service agencies refer clients to the program, held off-campus in a donated building in Mason's Bend, Alabama. Then, second and fifth year architecture students set to work interviewing the clients, holding design charrettes and scrounging for recycled and donated materials. Many students speak of their social education in equal terms with their architectural education.¹⁶

We acknowledge that the call by Mockbee for architecture to re-engage its social responsibility has been a critical motivating factor for our own effort.

Situated Learning: The Building Institute

Since its inception, the Building Institute has aimed to open up new paths for the learning processes of our students by inserting them into a social context that they have rarely encountered in any meaningful way: the world of chronic poverty, homelessness, addiction, mental illness, and the non-profit agencies that are in the trenches of these societal battlefronts.

In order to achieve a critical and active learning opportunity for our students, our effort- the Building Institute, like the Rural Studio, deliberately places them into a slice of present day America where physical and societal conditions are at a crisis point. While their design and constructing skills generate the most visible outcomes, this should not diminish the impact that these participations have had on their capacity to reflect on their culture, social conditions, and communal needs. This sustained encounter by our students with at-risk populations has altered our students' critical and ethical thinking in ways that are hard to measure but are real nevertheless.

Mending Tears

Like most other architecture schools in the country, our university is located in a city that has urgent needs and *critical tears in its social fabric* that require immediate design intervention. For the last four years, these interventions have formed the basis of projects that, in the context of the academic

semester, must yield quick results. Therefore, we have adopted a strategy that we term *accelerated fabrications* - projects designed and fabricated on a very fast track.

An added bonus of *accelerated fabrications* is their catalytic effect upon the communities where they are built. They work as a kind of environmental first-aid. Often these communities have been deprived for so long, this quick turn around offers them a tantalizing first glimpse of the larger vision our Building Institute can provide.

Finally, the effect of the Building Institute's projects upon our students is profound. The responsibilities and ethics instilled through the projects have had both immediate and long-range effects now beginning to be revealed.

Structure of the Building Institute

The structure of the Building Institute is both highly directed yet responsive. The organization is highly directed in its continuity and mission. From its inception in 2001, the Building Institute has remained committed to its mission statement of addressing local sites and needs and by building relationships with local charities, professionals and industries.

The Building Institute is responsive in terms of its format and curriculum. It operates as an architectural elective that is taught every semester, and in the summer. Two to four faculty members teach the course with one primary director to provide continuity. In the summer, the course also operates as a paid internship following the model in other disciplines such as Business.

The curriculum of the Building Institute begins with a syllabus / project brief like most studios. However, the focus of the Building Institute project brief is the *schedule*. The exact program is left for the students to identify through client meetings and charrettes. The course goals and methods of student evaluation are based on meeting the prescribed schedule defined by the academic semester and producing a measurable, physical outcome.

Extreme Design

The following projects are *extreme* – not *extreme* like the overly-expressive geodesic domes and architectural follies so often seen on HGTV¹⁷ – but *extreme* in their program, context, budget and schedule. The *extreme* needs discovered in homeless shelters and in evacuation shelters for victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita create the most challenging and the most fertile sites for our students' design interventions.

Most of the projects were conceived and built in fewer than eight weeks for less than \$1000 each. Often, a greater constraint than schedules and budgets can be the perception of the client. However, in the case of our projects, complete client-trust and support was achieved through enthusiasm, dedication and the quality work of our students. This trust, in turn, allowed for *extreme*, experimental design—a challenging aesthetic for a challenged context.

The Primary Site

"[A condition] for acting on what matters is to choose intimacy in the face of an instrumental world. The challenge is to sustain our humanity when all around us is in the process of being automated. Intimacy is about the quality of contact we make: It values direct experience over electronic or virtual experience. It is immersion into the world of feelings, connection with the senses and vulnerability... intimacy relies on variation and surprise."¹⁸

–Peter Block

The Acadiana Outreach Center is a non-profit organization, which serves the homeless and those in need in an eight county region of Southwestern Louisiana. The Outreach Center serves over 60 people per day by meeting basic needs as well as attempting to return its clients to fulfilling, self-sustaining lives.

In the Fall of 2003, the Center's Director, Valerie Keller, requested the help of the School of Architecture in designing a storage system to aid in organizing donations; however, as a result of several visits to the site—a city block full of sprawled and disconnected structures—the students and

faculty observed a terrible contradiction: while the Center's mission is "Giving People Back Their God-Given Dignity," the physical environment and facilities were depressing, coarse, and spiritually degrading.

Project One

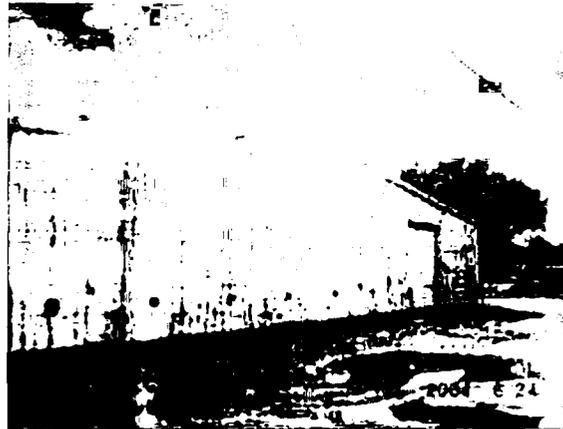


Figure 1. Donation Store Site- Before our Project¹⁹



Figure 2. Donation Store- After²⁰

In order to begin to immediately address the dominance of the degraded environment, one of the accelerated fabrications began to take shape. Upon the previously blank face of the ubiquitous metal building, our students designed and built an armature that does not attempt to conceal the banal flat surface but rather it intensifies light, materiality, texture and contrast. The armature has continued to evolve and grow over the last year accepting informational and inspirational signage and planters for climbing vines.

Project Two



Figure 3. Meditation Garden²¹

A barren alleyway was once the only connection between four halfway houses and the job training and rehabilitation center which serves the residents. Our students first created small installations (*altars / alters*) - inspired by the success stories and testimonials of residents who had graduated from the rehab program. These installations grace the walls of a meditative garden called the *Signposts of Grace*. Residents now can stop, rest and reflect upon the struggles and victories of their lives. The city selected the project as one of only a handful to fund as a pocket park.

To culminate the summer of work, students and faculty, in collaboration with residents of the halfway houses, local contractors and inmates from the local jail, designed and built a performance space for concerts and community events. Most importantly, the performance space provides a place to celebrate the center's life-changing programs.

Project Three

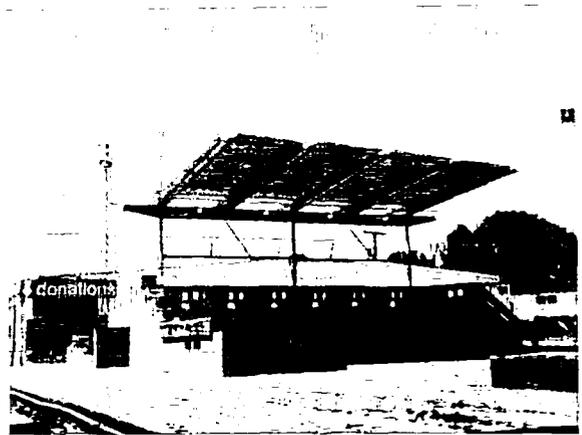


Figure 4. Performance Space²²

Project Four

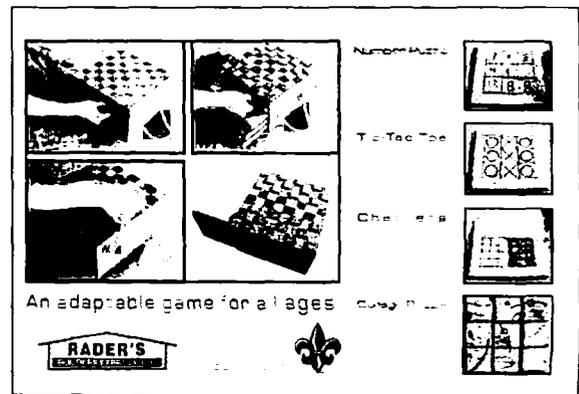


Figure 5. Hurricane Katrina Evacuee Game Boxes²³

After Hurricane Katrina, the students decided to refocus the design-build studio toward helping in the relief and recovery effort. To have an immediate and local impact, they designed and fabricated toy game boxes with over 100 puzzles for delivery to the evacuation shelters. The games and puzzles were to provide a much needed diversion for the families and children displaced from their homes.

Ten Steps

After four years of research with the Building Institute, we offer the following Ten Step Plan as a model strategy for developing a community design/build studio:

1. Identify & prioritize community needs
2. Initiate & maintain partnerships between agencies on the basis of shared goals and mutual trust
3. Accept risk
4. Design a master plan which clarifies goals and generates excitement
5. Seek publicity in order to generate support in the school and community
6. Fundraise publicly and privately
7. Negotiate university requirements
8. Initiate the work (first project to small in scale.)
 - a. Client meetings
 - b. Charrettes
 - c. Promotion-groundbreaking ceremonies
9. Sustain the work
 - a. Fast-track results
 - b. Motivate through enthusiasm
 - c. Improvise
 - d. Seek and generate client interaction
10. Conclude the work
 - a. Celebrate the work with students and clients
 - b. Commemorate the work with the public, politicians & media
 - c. Reflect upon and publish the work

Pedagogical Intentions

*"The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it."*²⁴

-Paolo Freire

The pedagogical intention of the Building Institute is to engender a critical, poetical and ethical process / practice. Because of program, budget and schedule restraints, the process must engage improvisation and collaborative design, as well as project management and technical skills. Teaching ethical and critical design also entails mentorship and an experiential learning

environment. Both of these strategies are found on-site in the design/build studio where

professors serve as mentors / architects-of-record for their apprentice students.²⁵ It is in this manner we seek to instill an understanding of professional responsibility and collaboration without stifling independence and creativity. Finally, we believe the site of our work, *the tears in the social fabric*, demands a caring and ethical approach.

Improvisational design and fabrication facilitate learning by doing. The fertile yet challenging constraints of extreme needs, budget and schedule dictate that our students think on their feet, observe intensely and act with precision. Improvisation implies sufficient mastery of an art to allow one to "stray, wander and explore."²⁶

William J. Carpenter, AIA states in his book, Learning By Building, that the following criticisms of architecture schools can be addressed in design/build programs:

*"Schools are not inclusive of pragmatic issues like technology. Schools are too insular and are therefore not engaging other departments and community. Schools lack collaborative exercises, which more closely mirror the actual environment in the architect's office or the construction site."*²⁷

Without a doubt, there is no better place in which to experience, practice and internalize technical, communication and management skills than on the construction site. Means, methods and materials become personal and intimate. In the heat of construction *battle*, communication and collaboration become critical, not only to successful execution of the design, but indeed to one's own safety.

Project management skills such as budgets, schedules and other logistics become players on the design stage revealing a relevance often ignored or excluded in the classroom. It is in the design/build studio that the ethical responsibility of the architect for the *Health, Safety and Welfare*²⁸ of the public becomes crystallized.

Reflecting Upon the Work

"They created, through their imagination and ingenuity, a place where their students could master not just the technical requirements but the true spirit of architecture."

- Paula Carson, Dean of the Moody College of Business Administration and Collaborator in Homeless Project²⁹

Finally, upon reflection of the Building Institute's work, we would like to acknowledge both the intended and the unpredicted results. Even in the more controlled setting of the classroom, the lesson plan may go awry. Outside the classroom, control becomes even more tenuous. For this reason, the exact process and product of the design/build studio remains un-prescribed. Everyone involved, including the student, professor and client relies on a high level of trust in the critical, poetical and ethical intentions of the work.

A student's level of mastery is revealed in his/her finished fabrication rather than in a final exam. The subject matter is internalized, often deeply, though it may be weeks, months or even years before the full extent of knowledge from the experience of the design/build studio is realized. Often, when students return to their drawing boards to detail their designs, the realization of their intimacy with the materials occurs.

We are beginning to see our students carry their knowledge and experience gained through the design/build studio into practice. In some cases, portfolios based on their design/build experience have garnered them some of the scarce, well-paying jobs.³⁰

Of greater importance, we are witnessing the birth of critical, poetical and ethical practices in our graduates.

Some have sought non-traditional career paths in the Peace Corps, attributing their choice to their design/build education.³¹ Others are carrying their critical, poetical and ethical education into traditional local architectural offices. Due to our School's influence, these offices are beginning to institutionalize community-service into the job-descriptions of interns and architects.

In conclusion, we wish to endorse the "One Percent Solution"³² program initiated in California. This program suggests a voluntary quota of pro bono work for the profession. We believe that this initiative is long overdue. It is hoped that by educating a generation of young architects in a critical, ethical and poetical practice, initiatives like this may gain support. After all, a critical practice is not just a good idea, but is an essential one in a world of under-funded, crowded homeless shelters and catastrophic events like Hurricane Katrina.

"It is the combination of autonomy, responsibility, creativity and drive that produces the innovators of our society: the rule-breakers that not only break the rules, but create new and better rules."

"The change agents should be those that are best educated. Thus higher education institutions should be rule-breaker factories. To become a factory for innovators and rule-breakers takes an institution that is radically different from most universities and business schools today."³³

-Uffe Elbaek, KaosPilot

Endnotes

¹ Libeskind, Daniel. *The Space of Encounter* [New York: Universe Publishing, 2000], 140.

² Slouka, Mark. *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-tech Assault on Reality* [New York: Basic Books, 1995], 79-80.

³ DeGrandpre, Richard. *Digitopia* [New York: Random House, 2001], 95.

⁴ Frank, Thomas and Matt Weiland, eds. *Commodify Your Dissent* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1997], 10.

⁵ Slouka. *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-tech Assault on Reality*, 38.

⁶ Frank and Weiland, eds. *Commodify Your Dissent*, 14.

⁷ Virilio, Paul. *Open Sky* [London and New York: Verso, 1997], 11.

⁸ Perez-Gomez, Alberto. *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* [Boston: The MIT Press, 1983], citation in Introduction, found at this link:

http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/course/48-200/archive/readings/fineout_01.html

⁹ Libeskind. *The Space of Encounter*, 140.

¹⁰ Survey available online at www.archvoices.org

¹¹ Anecdotal evidence by the authors gathered through thirty years of teaching (1975-2005).

¹² Moos, David and Gail Trechsel, eds. *Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture*. [Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 2004,] pages are not numbered.

¹³ Carpenter, William J. *Learning by Building: Design and Construction in Architectural Education*, [Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1997], 7.

¹⁴ Paragraph 4, E.S. 4.2, R. 404, *The American Institute of Architects, Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*. [AIA Document J330, revised July 1, 1977.]

¹⁵ Carpenter. *Learning by Building: Design and Construction in Architectural Education*, 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ Home and Garden Cable Television Network featuring the show "Extreme Homes," [Available online at http://www.hgtv.com/hgtv/shows_ext/0,1804,HGT_V_3836,00.html.]

¹⁸ Block, Peter. *The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters* [San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002], 65.

¹⁹ Photo by author.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Photo by Timothy Green.

²⁴ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [New York and London: Continuum, 2000], 21.

²⁵ Traditionally in architecture schools, the studio format evolved out of the atelier process as in the Beaux-Arts School where master architects educated their students often in their own place of work on actual projects.

²⁶ Hauerwas, Stanley. *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004], 79n.

²⁷ Carpenter. *Learning by Building: Design and Construction in Architectural Education*, xi.

²⁸ Demkin, Joseph A, ed. *Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*. [John Wiley & Sons, Inc. , New York, 2002,] xxii.

Licensed architects are charged with protecting the health Safety and Welfare as defined by the American Institute of Architects and NCARB.

²⁹ Paula Carson, Dean of the Moody College of Business.

³⁰ Conversation with alumnus Jeremy Durham after he received a job in Houston, Texas, Spring 2005.

³¹ Conversation with alumnus Eddie Guidry, Fall 2004.

³² One Percent Solution pro bono program for architects. [Available online at [http://www.theonepercent.org/.](http://www.theonepercent.org/)]

³³ Elbaek, Uffe. *KaosPilot A-Z* [Aarhus: KaosCommunication, 2003], 236.