

Constructing/Inhabiting the Interstice

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Opposing Stasis?

Passage through a typical architectural curriculum involves a bridging year when students are required to deal with architectural projects in a comprehensive manner. While the year level varies slightly from one school to another, a common emphasis is placed on tectonics and on systems and processes of assembling a building. Projects often become vehicles that serve to *simulate* the process of early design through realization that occurs in the "real" world. While this model has many positive attributes, it is not without difficulties inadequacies, and fallacies. For one thing, lacking real budget, consultant input, material research, team production, and so on, a full simulation is hard to achieve within the confines of a pedagogic setting. A synthesis between the actual/real and the conceptual/hypothetical depends greatly upon the interpretive efforts of the critic that helps frame the problem.

Within this context of a common curricular structure two (and perhaps extreme) approaches are prevalent. The first approach pre-tames the architectural solution to fit the conventions of material processes and conventions of construction while the second allows free, formalistic speculation of the architecture till it reaches a static definition and then proceeds to grapple with "solving" the tectonic aspects. Both approaches share in common a pre-disposition that favors the tectonics of the static architectural form/object in space over the idea of constructing and modifying *space* with clear intentionality.

Another dichotomous debate within architectural discourse can be traced to this transitional point. Students arrive at this point with the anticipation of learning about "real" architecture, an almost anxious interest to learn skill-sets and specific information necessary to enter the profession as production force. Perhaps this constitutes the first concrete time when a typical student (consciously or otherwise) enters the on-going polarized debate between the notion of architecture as an autonomous, conceptual system versus the position that deeply distrusts the conceptual and favors almost anything built. To the later, pragmatic becomes regarded as not only practical but clearly a-conceptual (or non-conceptual)¹. Pragmatic then, is conceived of as pure and free of affect and free of what is regarded as pure artifice: "concept".

Pragmatic, Philip Nobel argues, has come to represent the non-ideational as it is has been conflated with "practical", distorted in its polemical appropriation to oppose the excessively abstract modes of thought². While there is clearly a difference between "conceptual" architecture of the most self-conscious type and a critically considered architecture, the scope of this paper is too short to delve into this topic deeply.

How does the studio process maintain a balance between the desire for the critical and conceptual without losing sight of the material? In a third year undergraduate studio, a counterpoint to this opposition was attempted through introducing and engaging the term and notion *interstice*. How can construction of ideas be a guided search instead of a

mechanical process of assembling doctrines and dogmas?

Encountering The Interstice in·ter·stice

Pronunciation: in-'t&r-st&s

Function: *noun*

Inflected Form(s): *plural in·ter·stic·es /-st&-'sEZ, -st&-s&z/*

Etymology: Middle English, from Latin *interstitium*, from *inter-* + *-stit-*, *-stes* standing (as in *superstes* standing over) –

1 a : a space that intervenes between things; *especially* : one between closely spaced things **b** : a gap or break in something generally continuous <the *interstices* of society> <passages of genuine literary merit in the *interstices* of the ludicrous... plots -- Joyce Carol Oates>

2 : a short space of time between events

Interstice at once refers to both the temporal and the spatial. By nature, and in contrast to form, it is unstable and is open to change and transformation. It is easier to construct form. To “construct” space is a more challenging. Space simply seems to “result”: a by-product of the focus on form and its tectonics. Similarly the interstitial, when considered as the objective for construction, is difficult at best. Instead of defining it, which is the tendency in creating form, we have to attempt to engender it and open it up toward possibilities. Inherently, there is ambiguity, which needs to be intended and controlled. When one is “between” perception shifts with movement. One seldom rests.

The question, briefly stated, is this: How do you construe/construct the interstitial? Or, even more precisely, how does one endanger the interstitial?

The interstitial is not necessarily a predefined space or a static void. Instead, its true nature is that of a *blurred zone* or that of the roaming eye which is unable to fixate on a specific point. The interstitial can be thought of as the *spatial and temporal gravity* one experiences moving through space: a result of spatial perception intermingling with memory of where one has been and anticipating what lies ahead, above, below, or beyond. The interstitial always occurs in the act of composing. It resides in the silent pause between notes seemingly bound and defined by them and yet

stays open to be infinitely re-defined, displaced, or shifted.

While formal analysis as well as formal composition both become aided via rules and theories of composition as well as by systems of measurements, the immaterial in-between has remained, in most cases, simply a byproduct. What is needed is not as much a system, metric or theoretical, but first and foremost a conscious consideration and inclusion of this immaterial substance of architecture and urbanism in the design process.

Enclosure, room, and object are architectural ideas that rely on determinacy and boundaries. The interstitial on the other hand is not as easily defined by boundaries and enclosure. Doing so will immediately surrender its very nature; converting it into a thing, a room; a mere object. Architecture can potentially be experienced in the interstitial where the pressure of boundary is tenuous, tense' and ambiguous. The interstitial remains elusive, resisting the finite. It cannot reach tectonic stasis and is not necessarily associated with the monumental. While modernism in architecture advanced the finite, free floating, precise object, modernity in its evolution challenges us to face notions of indeterminacy, flow, fluidity, and shifting boundaries. The paradigm of object-upon-field has given way, for some time now, to object-as-field, which multiplies overlaps, shifts, and creates networks.

A studio project, comprising of two stages, was devised as a vehicle through which to engage and grapple with the condition of the *in-between* and the notion of the *interstitial*.

Stage 1: Exploring And Embodying the Interstitial

Students were asked to construct a tectonic device that allows the reading of temporal inhabitation and movement both vertically and horizontally.

The project was expected to:

1. Explore in-between-ness and transience as spatiotemporal concepts
2. Construct a surrogate site, signify a place, connect parts, and frame transient, unnamed activities.

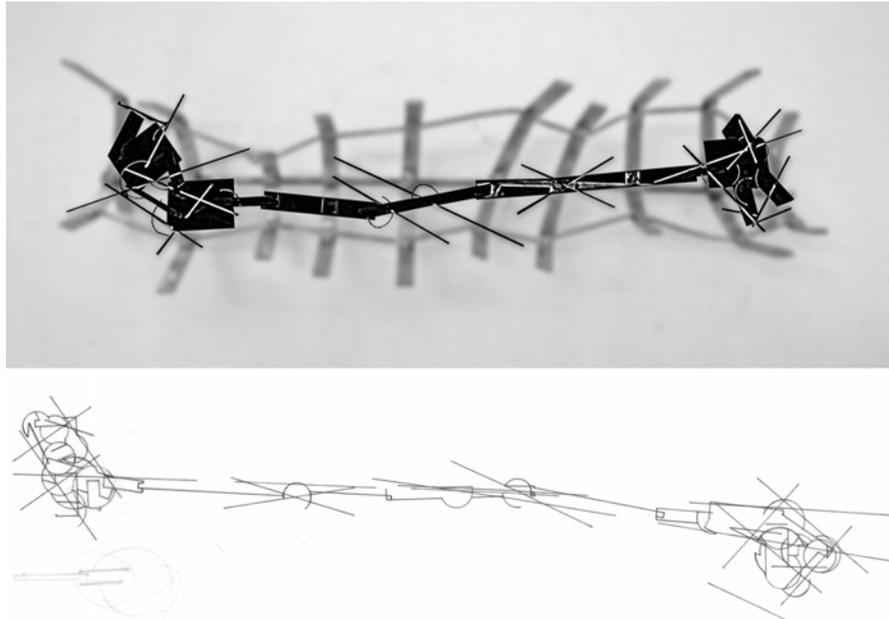


Figure 1: John Hollenberg, Analytical drawing (below) revealed through enhanced photo of construct

Through a series of two and three-dimensional mapping techniques, students explored manifestations of the interstitial at different scales including material/tectonic connections and spatial relationships. The expected result was an architectural thing/project/machine /instrument that was to possess no particular functional identity and yet mediated and realized moments of in-between-ness, within and without. The construct will allow us to "read" spaces without necessarily recognizing their "names". The completed project was to be examined to see in what way it poetically sustains the interstitial as a potential site for architecture.

Students were asked to ponder the phenomenon of interstice, as they perceive it to occur physically, experientially, and psychologically. They were encouraged to probe the world, their own mind/experiences, and memory to grapple with the notion of interstice. Students chose several phenomena, ranging from cultural through natural, which lacked figurative or formal qualities thereby negating, at least at this stage, the dangers of formal mimesis. A few examples can help illustrate the nature of individual choices as well as the individually developed working methods devised to interpret and compose: One student, Michael O'Donnell, examined the miasmic experience of traffic lights during

night driving in the city that reveals itself less as a network of places but more as a field of infrastructure. The student documented this experience through photography, paying attention to specific locations and the spatial relationship between his space in the car and the layered array of traffic lights that he could see beyond in the expanse of the grid.

Using selected photos as "sites" of this condition, Michael constructed his tectonic object through using shifting frames of thick plastic, each documenting a time interval and different intensity of light signals that controlled his space and his movement.

Amy Geist looked at optical experiences of refraction as a linear element transitions from one to another medium. This transition, which constituted a form of interstice, was revealed through a tectonic construct that relied on the geometry of this phenomenon developed through the science of optics.

Two students attempted to construct maps of routine interstate driving in order to materially manifest what is a numb, non-experience. Each student chose a particular driving experience as his focus. The following is an extract of John Hollenberg's statement of his routine I-70 driving experience:

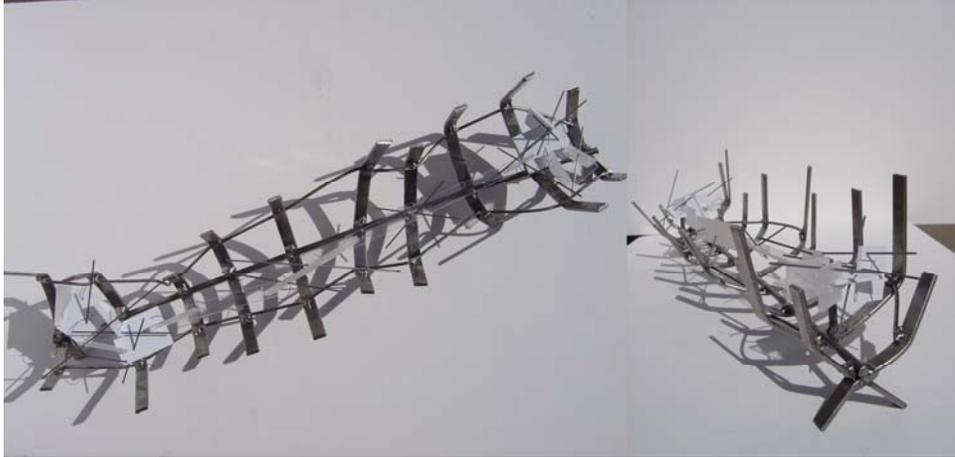


Figure 2: John Hollenberg, *Tectonic Construct*

"The interstice is defined as a gap or break in something that is generally continuous. The stretch of highway between Saint Louis and Kansas City seemingly bridges such a gap. Yet, I believe that the void that is the Missouri countryside is amplified by such a modern creation.

John saw his habitual drive as a taken-for-granted, elongated, and unconscious interstice. Seeing a parallel between factual maps, which reveal no sense of experience and his own numbness to the quotidian experience, John attempted to re-map this interstice by first performing the drive consciously. He then followed this by a producing a series of analytical overlay drawings (fig), which extracted multiple aspects that constitute difference and change in this normally instrumental journey between two points.

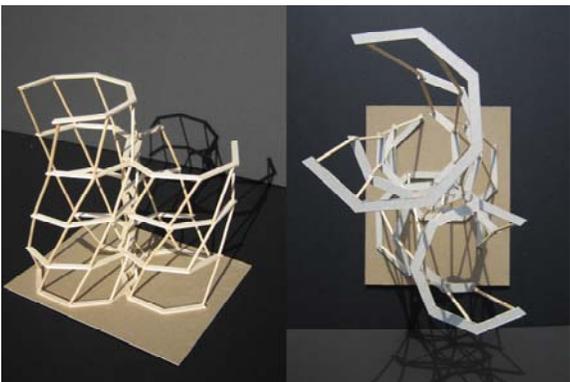


Figure 3: John Hollenberg, *Study Models*, "Hybrid Hotel "

Traffic intensities, straight passages, county lines, intersectional nodes, grid interruptions and so on were given values, formally

abstracted, and interpreted through a series of two and three dimensional studies leading to a new personal map which documented and manifested a specific spatiality (figures.).

This exercise focused on the unstable, on that which is in motion. This project was not for containing anything except space and its encounter with the ephemeral. Although the efforts of the students produced by necessity a bounded project, a *thing*, the struggle was to understand the phenomena of transience as it intersects with the architectural moment. The process models, as well as the final construct were treated as *material constructs of ideas*. Stress was placed on the fabrication of this construct, which is an embodiment of the process of students' interpretation of a particular experience/condition/phenomenon. The completion of this stage was seen as a stage of conclusion of this project.

Upon this completion of this phase, students were asked to return to explore their own constructs as a potential site of both transient and stable spaces by employing two different media. First, digital manipulation of photos of the constructs provided a method to peer into the nature of the object and its inherent spatiality. Second, by shifting media, students attempted to open up new possibilities of seeing their construct through 1. selective and analytical drawings, and, 2. acrylic paintings. This bridging stage was included in the process with the pre-knowledge that these objects would constitute conceptual studies, and that there was a danger of shallow adaptation of its visual features into the later architectural solution, without regard to its spatial and syntactic logic. Concurrent to these bridging exercises, anticipating the second stage of

architectural design, the studio was also engaged in discussions regarding the common experiential aspects of modernity at large through readings and class discussions.

Stage 2: In- Between-Ness And The Modern Condition: Hybrid Hotel

The probing of what is interstitial (spatiotemporally) draws us to consider in-between-ness, the indeterminate, and the transient; all notions bound up with notions of modernity if not caused by it. The symptoms of modernity permeate our existence. To most of us modernity is simply the presence of accessible technology. Our self-conscious (and historic) awareness of how life has become comfortable, convenient, and **"controllable"** is recognized as conditions of modernity.

To continue the interrogation of this notion of interstice, students were asked to proceed from, but further interpret, the tectonic manifestation and its two-dimensional tomographies of the previous stage through an architectural problem with a clear programmatic component. Students were asked to design a hotel to be situated in the core of Kansas City. An infill urban site was chosen with the notion that it resists singular

discrete objects, favoring instead a continuity of the urban fabric. The hotel as type was seen as particularly relevant since it ambiguously relates to apartments and sometimes hospitals. All these types, subsumed by common planning techniques, are marked by temporary inhabitation, comfort, pleasure and do not bank on long-term place affinity and thus constitute a modern, interstitial place.

Students were asked to refer to their work from the first stage as both a source of conceptual thinking as well as a syntactic and formal reference. Results were varied in their response to the conceptual beginnings. While some struggled with conceptually deviating from designing the conventional hotel, most students were able to deviate from the specific formal attributes of their conceptual model and yet produce new critical ideas for the project.

Michael O'Donnell's, interpreting from his concept of "traffic light trance", created ideas for the building massing and skin that emphasized streaming, impermanence and change. Multiple rectangular panels subsumed the regularity of floors and cellular spaces affecting their relationship to the exterior. John Hollenberg reapplied his method of mapping local conditions on to the body of his building,



Figure 2: John Hollenberg, *Final Model*, "Hybrid Hotel"

which inflected toward pressures and influences in the site's context.

Conclusion:

The interest of this studio was to foster an idea and process based approach and explore the zone between conceptual and a pragmatic or practical architecture.

The goal of the first design stage was to produce a physical construct that has tectonic, material (and as a by-product sculptural) interests. It required students to creatively employ visual, material sensibilities as well as their skills to *construe* (interpretation) as well as *construct* (fabrication). The constructs were a form of *representation or a translation* of interpreted relationships across media. Yet, they resist the normal connotations of representation since they were not scaled down pre-copies that await physical realization, nor were they metaphoric evocations of a concept, but instead they *are full scale constructs*, a physical record of process and ideas.

The focus on the interstitial by necessity keeps the attention on the spatial characteristics that emerge. For many students, the third year of education, which in itself is a suspended middle-state, could mark the threshold of binary and oppositional thinking. The thesis of the studio, as was made explicit to the students through repeated and verbal and written reiteration, was not to seek a reconciliation that perfectly balances opposed sensibilities but rather to begin the habit of locating one's own work at different stages within this realm defined by the ideational and conceptual.

Endnotes

¹"Conceptual" in architecture generates many discontents. Chief among them is a reliance on metaphors. See Silveti, Jorge. "The Muses are Not Amused: Pandemonium in the House of Architecture." *Harvard Design Magazin*: 27-28. See also the chapter titled "Ideas" in Harbison, Robert. *Thirteen Ways: Theoretical Investigations in Architecture*. MIT P, 1987. 103-119.

² Nobel, Phillip. "What Pragmatism Ain'T." *Metropolis* July 2001.