

Design Writing: Using Writing as a Studio Design Tool

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In the mid-eighteenth century, Charles Batteux divided the arts into three categories. The first category was the mechanical arts (“les Arts mécaniques”); the second, the fine arts (“les beaux arts par excellence”); and the third, a combination of the first two. The mechanical arts filled functional requirements, “les besoins de l’homme”; the fine arts, “pour object le plaisir”, included Music, Poetry, Painting, Sculpture, and Dance. The arts of the third category served human needs, like other mechanical arts, while providing pleasure, like the fine arts. In Batteux’s classification system, this third category included only two arts: Rhetoric and Architecture.¹

While this classification system itself inspires lengthy discussion, its significance here is the specific, intentional link between architecture and rhetoric as arts that share both functional and aesthetic characteristics. These shared characteristics provide a means for considering connections between architecture and writing, and frame my own studio pedagogy that engages writing as a tool in the design process.

In this paper, I explore the ways in which I have used writing in second- and third-year architecture design studios. First, it is useful to examine relationships between visual and verbal argument. While Batteux’s idea that architecture and rhetoric share fundamental characteristics provides a general context for discussion, a closer examination of the

implications of his classification system is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, it suffices to acknowledge the broad context of the relationship; in terms of using writing in the context of design studio, Gerald Grow’s study of the differences between visual and verbal thinking presents a clear, though somewhat reductive, conceptual framework for the argument that writing has a place in design work. Next, I provide examples from architecture studios in which two main types of writing play distinct roles in the studio context. Finally, student response from year-end course evaluations supports the idea that writing contributes to architectural design in meaningful ways.

Architecture, Writing and Visual Thinkers

In his 1994 article “The Writing Problems of Visual Thinkers,” Gerald Grow studies writing samples from interior design and architecture students. Through his analysis, he outlines “three factors” that summarize the problems visual thinkers have with writing: “a lack of words, the unimportance of sequence and the presumption of context.”² While Grow himself acknowledges problems with his study, his analysis of this small sampling of writing from design students supplies a basic set of oppositions that prove useful in a discussion of the way writing might be used in design studios. For Grow, written language works through ideas in a much different fashion than traditional visual design and representation tools. Capitalizing on this relationship between the verbal and the visual in an iterative, dialogic process expands design students’ working methods and ultimately enriches their work.

All three “factors” described by Grow point to writing as an ordering activity that requires analysis and clear, hierarchical organization of ideas. Such activity contrasts with “visual thought,” in which “a thing does not gain its reality the way words do, by existing in a network of comparisons, contrasts and shadings of meaning; it simply appears.”³ In Grow’s argument, visual thinkers consider everything at once, with equal importance, in a kind of synthetic representation impossible to create in written narrative. While such a clear opposition reduces very complex processes to simplistic generalities, and while some may question the value judgments embedded in this assessment, the analysis presents a contrast between visual and verbal work that proves instructive in terms of the ways in which writing might be integrated into the studio. This contrast frames the ways in which my students’ writing has worked into their design processes.

One element of this contrast is the difficulty visual thinkers have with sequencing ideas. Grow introduces this difficulty by again noting a major difference between visual and verbal thinking: “Visual thinking produces whole, patterned expressions such as maps, symbols and pictures. Verbal activity leads to sequences such as narratives and explanations.”⁴ As a result, visual thinkers tend to abandon techniques of syntax, order and hierarchy. Grow uses the analogy of dinner at a restaurant: “To a writer, sequence is as important as the order of dishes at a meal; a carelessly used transition could cause dessert to appear before the appetizer. In this analogy, a visual thought is more like the menu: all possibilities are present at once – and none favored.”⁵

This tendency to view all things as “sublimely equal” leads to dull, sometimes impenetrable writing.⁶ For Grow, “The writing of a visual thinker is like a map of all the possibilities; a verbal thinker writes like a guided tour.”⁷ We can easily conjure up the image of a sleep-deprived architecture student, pinning up a semester’s worth of work on the wall, placing models in front of us, presenting his or her project as a “map of all the possibilities.” While a map of possibilities provides rich ground for discussion, thinking about slightly guiding the tour allows students to begin to realize which ideas are most important to

their work. When students can incorporate this type of analysis into their design process in a dialogic fashion, by moving between verbal and visual modes of thinking, their design work can respond to the issues that surface major conceptual threads in their projects. Writing forces students to prioritize their ideas in a much different way than their visual studies do; the dialogue between the two enables the design process to continually re-focus on the evolving design idea.

Writing in Studio: Assignments

Verbal communication has long been part of a traditional studio pedagogy; students produce work, instructors introduce precedents and references, and we all discuss the work in a system of ongoing comparison between the visual representation of ideas and the verbal explanations we use in those discussions. Impromptu conversations, individual desk critiques, informal pin-ups, and more formal reviews all depend upon the interaction of verbal and visual communication to examine, edit, and revise design work. In these interactions, however, the primary mode of verbal communication is oral; it is typically spontaneous, and it is rarely recorded in a way that allows future examination and study. There are no resulting artifacts. In contrast, written work produces artifacts of the design process, much in the way that sketches, study models, and other visual studies do. As such, incorporating writing activities into the studio enables the alternate thinking skills required by verbal communication to affect design process in a more deliberate way.

To this end, I present writing to my students as another tool in the design process. An example from my course syllabus for Architecture 302 (Spring 2005) illustrates this philosophy:

Writing: Readings and written work are part of this course. Writing is part of your design work and provides another tool for exploring design ideas. Writing is divided into two types: formal written assignments and informal journal entries.

By including this general description in the overall syllabus, students begin to understand that the writing activities don’t exist

separately from their other work; there is not “design” and then “writing”, but rather, writing is part of the design.

Formal Writing

As indicated in this syllabus excerpt, I use primarily two types of writing assignments in studio. The first seems relatively straightforward: a narrative description of the studio project that complements the work presented at a major review. Again, from the syllabus:

Formal written assignments: These are typically assigned in conjunction with major reviews or research efforts. These must be typewritten, and any sources used to support or develop your ideas must be referenced in a standard reference note format. When sources are referenced, a bibliography or works cited page must be included in addition to the individual notes.

The narrative description provides an opportunity for students to concisely organize their primary ideas. In addition to its place on the overall syllabus, I present the assignment along with other items suggested in anticipation of major interim and final reviews. A typical assignment asks them to create a “narrative draft” (Architecture 201, Fall 2005) or a “written project statement” (Architecture 302, Spring 2005) in the range of 250-500 words. They pin up the written statement with their design work; they bring enough copies for the panel of critics, and we allow a few minutes for the jurors to read through the piece.

During preparation for their reviews, we may review drafts of these narratives in studio. After reviews, I comment on the written statements. In all cases, the questions remain the same: how does what they say match up with what they do, or what they’ve done? They then continue to edit the project statement as we move toward a final review.

Informal Writing

The second type of writing is less familiar to them, but possibly more useful as a design tool: ongoing journal writing on topical issues of the studio work. This idea has its basis in

Toby Fulwiler’s work in the 1980s, which advocates the use journals in teaching writing and in implementing writing across the curriculum programs.⁸ The syllabus description reads:

Journals: These are weekly, informal pieces of writing based on suggested topics or topics of interest to you. They may be handwritten and typically range 1-2 pages.

This second type of writing assignment, the informal writing, takes on a much different role in the studio. I’m not picky about format; in these pieces, students can write in sketchbooks, scrawl on notebook paper, or type on a computer. I allow students to write about anything they’d like, in relationship to their current studio work. To assist those who don’t know where to start, I provide a weekly “suggested topic.”

Some suggested topics for a third-year studio focused on multi-residential housing included the following:

How might your experience and understanding of the site affect your approach to designing this project? (25 Feb 05)

What are the challenges of developing modular or repetitive residential units? (4 Mar 05)

Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each of your 3 sketch proposals. (11 Mar 05)

Outline your design principles for this project. (25 Mar 05)

What kind of citizen will your building be? (8 Apr 05)

Feedback consists of comments, notes, and questions. I try to get their writing back within a few days; we would often use the journals as a point of departure for our desk critiques, comparing the issues in the writing with the issues being worked out through drawings, models and other visual means. This work had the added (and unexpected, for me) bonus of initiating another sort of dialogue between the students and me. It let me into their thinking

in a much different way than the usual impromptu conversation.

Writing and Design Thinking: Outcomes

While I found that the writing helped me in teaching, in responding to student work, in discussing the studio projects, I discovered that students also recognized the value of writing in the design process. Students were resistant to these ideas at first; for them, writing was not a typical part of studio work. The more advanced students especially met the writing activities with some objection. By the end of the semester, however, students began to appreciate the way writing about their work could inform their project's design. They still made some distinctions between "design" and "writing about design," but the majority of the students in the three studios that incorporated writing responded favorably to its place in the process.

A series of comments from end-of-the semester course evaluations provides a glimpse into this student response.⁹ They allude to their initial skepticism, as this student's summary suggests: "In regard to the writings. Although I originally thought they were a pain in the ass, they ended up helping a lot and preparing me for presentation." This comment also illustrates a primary way in which students found the writing exercise to be valuable: preparing for presentation.

In other cases, students concurred with my own observations during the design process. One wrote, "The journals were helpful because it made you think things out. Have a solid base to design from and develop concepts." Other students describe the journal writing as "solidifying the thought process of our projects," as a means "to understand my project and to constantly keep considering potential problems with my design," or as a way to "create a tight correlation between my thoughts on my project and what I was actually representing in my designs."

Another student commented on the way the writing helped the desk critique, something I mentioned earlier: "Desk crits got a jump start with journal." Still another pointed to the ways in which we would pick out specific

words to link to their projects: "I liked the journals. They helped me organize my thoughts and actually pick nouns and adjectives that I could keep my designs in line with." Again, these emphasize the way in which iterative writing becomes active throughout the design process.

The more formal writing, which I used in both second- and third-year studios, also generated student feedback that supports the pedagogical intent outlined above, with a focus on presenting the work. A third-year student wrote, "The written statements are a big help when it comes to review time, because we know what's important to talk about." And this, of course, was the key: distilling months of work down into a fifteen-minute presentation can be a daunting task, especially after long hours and late nights in the studio. But for the students, the narratives helped them "collect the ideas into a logical order for how to present them." Recall here Grow's assertion regarding the difference between verbal and visual thinking; while strong, rich architectural design requires visual thinking skills, our work must engage a verbal world as well. Because the writing exercises a different set of modes of thinking about the project, students become better able to pull out essential ideas in their presentations.

This leads to a crucial requirement for using writing effectively in design studio: iteration, revision, and continual movement between the written work and the visual work. This dialogue between the verbal and visual is imperative for the success of using writing in studio in a way that truly engages the design process. As a student pointed out, "this is not a writing class." This is true; these are design studios, and as such, the writing must be treated as another mode of design, subject to all of the generative, iterative modes that all other design work embraces.

One student's comments in particular illustrate the importance of this attitude: "The narratives helped me 1,000% - I would have been lost without it. It allowed me to articulate my ideas and have an outline for my presentation. Because I was able to edit it and receive feedback, I was able to prepare and refine my ideas appropriately. Narratives were very helpful." Note the role of editing and

feedback in the development of this student's work. Another student agrees: "The narrative helped me sort out and correct disparities between my concept and what I was actually producing. This activity helped me a lot with my critical thinking skills, which will allow me to turn good ideas into good projects more quickly."

This idea of ongoing written expression that engages the design process showed up in another way in the students' comments. During the semester that I only used narrative drafts without journal writing, some students indicated in their comments that more writing would be valuable. In response to a question about the use of the narrative drafts, a student writes: "I would do this throughout the whole semester." Another notes the dialogic relationship between the design (visual) work and the writing: "It also makes us think about our main points ahead of time and make us back up our design through the writing, as well as have the design back up the writing. I will definitely incorporate it into the future."

Ultimately, writing architectural ideas provides another means of interrogating and developing design work. This alternate exploration activates a way of thinking that complements the visual thinking skills our students typically use in their studio work. Through varied writing exercises, students have the opportunity to investigate their design work in very different ways; developing a relationship between the writing and the visual work throughout the semester produces not only clearer presentations, but also richer, more thoughtful designs.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Batteux, *Les Beaux Arts réduits a un meme principe*. Reprint of 1773 edition. Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1969. 27-28. I first encountered Batteux's classification in *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand* by Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2000): 191-192.

² Gerald Grow, "The Writing Problems of Visual Thinkers." *Visible Language* 28.2 (Spring 1994), 136.

³ Ibid. 148-49.

⁴ Ibid. 144.

⁵ Ibid. 146.

⁶ Ibid. 150.

⁷ Ibid. 150.

⁸ See especially Toby Fulwiler, *Teaching With Writing* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1987) and the edited collection, *The Journal Book* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987).

⁹ Student comments come from anonymous, end-of-semester evaluations. Comments cited here are from Architecture 301 (Fall 2004), Architecture 302 (Spring 2005), and Architecture 201 (Fall 2005) architecture design studio courses.