

## Hidden Values: Habituated Dispositions

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In contrast to the informal learning acquired from parents, peers, and worldly experience, formal education carefully structures the acquisition of bodies of knowledge, sets of skills, uses of tools and procedures. Progressive educators frequently struggle with redeploying these elements in differing combinations. The results of these deliberations, while certainly complex, can nevertheless be recorded with relative simplicity for all to examine in schedules and diagrams with detailed names and expected learning outcomes.

Curricula set-ups, however, as with the employment of any method or tool, cannot avoid value bias. That is, any given curricula will lead learners in some directions more than others, intentionally or by default. This isn't bad, but pretending neutrality is.

### PRESUPPOSITIONS

But there is a less easily tracked area of value bias; irrespective of the formal curricula and pedagogical approach adopted, learners cannot avoid also having some version of the "common sense"<sup>1</sup> nurtured by their engagement with the overall experience of schooling. All of us learn – from everyday experiences as well as formal education – not just facts and tools and the skills to work with them, but attitudes, unattended habits, taken-for-granted values and practices, success and failure patterns, unconscious predispositions. These shape the obviousness of conventional wisdom, "what everyone knows," "the way things are" – in short, the *common sense*. Such dispositional orientations are unconsciously used to organize the often wild flux of experience in both everyday life and formal education.

At a practical level, habituated responses also allow us to benefit from an economy of effort, without which we would get hardly anything done in life. With habits, we take care of all those relatively predictable situations we assume require no conscious attention, freeing us to focus on the singular, on our encounters with unique situations.<sup>2</sup> From the popular press: "Habits are a funny thing. We reach for them mindlessly, setting our brains on auto-pilot and relaxing into the unconscious comfort of familiar routine."<sup>3</sup>

Habituated dispositions (as distinguished from simple habits like putting the measuring cup back in the same drawer each time) condition our perception, our feelings, our thinking, our actions. These habits play out in our ordinary lives and in how we design: they affect what aspirations we value in designing; how we decide what is and isn't architecture; what factors we decide are relevant to consider or ignore; and perhaps most tellingly in the long term, how we categorize reality into identifiable entities that become the stuff with which we design.

The thrust of this study is to explore what can be done in curricula development that recognizes these pitfalls and works to make them into productive learning situations.

Before discussing the design assertions made above, it would be helpful to get a better sense of how some of our deeply internalized habits play out in our everyday lives. As an example prevalent in Western thought, consider the common-sense way we often conceptualize the identity of activities, people and things. We tend to set up pairings of oppositional differences, following the unspoken formula: X/not-X. The identity of X is defined by

what is not like it, by what is not-X. Male/female, for instance, inherited from Biblical narrative. Along with inside/outside, center/margin, private/public, mind/body, us/them, friend/foe, essential/accidental, and the like, these oppositions become, in time, naturalized as ontological givens. This way of categorizing reality – a “this” opposed to a “that” – however conveniently clear and decisive, is intrinsically oppressive, precluding the imagination of serious alternatives.<sup>4</sup> We use modifiers like “semi” to approximate conditions along a continuum, but we remain locked into the dominant characteristics of the initial pairing. As with any negation, we remain within the conceptual framework of the negated.

More generally, habituated dispositions are, in themselves, neither right or wrong; it depends on the values of the culture. In some cultures, such as traditional Bali, a passive disposition centered on balance and steady states is appropriate and even necessary.<sup>5</sup> An instrumental or free-will disposition is dysfunctional. East Asians, as extensive studies have shown, when viewing a scene, notice the *relationships* among the elements present, while Europeans and North Americans notice the *categories of items*, usually ranking them in importance.<sup>6</sup> Whether this is attributed to an Eastern bias toward collectivity and the Western culture of individualism, or to habituated dispositions to see reality as relational in one case and as composed of categories of entities in the other, both perceptions feel like common sense to their users.

Perhaps the most common and least noticed example of our X/not-X habit is the oppositional pairing of the *essential* and the *accidental* (or the *merely* situational). This habit permeates most of everyday life, and our design thinking and action as well. We divide the situation we are considering into two categories: those we must take account of, and those of no causal efficacy, those that can be ignored. Most of us feel creating a hierarchy of importance makes sense, that is, it makes common sense. Within this framework of hierarchical ranking, we often extend this to look for the *one key influence, the single cause* that, if identified, will explain how some event or condition has been attained, or could be attained by design.

Consider, for example, the Columbine shootings in 1999.<sup>7</sup> For months after this tragedy, public commentators argued whether it was this factor or that,

or some other, producing numerous assertions as to what *the* cause was. To use a bad pun, everyone was looking for the silver bullet that would explain everything. After a time a few suggested that the cause probably was “all of the above,” a combination of factors that acted through positive feedback to set the killings in motion. But in spite of the limits imposed by our 30 second sound bite news format, we are beginning to hear more public discussion of the need to approach questions from multiple perspectives in order to understand them, and with an assemblage of actions in order to resolve them.

Imagining some conditions are caused by a network of influences, rather than by a hierarchy of factors or a single key factor, should not be so foreign in an age now sensitive to the swarms of interacting influences responsible for ecological degradation and global warming. But it is; the X/not-X habit doesn't go away. There are some plausible reasons why this habit persists. Thinkers like Manuel Delanda, expanding on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, while rejecting the disposition to see *all* of reality as organized into hierarchical dualisms, point out that many phenomena are, in fact, formed from assemblages of stratified entities organized in hierarchies, while many others are formed by assemblages of entities organized as meshworks.<sup>8</sup> Depending on the scale of the phenomena being considered, there can be meshworks of hierarchically organized entities, and hierarchies of meshworked entities, and so on. Thus there is legitimacy in conceptualizing *some* kinds of phenomena as hierarchically ordered, along with some that are mesh-worked; the crucial act is to *recognize which is which, and the consequences these differing ordering processes encourage*. A dam (hold back the water) or an airport (board the right plane on time) has every reason for its influences to be precisely ranked in a hierarchy. On the other hand, a place to hang out, a conference center or school commons – places with more aleatory expectations – should be assembled in such a way that multiple interactions can freely occur without the physical set-up reinforcing a hierarchy of relations. The difficulty with those who are *disposed habitually* to see reality as parsed into X/not-X, and into the essence/accident version in particular, is that they see *everything* within that frame, ignoring the actual way given phenomena are formed and eventually engage with the larger situation.

Dispositional habits are learned at an early age in the home and reinforced by secondary schooling, and in most accounts are difficult to alter in later years. Richard Rorty accepts the fact that, in the US at least, secondary education, in addition to teaching a certain amount of fact, assumes the task of socializing learners into the dominant culture's normative expectations, or, in the terms used here, habituating the value dispositions necessary for social solidarity. Higher education, in his view, is then challenged to open up learners' minds, to present a wider perspective on the world, and to develop one's capacity for critical thought.<sup>9</sup> Critical thought involves not just the simple comparison of the conditions in question to normative standards to assess their adequacy, but the capacity to recognize the dispositional filters through which we understand reality, and thus to be free to alter these, to understand reality differently, and to act accordingly.

Learners come into architectural schools fully equipped with habituated dispositions. Some of these dispositions have developed along with the maturity of capitalism, such as the faith in consuming goods and good experiences as the path to fulfillment. But others are long-term and deep-seated, such as the categorizing dispositions of the X/not-X variety.

#### WHAT SHOULD (OR CAN) ARCHITECTURE SCHOOLS DO?

An inevitable question follows: Should, or can, schools of architecture respond adequately to Rorty's challenge? Should they find ways to develop learners' capacities to realize their taken-for-granted predispositions, to engage in critical reflection on them, and perhaps eventually, to take actions informed by such reflections? Graduate programs in architecture might feel they can ignore this question, assuming entering learners already possess critical capacities nurtured by their prior college education - an assumption that is valid in some cases, in others not. Five year undergraduate programs often assume learners develop critical skills from required courses in the humanities and social sciences. Generally they do not; these, often of great sophistication within the subject in question, typically are not understood in relation to design thinking.

The professional emphasis within architectural education rarely seems to have time or the inclination to include nurturing the designer's capacity to critically understand her of his own dispositional habits, or if such an aim is present, it is encapsulated in theory courses that consider it an intellectual issue, not one of repeated practices and emotional engagement, as found in studio.

As would be expected in schools aspiring to excellence, there is intense interest in challenging the profession's norms and predispositions, to be at the leading edge of the design front. But after the embarrassing failures of early modernist's claims, many are reluctant to venture into critically challenging the *societal* status quo. It is sometimes assumed, that expressing a critical attitude within the aesthetic of an architectural work, within the domain of architecture per se, will result indirectly in societal critique.<sup>10</sup>

Critique of either the disciplinary norms or the societal status quo, while important in itself, is not the direct issue here. The concern is in helping learners critique the presuppositions upon which they make most of their decisions, everyday and professional. To do this they must be able to recognize the set of habituated dispositions learned in life and schooled by institutions, and break free where appropriate. The commitment of architectural programs suggested here would not be political in the direct sense; it would be more basic: help learners *recognize that they inevitably have dispositional habits that carry sets of values, that other patterns are possible, and further, how they might develop new habits*. While a theoretical discussion of dispositional habits would be helpful to learners at some point, effectively challenging them would require a regime of repetitions similar to what produced the habits in the first place - most likely in the design studios.

Before attempting curricula recommendations, two concerns need elaboration: first, the influence of different curricula set-ups might have on habit formation, and second, the implications of habituated dispositions on studio design approaches.

#### KINDS OF CURRICULA

Architectural faculty have long struggled with how to promote a diversity of design approaches and

yet also impart the commonalities necessary to be a discipline, a profession. Most programs have some form of core studio experience, though what constitutes “core” experience usually is the subject of endless debate, prompted by competing interests anticipating support of a favored approach to follow. Some overall curricula strategies are: the master, camps, the smorgasbord, and, as I will suggest later, a less easily cartooned version that, within an ecological logic, specifically acknowledges habituated dispositions.

A few schools are dominated by the presence of a master, a renown architect-theorist, or, depending on intentional long-term hiring and retention patterns, are devoted to a relatively singular design approach. Cornell, under the spell of Colin Rowe, had this character for many years. Some, usually large schools like UC Berkeley, settle into camps; differences are only occasionally debated and students remain within the camp approach long enough to completely internalize the approach’s complex of habits as well as its conceptual framework. Schools like the Architectural Association in London, with a unit system wherein students may be permitted to stay in one unit for a year or more, have had a similar characteristic. Other schools may be called smorgasbord (I’ll not name any). They not only offer a diversity of design approaches, but students are encouraged to pick and choose among the diverse studio offerings, some sampling widely, others limiting exposure.

Each of these organizational modes accommodates the issue of acquired habits differently. The master school has the least difficulties with conflicts among habituated responses because difference is underplayed; at the graduate level, entering learners are likely to be aware of the orientation and self-select to willingly adopt the required dispositions. Undergraduates, while less aware of what they are getting into, tend to align their performances (if not their underlying dispositions) so as to conform, prompted by valuing the prestige conferred by study with a master. Or, they depart. For those who remain, developing a *critical* disposition is not a high priority in this kind of situation.

Learners in the camp type school, after some general exposure in core courses, tend to select the camp most compatible with their existing habituated values and dispositions, developing them in

depth. For some, this is a wise use of their talents and existing feelings of value. For others, the lack of challenge encourages an attitude of acceptance, not of experimental venture.

The smorgasbord school, for some learners, effectively challenges their resourcefulness and imaginative reach, where they carefully select among differing approaches with the aim of eventually constructing their own. For others, the pattern of sampling tends to reduce differences to not much more than a consumer experience, akin to the modern notion of the “good life”: getting more goods and good experiences, avoiding the indifferent and the bad.<sup>11</sup> The smorgasbord school, while claiming to be free of ideological orientations in offering individuals free choice, is deeply ideological in reducing architectural differences to a matter of personal preference, as in the logic of the market. Learners in this mode don’t necessarily expect to develop a deep understanding of any given approach; that isn’t the issue. Within a commodity logic, the look and popularity confirmed by picking and choosing is what appears to be valued.

These generalizations may easily offend. They are based not on controlled empirical evidence, but as the result of informal observations. The point here is to bring the problematic of habit formation into the discussion of curricula matters.

#### **THINK BEFORE YOU ACT (AS THEY SAY)**

One of the most common habituated dispositions incoming learners bring with them (with the exception, perhaps, of students with serious arts or humanities backgrounds) is the feeling that a responsible person must think before acting, admittedly an admirable injunction in many circumstances. A clear hierarchy is evident here: thought gives form to the materiality of action (as if we never have learned anything valuable in our experimental give-and-take with actions). When brought into the design process, there are a certain number of learners who feel they must know *everything* about the assignment – they must think through every potential problem and opportunity – before they can take design action. In any studio having a serious research expectation, learners often defer beginning physical design until it’s far too late to develop the project sufficiently; not only is design commitment slighted but there is no way, due to underde-

veloped design, for their extensive research to be seen as relevant.

Others will feel that they must imagine the whole design result in their head before anything can be committed to model or paper. This might be a disposition supported by the romanticized stories of Wright or Mozart possessing finished images of their work in their heads, awaiting only commitment to paper.

In an effort to find a clearly thought-out process that is known in advance before application, others under the sway of this disposition will turn to design methods that claim, if used correctly by a practiced adept, a good design will follow. In contrast to more stochastic approaches, ones valuing multiple explorations and feedback from iterative trials, these methods assume the potentials immanent in a given design situation can be prethought, or in some cases, ignored. There are numerous versions of these linear approaches that promise, if not excellence in the end, at least a sound beginning; for example, age-old methods based on adapting carefully selected exemplars or proven typologies. Or, like the classical composition of an initial whole by taxis, genera, and, symmetry operations, there are numerous ingenious rule-based methods to produce coherently organized, and sometimes exciting, configurations. And as a staple, there is the traditional modernist process of decomposing a faulty type into its components and recomposing it in a "better" arrangement. This routine moves linearly from an ideal topological (or bubble) diagram into its material configuration, wherein the designer is free to express her of his creativity. Even methods beginning with mapping or diagramming the specific design context are sometimes touted as leading *inevitably* to positive results, as if the *multiplicity* of diagramable influences, including programmatic intentions, had no potential complicating influence. All of these linear hierarchical methods, as difficult in execution as some of them might be, rely on a "thought, then action" disposition.

Akin to the think-before-you-act pattern in its predisposition to mentally rank everything in order of importance, is the seemingly trivial pattern of settling into a single mode of exploration and representation as the best way to work. This is often seen in learner's exclusive use of model making, or

plan drawings, or more recently, computer modeling. Rational argument does little to modify these practices, even when learners recognize the complementarity of diverse modes, each with distinct capacities and limits. In many cases, one suspects this single-mode practice originates in nothing more complex than sticking with the most comfortable initial way of working.

Many learners show real emotional distress when asked to relax their propensity to think everything out before taking design actions, even when they acknowledge other dispositions are possible. One suspects such individuals have internalized the Western prejudice of mind over hand (the mind/body dichotomy), or an Aristotelian hylomorphism whereby form (from outside) is imposed on passive matter (the form/content dichotomy).

#### ENTER ECOLOGICAL AND COMPLEXITY STUDIES

The noticeable crunch in all this comes when programs begin to seriously consider the ecological logic embedded in sustainability. The quandary has existed previously for those in the American Pragmatist tradition of learning-by-doing, and for those who have marshaled productive insights from the post-classical sciences, in particular the studies of complex phenomena. As noted earlier, we now have substantive design approaches informed, for example, by the work of Deleuze, Guattari, and DeLanda, wherein architecture is conceptualized as engaging with *multiple performative opportunities*, constituted as *assemblages with capacities to affect the specific situation and in turn be affected by it*. These approaches engage with situational differences, and thus are open-ended, but in looking always to the set-up's *consequences* in the world, they reject "anything goes." In these approaches, material set-ups can be understood as emerging from the multiple influences immanent in the concrete situation, as well as from programmatic directions, requiring the designer to understand the ongoing relations among heterogeneous forces, similar to the logic of ecological systems. These approaches cannot operate within the linear "think, then do" sequence, nor with the accompanying hierarchical essentialism such methods carry.

Serious issues for curriculum development are posed by the contrast between (using a crude

shorthand), essentialist and ecological dispositions. Should schools attempt to match faculty and learners by dispositional habits? Assuming, as I am arguing here, that these habits are deeply engrained and mostly unrecognized, do we expect learners to thrive who, through no fault of their own, are mismatched in studios operating on fundamentally different assumptions than theirs? In the name of diversity, are we trying to “train” learners to switch, at will, the basic dispositional context within which they learn?

Should the faculty be carefully sorted into essentialists and ecologists, for example? One semester the learner engages with one, and the next the other, and eventually decides for her or him self? The worry with this shifting back and forth, aside from reinforcing consumer attitudes, is the *shallowness likely to result*, where learners find *ways to produce the imagery and overt routines necessary for fitting in and pleasing faculty, but in so doing, simply suppress, as unneeded, any critical impulse to understand their own underlying dispositional habits.*

But aside from these difficulties, I would argue, as Rorty has, that any institution of higher learning has an *ethical* obligation to help learners develop their capacities for critical thinking. To do this they must be able to re-work the dispositional habits they have accumulated - to recognize them first, and to selectively revise them if they choose.

#### AN ENCOMPASSING ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

While essentialist design approaches noted previously are incompatible with an ecological logic, the latter can absorb the intentions, if not the former’s underlying ontological assumptions. That is, an ecological approach involves a set of habits that are comparable with design challenges that are *either hierarchical or meshworked.*

As a sketch for a curriculum structure – for at least the design studio sequence – it would make sense to design a *core* studio experience within the more inclusive logic of ecological dynamics. This would enable a series of practices extended long enough for learners to develop some *depth of habituations* - probably two years. Within that core ecological approach<sup>12</sup> design challenges would mainly require working with a meshwork of heterogeneous interacting influences, but also with some studies calling

for a stratified or hierarchical setup. In contrast, the upper year studios would offer a deliberately open range of ideological approaches, both challenging and furthering the core approach.

Having engaged with design challenges in the design core that require working with both hierarchical and meshworked design challenges (within an overall ecological approach), and having the different implications of their formative processes openly discussed, the learner may more likely be able to bring her of his previous, often scattered, dispositional habits into a pattern of mutual support, compatible with the overall core studio approach. And because learning to work within an ecological logic is more difficult than within a linear approach, once having mastered working laterally among several unranked influences, the learner can easily redirect later to a linear design process, if so inclined.

There remains the legitimate concern many faculty have with finding ways to encourage a diversity of design approaches - probably the reason a smorgasbord pedagogy is appealing. The logic of an ecological dynamic itself *engages with the diverse or heterogeneous influences present in any given situation without a priori ranking*, and while one may call it “an” approach – an ecological approach -diversity *per se* is central; the logic of ecology itself enables diversity of design responses.

In this ecological approach, at the simplest operating level, core level studio projects would posit multiple non-ranked challenges whose potential relationships would have to be explored, avoiding briefs where a ranking of influences is pre-given by the faculty. The act of exploring differing potential relationships – in which no one knows the productive response until it appears - in itself is an invitation to recognize one’s habituated dispositions.

Agreement on this suggestion may be unlikely, but the question remains: What are *you* doing about the power of habituated dispositions?

#### ENDNOTES

1. Many phrases could be substituted for “common sense”: the taken-for-granted, apperceptive habits, matter of fact, structures of feeling, habits of attention, dispositional habits and, extended somewhat, habitus.

2. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 (1972)): 141-142.

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3. Janet Rae-Dupree, "Can You Become a Creature of New Habits?" (*The New York Times*, May 4, 2008).
  4. Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 249-272.
  5. Bateson, *op. cit.*, 120-125.
  6. Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).
  7. In 1999 at Columbine High School in Colorado, two students killed 12 students and a teacher, wounding 23 others, before committing suicide.
  8. Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002).
  9. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 115-116.
  10. As discussed in the Robert Somol/Sarah Whiting faulting of Michael Hays' and Peter Eisenman's "critical" approach in "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33, *Mining Autonomy* (2002): 72-77.
  11. I would argue that our disposition to regard *getting* rather than *doing* as the path to a satisfied life - the consumerist ethic - produces a bookkeeping version of the "good life," in which one aims to get more goods and good experiences (many designed by architects) and avoid all that seem bad, or toward which we are indifferent.
  12. This would involve an ontology of assemblages as advanced by Manuel DeLanda in *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006).