

Constructing Mental Landscapes, aka We Live in Skin City

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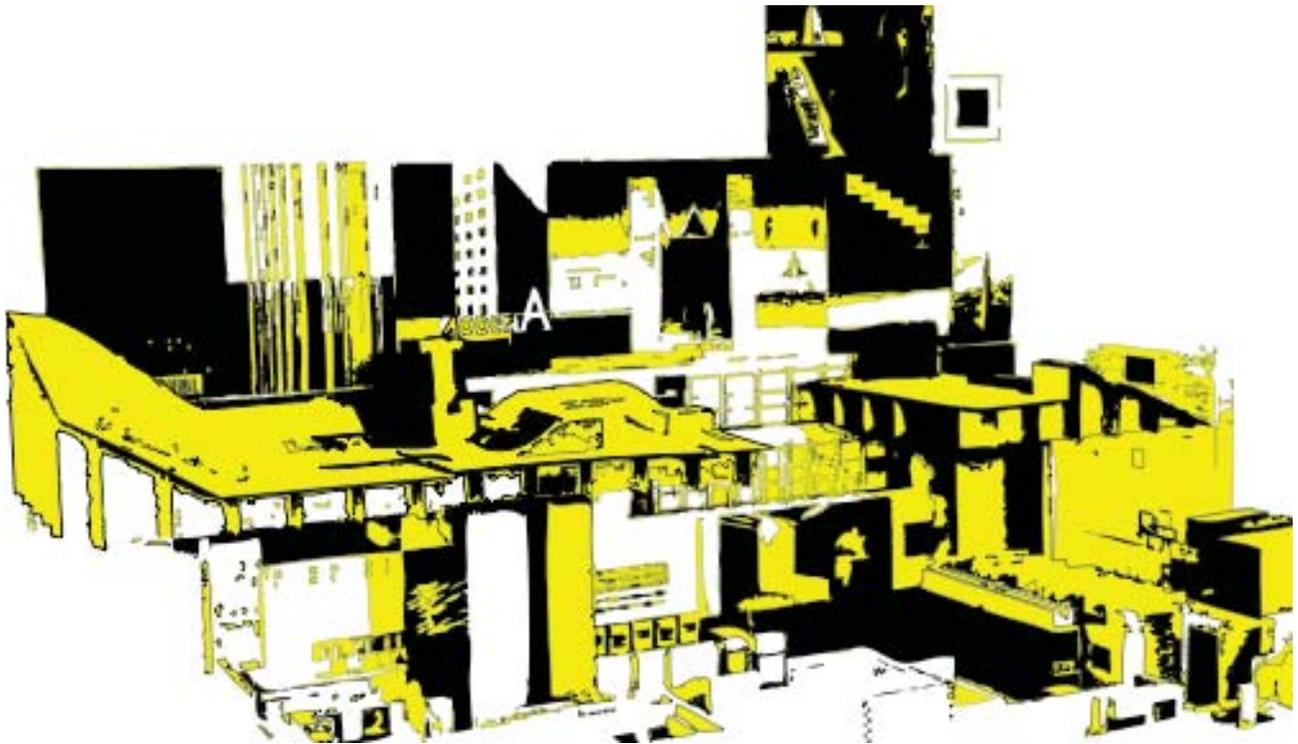


Figure 1. SKIN City, the byproduct of a social network studio, is seen in the foreground as a physical model. Drawing types incorporated are two-dimensional representations of ready-made objects and graphic morphing.

In 1871, Lewis Carroll, through the invention of portmanteau words, was the first author of what has been nicknamed SKIN City. In this city, a constant blending produces an atmosphere, which could only be described as a veil known as smog. Smog is the combination of smoke and fog. Smoke is a byproduct of the products internalized within

the boxes given to the students on the first day of class, the weight of which cannot be lifted by one or many individuals. But during the fall, another atmospheric shift occurs in which the fog becomes friendly and we look for it on a regular basis. The students saw the smoke and the fog as completely separate, but the lesson of blending which occurs

is one in which an architecture, involving both landscape and built form, becomes integral to the existence of the other. This brief analogy is one which the students could hold as a touchstone for regular and repeated visits that acted as a diagram for consistent application at any scale during the semester. The 4+ scales include city, site, building, and detail.

Mental landscapes were constructed in a free form, shared experience studio, in which every action was a direct reaction of the previous experience. The thesis for the semester was whole to part, originating at the individual scale and progressing into a lab/studio effort. Provided with specific prompts, parameters, and materials, the students designed their projects and throughout the process more specifically the practice of design; they established a system for social network. This may sound as if a party was established, but what was configured involved a transfer of all materials involved as an act of free stealing. In the music industry, this would be described as sampling, but just as for any artist, the original material needed to be transformed as a symbol of who was rehearsing, as practice became live performance.

This studio was first implemented and tested in California in the summer of 1995. For more than a decade, this design problem has been presented at three different schools in Arizona, California, and Virginia. In many ways, the precedent for this studio is John Hejduk's Nine Square Grid design problem, first introduced in 1954 at the University of Texas, one that was developed over decades and in this year of 2008, serves as inspiration for an international design competition as an homage to Hejduk. Hejduk understood that there was substance in the grid, so he continued to question its' structure and content. Each time SKIN City has been presented, the two-way relationship that has resulted has been unique rather than repeated identically again and again. The portmanteau problem has been updated and inspired by artist and artistic acts. For Hejduk, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier were inspirational, and for the nine square grid design problem, Sol Lewitt was a significant inspiration. For SKIN City, Marcel Duchamp and Robert Overby are precedents for thinking creatively about spatial conditions in a way very similar to that of architects. Duchamp and Overby introduce ways to change our thinking of the ordinary or the

decrepit; they present environments as being connected throughout, rather than separate entities (e.g. interiors and exteriors). Can techniques that artists present help our community, as architects + designers, analyze the thinking in and around the way we design? Should architects surround themselves with artists, such as Hejduk did personally, as well as at Cooper Union, to help us evaluate the way we think about design?

The knowledge needs to be spread analogous to a matrix model or an office model, rather than a hierarchical model, of a top-down system. Development occurred from process to practice to profession, where the students unknowingly developed an office model of alternative practice. Each one of the students was part of the design nucleus, but also the production team. By breaking neighborhood boundaries within SKIN City, the students established individual relationships, while maintaining the visual and physical connections that had formed as a social network during the design process. At the same time, the development of physical and digital models became a production that was based on scheduling deadlines and limitations. Rather than a traditional studio setting, with desk critiques and benchmark pin-ups, the group evolved into an everyday office setting, where daily deadlines and group meetings provided the most efficient manner of communication and delivery. A simple rule was agreed upon by all... "no desk crits!" From the beginning the students joined together to have a shared educational journey rather than the individualistic education that is taught from an early age. The value of a collective education is integral in the foundation years of the architectural education. Throughout our architectural careers, we continuously work in group atmospheres. To establish similar, positive working environments during the early stages of education is significant and will provide a key transition for all members involved into higher levels of education and practice. The yearlong studio is a setting, which allows the prosperity of a shared experience studio. The students and teacher have ample time to establish a supportive and successful working relationship.

The dialogue formed as a result of the alternative practice is a unique experience for the "characters" involved. Each individual recognized and contributed their personality traits and interests into the



Figure 2. Ready-made boxes, or sites. The interiors of the boxes were explored in order to find visual and physical connections and adjacencies.

implementation of the design. The social interactions greatly enhanced the design process of the overall project. SKIN City was the product of several teams working together as one studio/office: computer modeling, hand rendering, physical modeling, and quality control. One year later, students reflected on their experiences of SKIN City:

I found the facilitation of communication between the groups to be a critical element in the success of Skin City. Because the city was composed of individual buildings, neighborhoods and the connections between them that make a city, and all of this was being done by specialized groups, inconsistencies in the design were common occurrences amongst the class. Because myself and a few others were working as a "net" in multiple teams at once these differences were quickly mediated and often strengthened the project as a whole because of the dialogue generated amongst the groups.

The dynamic of working as individuals with projects and ideas seemed obsolete after having the experience of a collaborative studio. The relationships formed during these projects have stayed intact as we continue our education through competitions and

studio work. We are constantly learning from each other and helping to develop our characters.

After being nicknamed "The Mumbler", I realized that my communication skills needed improvement, and, though I like the nickname, I felt strongly that I had to lose the negative connotations of being "The Mumbler". Through the necessary communications of collaborative efforts, my communication skills have grown much stronger. Sometimes I accidentally slip into "The Mumbler" mode late at night, my ability to communicate has been significantly improved to the benefit of myself, my career, but especially my peers.

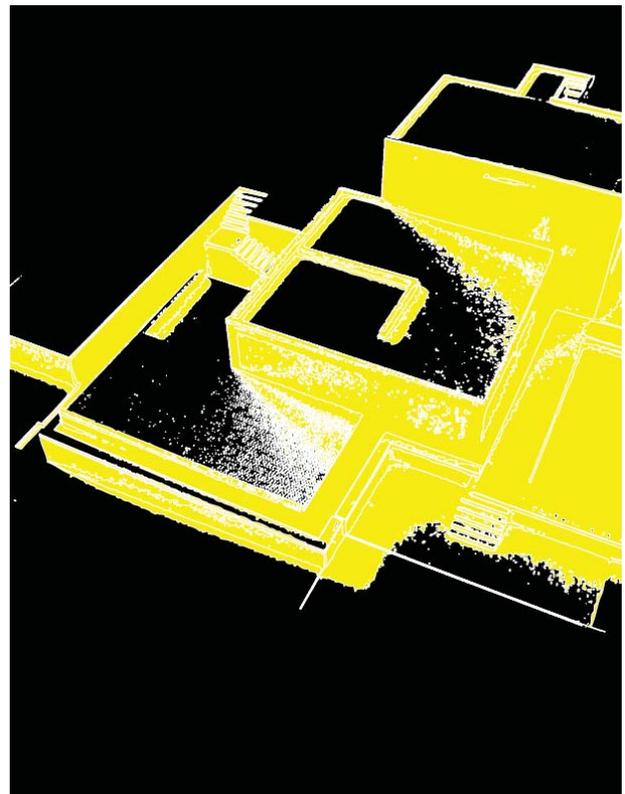


Figure 3. SKIN City box "site"

To live is to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasized. An abundance of covers and protectors, liners and cases is devised, on which the traces of objects of everyday use are imprinted. The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior. The detective story that follows these traces comes into being...¹

The whole to part thesis: Skin City originated with a series of boxes, as a lesson in proportion and composition. Typically and traditionally, architects start in the two-dimensional realm and trans-

late their designs into three dimensions. With the ready-made box, the origination of the design process as a three-dimensional object, that traditional process is reversed. They had to document every detail of the box as if it were a contract document or a site plan. The students become artists, as they document their boxes, by hand drawings and latex paintings. Latex paintings were used to explore the boxes, to reveal multiple orthographic projections, which could not have been experienced using solely two-dimensional documentation. The latex then had to be cut off as one continuous skin, to complete the transformation from three-dimensions to two. A reversal of pattern for the dress/clothing was produced as a result of three-dimensional form. The "SKIN" was flattened momentarily to rest on the landscape before evolving once again back to three-dimensions. The physical adaptation of the contract documents, as well as the actual box introduced interior and exterior transformations, which allowed for multiple design configurations throughout the development of the project. Following the extensive two-dimensional exploration of the boxes, a drawing technique, graphic morphing, was used to connect or assemble sectional drawings and to translate those drawings back into three-dimensional models. This process opened up the possibility of the design-social network. Once the flattened three-dimensional paintings were constructed to produce the master plan of SKIN City, the individual students discovered connections between their spaces, whether visual or physical, through the discovery of orthographic projections and sections. The project was coming full circle: everyone started with the same proportions and constraints, made individual discoveries, and implemented a system of connections between the individual projects. Therefore the Walter Benjamin quote above also is brought into direct focus as students begin to understand personal design patterns.

portmanteau word; noun

a word blending the sounds and combining the meanings of two others, for example *motel* (from 'motor' and hotel') or *brunch* (from 'breakfast' and 'lunch').²

The individual two-dimensional spatial exploration evolved into a social network of three-dimensional spatial existence. Groups were formed to create a portmanteau. The groups collectively created a new

language for their architecture, with the blending of drawings, signs, symbols, and materials. The students were not questioning themselves, but instead what was the question that was proposed by the next step of the process. Students began to understand that every next step involved the inclusion of elements of the previous steps in design; previous actions were never forgotten. The students always continued their process with a free flowing structure – they never knew which step was next to come. The organic nature of the process thrived in the context of a shared experience. The students fueled the development of projects together, with the excitement and anticipation within the high-energy studio. Each group worked together in a simple and meaningful manner, which allowed for the sharing of thoughts and ideals, these thoughts constantly being communicated with adjacent groups. The dynamic nature of connectivity, with one simple rule rather than multiple, had a mind of its own, rather than a sense of control. The connectivity allowed for, and encouraged, the free stealing of knowledge across the studio.

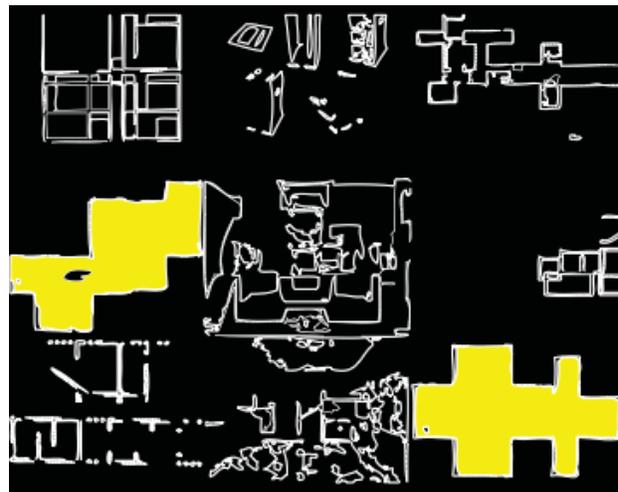


Figure 4. The shared experience began with a preliminary master plan using the original latex paintings. The students worked together to create connections, whether physical or phenomenal, and formed groups to explore them.

Marcel Duchamp used ready-made products to create spatial art by simply transforming the surrounding conditions. He blurred the line between art and architecture, and the students followed this tradition by consistently keeping one foot in the real world and one in the imaginary, or mental dream. At first,

the students wanted their boxes to be buildings, but at the end of the semester, the “buildings” were still referred to as BOX architecture. Robert Overby used latex paintings to translate his artwork into spatial communications and documents. These artists were influential in a way that inspired the students to think as architects. The ability to see these artistic interpretations and how they apply to the architectural realm is invaluable to the education of young architects. The students used these precedents as a mode to act as artists and architects simultaneously. The atmosphere that is created when several creative forces join together is very compelling. The knowledge and vision that artists can provide to architects is critical. In an office model, such as the one created in SKIN City, looking to artists and their interpretation of space is revolutionary in the mental realm. To expand the way that architects think about space, as more than just designers, allows for increased creative input from all parties involved. In other words, is the only way for the making to change, is to first change the thinking?

Ready-made artifacts were the foundation of the studio, however a spatial process, coinciding with a shifting perspective, was used to transform the “box”, or *site*, into the built landscape as an idea for a city. This task was accomplished through the collective efforts of the twenty students. The students took an assignment with given parameters and, after seeing the inherent connections located throughout the project, formed a new design project, one that required an extreme effort. SKIN City would not have existed without the discoveries of the students, and the students would not have thrived without SKIN City as an office model context that was established. The relationships that formed from the construction of the landscape and the idea of the city are the type of relationships that prosper in the professional realm. The students respect within a co-existent community took life well beyond the studio context and was a unique observation in academia. The students continue to successfully perform together on various competitions and studio projects. The foundation that was created in SKIN City is one that will provide a seamless transition from the early stages of education to the professional program of education, as well as to architectural practice. The students were not told to collaborate, but merely derived a group effort from the organic nature of the free-form studio structure, which led to discoveries of consistencies amidst projects.

The interiors always contain a warm bag in which to wrap oneself. It’s an architecture of pleasure and an architecture of the womb.³

To end and yet begin again, Hejduk comes to mind. To paraphrase him... it is important for young architects to build their mental structures before building their physical structures!



Figure 5. Constructing Mental Landscapes: The blending of landscape and built form was explored in the context of the social network.

ENDNOTES

1. Benjamin, Walter. “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 155-156.
2. New Oxford American Dictionary, 2nd Edition
3. Quetglas, José. “Lo Placentero,” *Carrer de la Ciutat*, no 9-10, special issue on Loos (January 1980): 2.