

Practicing Experience

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MAINTAINING A WORK ENVIRONMENT TO BE UNCERTAIN AND PRECAUTIOUS

Uncertainty is of little consequence in a typical studio course; precaution has even less relevance. Students might be encouraged to “take risks” in design, and be given praise for experimentation, suggesting that the things they don’t know only affect their school performance. However, in practice, the things that we don’t know have large consequences. Furthermore, beyond a design practice, uncertainty and precaution increasingly shape today’s society. The large problems of our time such as climate change, global terrorism, and health risks from industrialization require every part of society to learn to work in ways that factor not only what we know, but also what we don’t know. Much of the work of this century is destined to address the side effects of modernization, hazards that were once not known, and to proceed with the realization that we will continue to produce side effects with risks that are currently not known. The simple diametric model of knowledge versus lack of knowledge has been replaced by gradual degrees of non-knowing. Uncertainty can no longer be seen as defining those things that will

be known once we have better methods of inquiry. The threatening risks from the once unknown effects of industrialization are accumulating at a pace that does not give us time to wait for science to clear up confusion and disagreement. Making decisions in the twenty-first century requires the ability to function within different types of non-knowing in order to manage the effects of what we know and to proceed with caution, knowing how to mitigate the risks of what we don’t know.¹ The table below summarizes types of non-knowing and some of their cultural manifestations.

It is possible and probably advisable to talk about types of non-knowing in a school studio. However, it is impossible to not talk about them in a design practice with real projects being built with other people’s money. Furthermore, uncertainty increases exponentially as the focus extends from the performance of a single building to its impact on the environment and then to a neighborhood plan or to larger scale planning and land-use policy.

This paper explains a particular design practice, the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio, and offers lessons that are being learned about creating and

Type - certainty:	We know that we know what is knowable.	(science culture).
Type - probability:	We know that we know what is unknowable.	(insurance culture).
Type - uncertainty:	We know that we don’t know what is knowable.	(reflexive culture).
Type - precaution:	We know that we don’t know what is unknowable.	(risk culture).
Type - distraction:	We don’t know that we don’t know what is knowable.	(information culture).
Type - ignorance:	We don’t know that we don’t know what is unknowable.	(fantasy culture).

Figure 1: Description of types of non-knowing.



Figure 2. The design studio space.

maintaining an environment for students and interns to learn to work with uncertainty and precaution.

The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio is located in Biloxi Mississippi. It shares work space with other organizations in a repurposed church sanctuary and an adjacent rectory that were buried under fifteen feet of water in Hurricane Katrina. The Catholic Diocese no longer needs the buildings because the population of the surrounding neighborhood is one half of what it was before the storm. The two buildings make up what the community generally calls "The Coordination Center," which consists of a group of organizations that evolved from a relief distribution and volunteer coordination center into a case management, house repair and building program and then into a community redevelopment corporation. The name of the lead organization

has changed several times and is currently called the Hope Community Development Agency (HopeCDA). The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio shares work space with HopeCDA and is affiliated with Mississippi State University College of Architecture, Art + Design. The design studio's full-time staff consists of a director, who is a licensed architect and Associate Professor, another experienced architect, two planners, a landscape architect, and around ten architectural interns. In addition to the full-time professional staff, the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio has organized three spring semesters with students and has employed both paid and volunteer summer interns. The design studio staff interacts daily with the case-managers and construction managers of HopeCDA as well as with many community members and workers of other partner non-profit organizations.

The image below is a view of the design studio looking beyond to the case management work space of Hope CDA.

The workspace is a pragmatic architectural response to the program. Every person in the studio is in view of each other. The director does not have an office. He uses a portable computer and sits at a long table with room to work and meet. The open work space shapes the way work is done and shapes the way the community imagines the way work is done. Every day there is continuous movement, crossing between the design studio and the rest of the building. The boundaries between program spaces are indicated by large sliding panels which simultaneously separate and connect the spaces as they are used. The panels are made into chalkboards and therefore offer changeable surfaces for useful information. There is an unassigned enclosed room that functions as a meeting space and library. The room's interior is blue and its outside is plywood. It is a prominent, fixed box, centered in the plan of the building's otherwise active space.

Situating the design studio in the Coordination Center created unusual working conditions. In a typical design firm the interactions between clients and design professionals are typically limited and formalized with structures such as receptionists, artfully furnished lobbies for waiting visitors, conference rooms for formal presentations, contracts, submittals, and other structures that maintain the firm's image, control outside visitors, and manage the delivery of professional services. The work space of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio is not as controlled as a typical design firm, and the presentation of the work is not as selectively managed. Case managers, home-owners, construction managers, and others are welcome to come into the studio work space freely and unannounced. Design drawings generally can't wait for a formal presentation meeting and are more often used as process tools to get feedback even in their incompleteness. The table used to meet with home-owners is in an active space that intersects the case management work area and the design studio. The meeting room and library is the only quiet space, and is well used by the design studio as well as by workers from other organizations. Its use is intentionally not scheduled to maintain the need for cooperation and negotiation. The effect of such an open structure and informality is an increased need

for tolerance of others and an appreciation of the positive instability that comes from uncontrolled outside influences.

The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio's method of compensation for professional services is also unusual. The design studio's professional staff consists of full-time employees paid from a combination of federal and private grants so that we are able to provide professional services to low-income households that are unable to pay. All of the house projects are for people that have been qualified by the case workers in partner organizations for various housing assistance programs. Because the professional services are paid for by outside funding the design studio is able to work with people that need assistance without adding cost to the project. Such unusual means of compensation changes the relationship between the designer and the client. The architect is not working "for" the client; she is working "with" the client. On the other hand, as paid employees, the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio avoids the distortion that volunteer service can bring. If the volunteer is elevated in the eyes of the receiver for being altruistic the work is sometimes appreciated more because it is given without pay than because it helps those receiving



Figure 3. A Biloxi home owner and his house.

assistance. By being paid by outside funds the low-income residents are receiving needed assistance, while the distortion of volunteer labor and the pressure of professional fees are both eliminated.

Most of the people that are getting design assistance lost their homes and most of their belongings in Hurricane Katrina. They have been suffering this unexpected loss and the frustration of bureaucratic delays for much longer than they ever imagined. At the point that they have made it through the case management and are ready for a house design they are still uncertain whether or not the grant funds will work out and whether there will be enough money to build a house. Collectively, the architectural interns in the design studio have worked with well over a hundred such people. Individually, each of these prospective home owners has a difficult story to tell. It is not unusual for an intern to find herself in a meeting needing to reassure a discouraged person who is in tears at the challenges and uncertainty of her life. Such experiences, multiplied over and over, shape the working environment of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio. The interns come to know, first hand, that architecture is not a self-serving pursuit, and that learning to work positively with people who are in conditions of uncertainty is a skill as useful as learning how to work out and dimension a floor plan.

The skills that have life-long impact on the interns of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio are not technical skills that result in a sort of expertise; they are social skills that result in the increase of experience. Even though expertise and experience can both be used to describe acquired skills, considering the difference between the senses of the two words is instructive. Expertise describes uncommon skills, specialized abilities that set one person or a group of people apart from others. Experience, on the other hand, describes skills and knowledge that come from commonly shared events or activities and that form and strengthen human relationships around those activities. In its inclusive sense, "experience" is everything that comes from the interaction of the human organism with its environment: beliefs, customs, values, politics, and prejudices; in short, another name for culture.²

When experience is taken to define an idea as broad as culture, it is seen as being more shared than individual, more common than unique. Ex-

perience is the life force of a community in the way that values, beliefs, and customs shape the community's relationships with the environment. Therefore, it follows that experience – and not individual expertise – is the means, the context for judgment, the sustaining force, and the reward, of community design work. The degree to which a design practice works with experience, not the measure of expertise, is the primary condition that distinguishes community design from a standard architectural practice.

Much of the philosophical language explaining such a broad notion of experience comes from American pragmatists, especially from John Dewey. In his book, *Experience and Nature*, he offers an expansive sense of "experience," pointing out that it is what William James calls a "double barrel" word. Dewey writes:

Experience denotes the planted field, the sowed seeds, the reaped harvest, the changes of night and day, spring and autumn, wet and dry, heat and cold, that are observed, feared, longed for; it also denotes the one who plants and reaps, who works and rejoices, hopes, fears, plans, invokes magic or chemistry to aid him, who is downcast or triumphant. It is "double-barreled" in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in unanalyzed totality.³

Analogously, in an architectural practice, experience denotes the building site, the design process, the physics of heat, humidity and rain, and of hurricane force winds, uncertain budgets pieced together with grant funding, volunteer building organizations, the building code; it also denotes the family who lost their home and belongings, who hope and fear for the future, as well as the architect who gets to know that family as well as she knows the house's wall section. Experience always has a degree of uncertainty because it includes external forces – such as the threat of destructive weather events, as well as social concerns – such as the words used to describe and dramatize such threats. Types of knowing and non-knowing combine in experience.

A design practice shaped by experience acknowledges uncertainty as a prudent realization and precaution as a standard of care. Building design uses both physical science and social science, and both have a degree of uncertainty. For example, the un-

predicted storm surge of Hurricane Katrina, led to a drastic change in the one-hundred year flood calculations for the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The base flood elevations were increased from an average of around 12 feet above sea level to around 20 feet above sea level. Large areas of cities that were not in a flood zone prior to Katrina are now in flood zones and are required to build off the ground. At first many people on the Gulf Coast were suspicious of the unexplained physical science of flood prediction that led to the revised maps. These people saw the changes as politically motivated, as an indirect way to make it difficult for people to build back. Eventually, people became resigned to the revised flood policies and addressed the difficult task of rebuilding, which starts with a question packed with uncertainty, "Should I build back on this piece of land now that I know that it has a higher risk?"

To the property owner the non-knowing of building back is completely individualized. It balances the value of attachment with the weight of risk. On the one hand an individual property owner may ask herself, "How attached am I to this piece of property - emotionally and financially?" On the other hand she may ask, "How much risk can I afford - emotionally and financially?" The consideration of attachment versus risk repeatedly put in balance by each property owner is multiplied by the hundreds of property owners in each Gulf Coast community. The multiplication of this individualized uncertainty at the scale created by Hurricane Katrina is the context of the work of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio. Nearly every one of the one hundred or so houses that have been built from the design studio's work is in a flood zone and is required to have the first floor elevated, either a few feet, or as much as twelve feet off the ground. Many of these elevated houses need to be wheelchair accessible, requiring ramps and elevators. Every house is designed for the specific site and with input from the future home owner to meet the needs of the specific household, resulting in many different house designs.

The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio is a practice unlike other university affiliated design/build programs. Most design/build programs emphasize the use of students and focus on a single building project. In this way the building is conceived as exceptional in its design and in its building process. In other words, it is seen by everyone involved as being

outside normal practice. This exceptional distinction creates opportunities to experiment and is therefore beneficial to research and teaching goals. The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio has some of the same ingredients as other design/build programs; however, the emphasis is shifted and the number of variables is multiplied. Typically we have around 20 current new house projects either in design or in construction. All of the full-time interns and architects have several ongoing house projects, which they stay with from start of design to the completion of construction. Each house is designed with extensive interaction with a family, consultation with case workers and construction managers, and is shaped by day-to-day conversations within the studio. Even though each house is unique, there are many standardized details and specifications that improve by the ongoing critical development that comes from a practice. The construction is being done by many people: subcontractors, skilled volunteers, and on some projects the designers, and students of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio. The many projects and multiple participants create a complex system of feedback, so that the design process is not focused on one exceptional house. Instead it is spread out as a practice.

SUSTAINING A CRITICAL CONVERSATION ABOUT VALUES

Defining values can be a confounding activity because the aspirations that shape a practice are difficult to isolate and resist being named and collected into an exclusive list. Nevertheless, using the language of values to describe and share the aspirations of a practice holds promise because values are the sort of rare words that carry an extra load of meaning and are useful to evaluate the merits of various actions. John Dewey says: "If values were as plentiful as huckleberries, and if the huckleberry patch were always at hand, the passage of appreciation into criticism would be a senseless procedure. If one thing tired or bored us, we should only have to turn to another. But values are as unstable as the forms of clouds. The things that possess them are exposed to all the contingencies of existence."⁴ In other words, useful values are both uncommon and difficult to define.

The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio staff has been discussing values for nearly a year in a series of group conversations. These meetings started

with several "Super Value Meals" in which eating together was followed by sharing thoughts and concerns about values. Once these after-dinner conversations seemed to be getting slowed down by debate over the meaning of particular words, we all agreed to leave words alone for a time and to each do a diagram about values. The pin-up of the diagrams and several meetings that followed led to an increasing realization that the goal of listing "our values" was impossible if we were to remain faithful to what we had learned from each other and from the people we work with in the community. To say "our values" suggests that values are something that we have, either things we carry around, like the "valuables" that we are warned to put in the hotel safe, or defining attributes, like a person's height and weight. Instead of something we have, it is more considerate to think of values as guiding word tools that are part of the language of our time and place and are available for all to use. At times values work like common framing tools such as a ruler, a square, and a level, to guide specific practical decisions. At other times values are aspirations to help us improve our work by being able to imagine doing things better. In either case care should be taken to avoid a possessive attitude that makes a claim that we own values the problem with defining values is that once identified they are typically collected into an ideal realm of words so that they can be analyzed and discussed. This ideal realm of analytical language unavoidably strays from the uncertain realm of experience, and the particular words being used to define values take on a sort of unnatural weight. People start privileging the word "values" with leading words such as "central", "basic", "core", "fundamental," and other structural terms. Soon the discussion tends to get overly concerned with precise definitions, one word contesting another in a search for the perfect word that can stand proudly as the finalist in a pageant of possible words. In the process of polishing the language the value statement gets further and further from experience. □

Once values are isolated from experience in this way they are thought to be able to be measured according to some common scale of goodness. But good things are not all compatible; they can't be weighed according to a common standard. This is because the freedom to choose between good things is a value in itself. In other words, the extent of our liberty to choose to live as we desire

must be weighed against the claims of many other values such as equality, or justice, or happiness, or security, or public order. The fact is we cannot have everything all the time; not because we can't afford it, but because at times one good thing takes the place of other good things.

Isaiah Berlin's 1958 influential essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty" makes a useful distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom.⁶ Negative freedom is "the degree to which external forces do not interfere with my activity;"⁷ and positive freedom is "the wish to be my own master."⁸ Even though these two types of freedom appear to have nearly the same end results, the thinking that leads to each of them is significantly different. Negative freedom acknowledges the various external forces that shape social experience and strives to mitigate those forces that keep a person from being able to make choices. Positive freedom stems from an ideal of self-rule, independent from external forces. In short, negative freedom imagines an empirical, heteronomous self, and positive freedom imagines an ideal, autonomous self.

Such a distinction is useful to discuss values, because the concept of negative freedom offers a way to see that not all good things can or should be brought under a single idealized measure, and to see that the urge to be one's own master can blind a person to the consequences of his actions on other people. Berlin points to such a condition of blindness when he states that "if the essence of men is that they are autonomous beings – authors of value, of ends in themselves, then nothing is worse than to treat them as if they were not autonomous, but natural objects, played on by causal influences, creatures at the mercy of external stimulus."⁹ Yet, the reality of human experience today, in both a social and natural world, is the increasing realization that we are not independent from social forces and should become more mindful of the consequences of human actions on each other and on the natural world.

Acknowledging that values are not commensurable is not to say that values do not have a significant role in shaping our actions. In fact, the realization that our values can not always be analyzed and ranked gives us added insight into the complexity and uncertainty of experience and makes us more careful to watch our actions so we don't harm other people. Wise words come to mind:

*"To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian."*¹⁰

This is the first lesson learned from the discussion on values.

USING VALUES TO SHAPE PRACTICE AND PRACTICE TO SHAPE VALUES

William James begins his second lecture on pragmatism with a camping story:

"Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find every one engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel – a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussions had been worn threadbare. Everyone had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared therefore appealed to me to make a majority."¹¹

James goes on to elaborate in detail what it means to "go round" and we read along with a smile until he comes to a very serious conclusion to the story. We are caught off guard as we realize that we have been uncritically following the seemingly trivial argument of the comical man and the squirrel, trusting James to get to the point of the story, which he does in a way that pulls the curtain back on the philosophers before him: He says, "It doesn't matter."

He explains that if there is no *practical* difference then the alternatives mean practically the same thing and all disputes are idle. In other words, if a

dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show practical consequences from one side or the other's being right.¹² This pragmatic formula is the second lesson for values, and James's squirrel story serves as a standard of whether a given conversation matters:

If a difference in the words used to explain values does not make a difference in practice, it is of no consequence.

Practice is an effective critique of the language of values, more effective than language itself. The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio has maintained an extended group conversation about values that began with the notion that we would produce a list of "our values." Students from several schools that lived and worked in Biloxi during the semester joined in the ongoing conversation with the full-time studio staff. People from outside the studio often participated in the meetings; their presence was a welcome challenge to the tendency that such conversations can become specialized and proprietary. The values meetings have been enjoyable and have added to the solidarity of the design studio. However, the discussion of values would have little consequence for the participants if it were not for the fact that we are working together everyday on projects that are being built by others, for others, and with other people's money. For example, if we say we value "being careful", each person generally reflects upon his or her work in the studio with the question, "am I being careful in my own work?" Such self analysis is part of a reflexive practice in which the work is shaped by an ongoing critique of the work.

Many students and interns have come to work in the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio because they are attracted to a place that combines designing and building. Initially, they are interested in a design/build program because they expect to learn about architecture by way of construction. However, they come to realize that the greater lessons being learned come from the experience of designing a building for another person. Many students have been implicitly taught in school that design is a personal activity in which the ideas of the designer are being expressed. They think of their student peers and their teachers as the audience for their designs. For the typical student, designing a house for another person, especially a person with vastly different life experiences, is a new and exciting

effort. The student or intern learns that design is not an autonomous activity. She learns that her own ideas are put into a complex dialogue with the future home owner. Put into a situation with a house client for the first time, the inexperienced designer often tries to replace the autonomy of the designer with the equally limiting preconceptions of the client. She thinks perhaps that the client should direct the design, supposing that the work of designing a house is to give the owners what they ask for. Eventually the designer learns that even houses have a public dimension and that there are external forces, both natural and cultural, outside of the ideas of the designer or the client that have a formative design role. This type of practice learning is a transformative experience.

In a design practice shaped by experience, values are not things we own; instead they are words used to guide the relationship of the designer and the community. Instead of using words like "core" and "central" to describe values - words that locate values internally, values are imagined as boundary

conditions, not located within us but made visible in our social interactions. In building design as well as in planning work the designer makes many decisions that directly equate to costs and benefits for other people. The people that carry the costs and benefits are not limited to the project client. The consequences of building extend beyond the project; they are both known and unknown, both local and global. Working with precaution requires that we maintain a reflexive practice that is shaped by an ongoing critique of our work, so that we can see the effects of our actions on other people. A practice of experience takes care to keep from thinking that we are autonomous and watches out for a false certainty that can make us oblivious to the consequences of our work. Such important lessons make up the experience of a careful practice and are lessons that are best taught in the sort of teaching practice of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio.



ENDNOTES

1. Theories of knowledge and non-knowledge are part of Ulrich Beck's description of "Reflexive Modernization," in his influential 1992 book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, and his later writings, especially *Reflexive Modernization*, 1994, and *World at Risk*, 2009. Beck compares linear theories of knowledge in which non-knowing is not relevant, to non-linear theories in which the "types, constructions, and effects of non-knowing constitute a key problem in the transition to the second, reflexive modernity." See Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2009, page 125.
2. The sense of the word "experience" used here follows John Dewey's writing in his 1925 book *Experience and Nature*. John Dewey later stated that he wished he had called the book *Nature and Culture*. See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, New York, 2001, p. 437. Oliver Wendell Holmes also uses the word "experience" in a similar sense in his influential work *The Common Law*, in which he states that "experience is the life of law." Holmes's notion of experience, like Dewey's includes beliefs, customs, and values, and is behind his important teaching that precedence shapes the law more than principle.
3. *Experience and Nature*. John Dewey, Dover Publications, New York, 1958, page 8.
4. *Ibid.* page 399.
5. The contingency of language and the critique of fundamental figures of speech is an important part of Richard Rorty's contemporary pragmatism. Rorty says, "The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary." Rorty echoes Dewey's similar caution. Dewey says values are usually "gathered up into the realm of values, contradistinguished from the realm of existence. Then the philosopher has a new problem with which to wrestle: What is the relationship of these two worlds." See *Experience and Nature*, page 394. Rorty repeatedly critiques idealist thinking that there are such "realms of values," independent from experience. Rorty says, "We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not of our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effect of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human language, and that human languages are human creations." See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, page 5.
6. "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.
7. *Ibid.* page 169.
8. *Ibid.* page 178.
9. *Ibid.* page 183.
10. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Joseph A. Schumpeter, London, 1943, page 243. Isaiah Berlin ends his essay quoting Schumpeter and adds, "To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity."
11. *Pragmatism*, William James, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 1981, page 25.
12. *Ibid.* page 26.