

New Foundations: History, Theory, and Making as Basic Design

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In architectural education, quite often courses in history and theory are structured in ways that suggest they are add-ons to the central task of teaching students to design and technically assemble buildings. The add-on effect occurs in two ways: first, through a curricular set-up that places history and theory courses outside of direct interaction with the studio sequence; and second, through a course structure that encourages students to view history and theory simply as a chronological sequence of facts and personalities. Such treatments of history and theory perpetuate the view that these courses are merely supplemental, and of limited consequence to the education of young designers. The marginalization of history and theory stands counter to Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang's urging that architectural education provide breadth and depth to students experience by emphasizing and incorporating related fields.¹ In fact, Boyer and Mitgang suggest the necessity of pushing history and theory well beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries of architecture:

In a rapidly changing world, students need to be able to look beyond the confines of a single discipline and view problems in their totality. To understand the ethical choices entailed in any profession, students should be exposed to how the great figures in history, literature, philosophy and art have struggled with life's moral dilemmas. These are the needs that make a true liberal education so essential to the future of the architecture profession....² Of all the reasons that this study has argued for better integration of liberal studies into the architectural curriculum, none is more important than the preparation of future architects to confront the ethical choices and tradeoffs of professional life. To have encountered and thought about Hamlet or Doctor Faustus in literature, or to have read Hobbes and Rousseau in philosophy, and even to weigh the

words of history's most notorious architect, Albert Speer, are experiences of incalculable value to anyone engaged in professional study.³

These statements are inspired by a concern that, particularly in undergraduate architecture programs, students enter the university without a great diversity of knowledge and are immediately swept up, sequestered, and isolated into a focused architecture curriculum. In these scenarios students are effectively taken out of contact with the world and its multiplicities. Yet, this is the very world they are going to be asked to design for.

Although urgings for an increased value of liberal education provide a good start, it is my feeling that asking architecture programs to simply allow more space for liberal education is not enough. Students have financial and time pressures that are compounded by the rigor and demands of an architectural education. Within such conditions many will find it difficult to seek out other disciplines in order to provide breadth for themselves. Further, and perhaps more importantly, even if such breadth were built into the overall program structure most students would find it difficult to make meaningful connections between outside fields and their design studies. Simply put, often young students are the last to understand the relevance of liberal education to architecture. For these reasons architecture programs must take more responsibility for showing students a.) *why* breadth of education is important, and b.) *how* lessons learned from other disciplines can be applied to architectural understandings. Herein lies the basis for a new design foundations course at our University that introduces history and theory as part of basic design.

Historically, our program has had a year-long architectural history/theory course that is typically taken by students in their third year. Currently we have one *non-tenure track* Art Historian in the College of Art and Architecture. Two key issues arise from these facts. First and perhaps most obviously students get no real exposure to history or theory until they are already two years into their education. Second, a more subtle consequence is that since these courses do not occur until the third year, students get through two years of the program with the implicit understanding that history and theory are merely extras. With these late offerings of history and theory and limited ability to take much more (i.e. one temporary historian) the curriculum itself has told students that they can design without knowledge of either history or theory.

The new foundations course attempts to alter these perceptions. It is structured to treat history, theory and design as interrelated flows. And because this is a College of Art and Architecture course, as opposed to a Department of Architecture course, it addresses history, theory, art and design in broad, liberal, terms. The very structure of this course puts it in position to meet two of the aforementioned challenges. First is that because this is the *College foundation*, it suggests that theory and history are fundamental to *all* design disciplines. Second, because the course is both a studio and lecture, it is able to draw relations between history, theory, and design in a fluid way, and avoid both a history/theory model rooted in memorizing people, objects, and styles and a no-need-for history/theory studio model. My hope is that as this course develops and students continue on in their respective disciplines that they will have learned *from the beginning* to see the currents of history, theory, and design as inseparable and these interrelations as fundamental to the making of good design.

INTRODUCING A-CATEGORICAL THINKING

At the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that the basic goal of architectural education is to teach students how to craft places that successfully interface with the specificities of particular situations (in the broadest sense of the word). From this proposition, it would seem to follow that understanding the ways this has been attempted in the past, both good and bad (history), and how the manner in which we think and have thought about our

existence in the world (theory) has effected such attempts would be a good starting point. Further, these understandings could then be re-applied through one's own making to provide a deeper knowledge of how the three currents intertwine. Yet, doing this with any degree of sophistication first requires dismantling a view that holds history, theory, and design as separate categories.

Dismantling categorical thinking is not easily achieved. German philosopher Martin Heidegger struggled throughout his career to shake the linear logic of Western metaphysics and the corresponding limitations it placed on thought. In this quest, he attempted to demonstrate that gaining a deeper view of existence does not come by focusing on separate beings, but rather the specific interrelations, concepts, processes, and happenings that make beings what they are.⁴ Heidegger sought to illuminate the ways in which things gather at different scales and for different durations, always suggesting that temporality should not be thought of as mere sequence, rather as an event of simultaneity. Heidegger shows us that a primarily logical interaction with things tends to encourage isolation and simple causality; and that the intellect often assures us that we have the whole picture when in fact it is this very clarity that covers over a more complete picture. In short, Heidegger posited that the world is more often simultaneous than it is linear and that we experience a multitude of things in concert at any given time.⁵

Architecture has inherited many of these same limitations that obstruct our ability to cope with simultaneity. Such limitations become particularly problematic when they lead to a comprehension of design as instrumental problem solving. Here history and theory are at best superficial and at worst disposable, in that problem solving tends to bracket out complexity. If instead one understands architectural design to be an ethical undertaking—that is, as an extension of our existence—then there is an opening for history and theory to participate. Here effective design thinking begins with a capacity for simultaneity's inherent ambiguity – a designer must draw a building plan to understand the building section and draw a building section to understand the building plan. However, a designer does not finish one and proceed to the other - in an effective design process they must be co-evolving and co-informing.

For similar reasons, basic design, theory, and history need to be understood as coincident. As I suggested above, students are frequently taught in a sequence that encourages them to first learn basic vocabulary and such skills as drawing and crafting objects, then the creation of buildings in a circumscribed manner, then history/theory as a sidebar. Even if history is brought in early, the externality of the sequence, especially when taught outside the department, students often have little notion of how history is connected to their design curriculum, except that in studio they are often given precedents to 'look at.' This is frequently all that they do – look at images.

In-depth theory usually suffers an even more incomprehensible existence, as it is often thought of something that upperclassmen and graduate students do as a kind of scholarly obligation or academic rounding of the architect. That is to say, theory is not often treated as if it actually has relevance to the everyday practice of architecture. Such treatment only serves to further reinforce notions of it being an esoteric curiosity, something not to be taken seriously because it is peripheral to the issues of designing real things. Of course this is not necessarily the view of educators that set up these systems, but regardless, the eccentric positioning of theory courses certainly suggests a nonessential status to students. In short, the peripheral positions of both history and theory within many programs lead students to believe them to be less important than their personal creativity. In this foundations course, I hope to show students that creativity is (and has often been) comprised of an interdependence of history, theory and design, not the singularity of genius.

Now it might be said that structures and technology usually suffer a similar fate. However, the one difference is that in most cases, except for the most theoretical/abstract programs, the role of building technologies makes itself known out of the sheer necessity of architectural functionality. In other words, even simply making a *maquette* teaches one something about gravity and construction techniques. And, the more developed one's design becomes the more one is required to draw upon technical knowledge to complete it. Certainly I do not mean to suggest that a peripheral position is a legitimate way of handling building technology either; rather, I simply want to point out the

difference between technology and history/theory to illustrate that history and theory rarely make themselves conspicuous in design studio. Thus, following Heidegger's concerns about the limitations simple causality, history, theory and design must find ways to interrelate and co-inform so that temporal and causal complexity enter into one's understanding of architecture early-on and afford these important foci an opportunity to inform the work.

INSEPARABILITY OF CURRENTS: THE STRUCTURE

Manuel DeLanda has observed that, "...while rigid habits may be enough to associate linear causes and their constant effects, they are not enough to deal with nonlinear causes that demand more adaptive, flexible skills."⁶ With this in mind, the introduction to the syllabus describes the course:

Design thinking is a unique way of seeing and engaging the world. It involves equal parts analysis and intuition and for many, the less grounded aspects of design can be both exciting and unnerving. This course introduces design, design thinking, and the craft of "making" by mapping a genealogy of thinking and making across time and links this knowledge with a series of studio based problems.

This two part integrated course addresses the arts from the perspectives of: history; theory; creative process; compositional techniques; organizing principles; design communication; as well as other issues central to design literacy from a pre-disciplinary perspective. The course content focuses on our perceptions of the world, the ways in which we attune to the forces at play within it, and how we as artists and designers respond to said forces by way of the creative act.

The overall intent of this course is to provide insight into the ways in which humanity has thought and continues to think about the process of "making." This course seeks to shed light on the manner in which our creations exist in space and time and interact in reciprocal relation with people and things around them. The lecture will provide a historical-theoretical narrative in which to ground foundational issues and skills that will then be further explored and developed through the practice of design and making in the design studio.

Currently the course is composed of two existing, two-credit art classes. The intention is that these two classes will be officially transformed into one four-credit, College of Art and Architecture course for fall of 2011. Lecture is two days a week (one

hour each) and studio two days a week (two hours each). The basic idea is that the lecture outlines a history of the way different epochal cultures have seen their world and how this has influenced the way they made things within it. It focuses primarily on Western traditions to reveal the legacy that the majority of the students have been schooled within. The studio picks up emerging themes from lecture and takes them in slightly different directions. These themes are then revisited later and filled out further in historical and theoretical terms as the lecture proceeds. The themes are embedded in the titles for the studio projects:

- A1 *Stimmung*: "Making" as Mood
- A2 *Genius Loci*: "Making" as Response
- A3 *Dissoi Logoi*: "Making" as Inquiry
- A4 World: "Making" as Place
- A5 Time: "Making" as Narrative
- A6 Abstract Machine: "Making" as Perception

To provide a sense of how the lecture and studio overlapped, I quote the introduction for assignment two:

From lectures and the first assignment you have seen how the Greek gods (*daimon*), experienced as moods, colored encounters with the world. Mood is also the announcement of our encounter with another unique whole, that of "place." When speaking of the earth the Greeks did not speak of "space" rather they referred to "place" or *topos*, recognizing that place indicates identity, belonging, and embodied orientation. The Romans had similar notions of place and made its relation to mood explicit in the Latin phrase *genius loci*, or spirit of place. This idea has been carried forward particularly in the landscape design traditions and in the writings of architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (whom you read during week 2). Think of such places as home, or a city you have visited, or a unique encounter with nature such as going to the ocean or the forest. In these examples, we see how place can give meaning to our existence and shape to our memories. Place is the basic grounding of these relations and the announcement of one being "somewhere." A sustainable future for our planet depends our relationship to the earth and the unique places that comprise it. If this relation is not taken seriously, treated as the foundation for sustainability, then we will eventually find ourselves in a world of box stores and subdivisions, with our spaces of in-

habitation made from the same materials and perhaps even from the same plans. The phenomenon of place reminds us that this might not be the type of existence that we want to "sustain."⁷

Here one can begin to see how history, theory, and making were treated as a flow extending from the past into the future. The emphasis on interconnect- edness allowed readings, studio projects, lectures, and images all to intensify one another; a theoretical point, historical period, or understanding of design were all touched upon from a variety of perspec- tives. Such overlaps in the course structure were also intended to suggest that each respective foci are simply moments of emphasis (as opposed to dif- ferent subject matter) and connections were made through repetition as opposed to singular focus.

Establishing this nonlinear environment began in the lectures where I introduced Plato's condemna- tion of artists in *The Republic*. I explained his rea- sons for taking this particular view of artists and spent some time describing his attempts to overturn the Greek educational system. I described how the thrust of Plato's invective is aimed at Homer and the pre-literate educational system which was poetic, generalized through specific examples, and highly participatory.⁸ In outlining the difference between the two positions, my discussion and correspond- ing visuals were set up to reflect a more Homeric position; that is to say, they required listening and thinking rather than transcribing content for accu- racy. In this way, I attempted to situate students in learning as a dialogue, asking them to hear and participate by thinking through the material, and forming their own judgments. At the same time studio projects had begun to pick up threads from lecture and offer students another point-of-view on the material. In short, the overall composition of the course was intentionally ambiguous, multi- relational and slightly complex. This done knowing full well that many students would struggle at the beginning as they began to make sense of what is going on. I did this with similar overturning notions that Plato had, but instead of reinforcing his con- cerns for precision, reason, and clarity I hoped to reinject something of the Homeric wholeness, nar- rative involvement, and value placed on personal identification with situations into their education.

This treatment of art history offered the space to explore cultures, their values and the way their worlds might have been understood as embodied

in specific examples of art and architecture. For example, Greek *kourous* statues reflected Homeric values; Roman mosaics revealed a strong interest in the sensuous world. We also viewed Vitruvius through the lens of Aristotle's rhetoric to enrich our understanding of *commoditas*, *firmitas* and *venustas*, and thought about how the French Enlightenment spillover into French Architectural theory might be considered as a precursor to contemporary strip-architecture. These examples help to demonstrate my emphasis on understanding relations rather than objects or artifacts as such.

STUDENT REACTIONS

It is unfortunate that disciplinary and temporal overlap is lacking in typical University coursework, because developing the integrative skills to deal with such complexity is fundamental not just to architecture but life in general. For me, persuading students that this way of learning is valuable comes first by demonstrating my own interest in the material. I then attempt to communicate my interest through diverse and (hopefully) compelling graphic content. To do this, I used a range of media such as film and music, quotations, diagrams, images from popular culture; I also experimented with typography and tried to provide comparative imagery whenever it was suitable. For a generation that is used to being seduced by the media, it seems we should take seriously that we as teachers need not only know our material but also provide a little inducement to student interest as well. In other words, one cannot just tell freshmen that Medieval Christianity or Friedrich Nietzsche is interesting and relevant to design; rather one must *show them why*.

However, even if one is successful in being engaging, it is inevitable that unfamiliar material presented in an unfamiliar structure will not be easy to deal with. That said, predictably, early in this course the difficulties with overcoming educational norms were evident and manifest as both confusion and fear. A Blackboard post provides an example:

I'm throwing this out there, and maybe someone else may feel the same. I attend every lecture, and listen intently and take what notes I can gather from the lecture. However, the lecture style, to me, is rather unstructured. This makes it difficult to make readable notes that can later be perused through to help recall certain information from class, not necessarily found within the readings. As a senior, taking this class for enjoyment and one last elective credit

or two, I know how to effectively study and take notes...so not sure as to why this particular class is hard to grasp ... while I enjoy the fancy slideshows, with the music and the less is more approach can we just have some power point with actual points and important things to remember?

Although I sympathize with such confusion, it also reinforces my concerns about the limitations in the way students are being taught, which further strengthens my resolve. As part of this resolve, however, it is important to remain open to student concerns and correct where it seems appropriate. One such concern early in the course was an almost obsessive fear about the content of the final exam. This surge of student anxiety indicated to me that my students might be so worried about which little bits of information to remember that they would miss the course's big picture. Initially I had toyed with the idea of having no exam at all, but in a class of three hundred my pragmatic side said that you *have* to have an exam. However, in witnessing students' fear of the exam it struck me that a traditional final might actually undermine the intent of the course. That is to say, exams to me often feel like threats, and this threat to learn did not seem to sync with providing the necessary space for students to become comfortable with a new way of thinking. So in order to alleviate student concerns, I simply wrote a "final exam" during the second week of the course and gave to them. The final was a take-home, open note essay that they would complete by the last week of the course. It essentially asked them to make a persuasive case for their own particular but comprehensive understanding of the course;⁹ to promote the idea that the final was a tool for thinking I also encouraged students to come and discuss their ideas with me at office-hours.

Doing this achieved two things: it allayed a certain paranoia that I was somehow trying to deceive them, and it allowed the test to become a better device for assimilating knowledge (instead of being primarily an attendance policy). This shift to the final and ongoing immersion in the material seemed to help many students settle into the flow of the course. In fact, several students at different times made a point to come up and tell me they were now "getting it." One of these particular students wrote me about his final exam in which he wanted to address the changing conception of divinity over time and the effect that this had on art. In closing he said, "I am enjoying the class; I'm beginning to understand more as

we go through the semester. Thanks.” Now, in *no way* do I believe that everyone made such improvement, but I do count stories like this and the decline in palpable fear in the lecture hall as progress and signs that perhaps we made headway.

CONCLUSION

This course grew from a deep concern for the increasing focus that our educational systems have placed on getting particular answers from students as their priority; and frankly, I am alarmed that students are *asking* for more bullet point slide lectures. Education’s current shortcomings are held fast in notions that knowledge is primarily hierarchical, logical, and memorize-able, which contributes to an inability to address the relations *between* things and the complex causality that follows. Certainly much more can be done than has been done in this class to refine the ways in which we administer architectural education generally and the role of history and theory specifically. However, I do believe this course lays an important foundation for our program. Perhaps most importantly, it shows that students can cope with difficult material and in fact value, enjoy, and benefit from early involvement with history and theory; it is only limited reinforcement and lack of opportunity that hampers their ability to bring these essential aspects of life into their design work. Overall, given the difficult challenges facing our world, it seems time to ask what we can do in education to better present a complex world *in its complexity*. I hope this class is a small step in this direction.

ENDNOTES

1. Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang, *Building Community : A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice : A Special Report* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996) 51.
2. Ibid. 77.
3. Ibid. 141.
4. For example see Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
5. For example see Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
6. Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (New York: Continuum, 2006).
7. The rest of the assignment read as follows: In the first assignment groups of students examined the role and effects of mood on our encounters with the world. In this assignment individual students will identify a place that has particular resonance for them, one that they can visit over the course of the assignment and

attempt to communicate the “spirit of place” they have experienced here. This will be done as a 3D collage or assemblage. This assemblage has no size or material restrictions. Choices related to size and material however should have some significance to the spirit of place that each designer is attempting to communicate.

8. Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1963).
9. 80% of the grade for the course was based on a sketchbook where students executed a daily sketch, reflected weekly on course readings, and responded to a series of tasks, “sketchbook assignments,” that I gave randomly during lecture.