

Flexible Identities: The Notion of Nation

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The context of architecture is an inherently social, political, and cultural phenomenon. Since 1851, the World Exposition has had a profound impact on shaping architecture and urbanism from both critical and historical perspectives. With particular focus on the World Exposition as a dynamic global phenomenon, this essay explores its layered depth. Theory and practice are equally considered, as well as issues of changing political and cultural identities. The origins of the World Exposition are referenced with respect to parallel developments in architectural theory, technology, and design from 1851 through the 21st century.

The World Exposition offers an invaluable cultural lens for design research in an academic context. *EXPO 2020*, an interdisciplinary undergraduate design studio at the Universidad de Monterrey, explored the richness and potential of the historical World Exposition. The studio developed a critical understanding of architecture and urbanism from local and global perspectives. The course began with a research-based analysis of the exposition in reference to its broad themes and changing contemporary notions of “national” identity. This initial research, combined with analyses of local urban conditions, created a foundation for hypothetical exposition proposals and urban design interventions positioned in emerging global cities. The approach in the studio was multi-scalar and multi-perspectival, culminating in the design of both an urban strategy and a “national” pavilion.

Interdisciplinary discourse engaged students from both Architecture and Interior Architecture, working together to facilitate shared exploratory design

goals. Specific sites were selected through research, encompassing a range of worldwide possibilities. Traditional territorial relationships and boundaries in the design disciplines were expanded and blurred. Multi-scalar and trans-territorial engagement of 42 world exposition precedents culminated in a series of research visualizations. These presentations included analyses of specific national pavilions, as well as general urban and architectural strategies for worldwide expositions from the 19th century to present. As a reaction to conventional paradigms, student teams collaborated on the design of alternative approaches to the national pavilion, informed by cultural, material, and regional specificities that engaged contemporary “national” identity as space, object, and identity in an age impacted increasingly by the forces of globalization. This research-intensive collaborative studio built upon approaches employed in a previous exploration presented at the 2011 ACSA National Conference in Montreal.

ASPIRATIONAL ORIGINS

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, international expositions--more colloquially known as world’s fairs, became a primary force in shaping cultural and technological productions of modern society. Held primarily in the United States and Europe, these events introduced state-of-the-art technological and scientific investigations to mass audiences. In the Victorian era, world’s fairs were regarded as mass communications endeavors that would educate citizens in progress, while serving as vehicles to further propaganda in support of the nation-state.¹ Apart from industrially- and commercially-focused objectives, world’s fairs promoted the dissemination

of advances in architecture and the fine arts. Beyond temporal contributions, World's Fairs offered significant opportunities for city building. They inspired the establishment of new museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago, or enhanced the collections of existing ones such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. On a grander scale, world's fairs have contributed permanent landmarks to cityscapes, such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, as well as re-configured urban design strategies in major cities such as Chicago's Jackson Park. Likewise, the rise of entirely new professions, including advertising and marketing, may be attributed to efforts associated with promoting world's fairs and the commercial products they featured.

Industrializing nations of the late 19th century exploited the world's fair framework as a promotional device. The first world's fair, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, was held in London in 1851. As a response to England's advancing industrial revolution, the fair celebrated the considerable industrial and imperial primacy of the United Kingdom. Its success was a catalyst for other nations to host their own world's fairs to give focus to their own national technological, cultural, and territorial aspirations. The French government responded by organizing the universal expositions of 1867, 1889, and 1900. Similarly, smaller European powers, including Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands also engaged the world's fair as a tool for their own nationalist objectives, domestic policies, and colonial aspirations. And while most of these exhibitions were hosted in the Europe, colonial outposts of European nations became increasingly used as host cities, including Melbourne (1880), Calcutta (1883), and Hanoi (1902).

Beginning with the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris, world's fairs increasingly featured exhibits of people living in territories under colonial European rule. The exhibits were promoted as authentic representations of life in the colonies. While the modes of representation varied, most visualizations contrasted radically with reality. Various patronizing, prejudiced, and promotional, by the late 19th century world's fairs were devoted primarily to celebrating the imperialist system. Equally alarming, prominent anthropologists supported the representational claims of the world's fair colonial exhibits. "Colonial" expositions—were organized in Europe as well as in colonial capitals such as Hanoi and Calcutta.

'HAPPY' AMERICAN COLONIES

It can be argued that a considerable rationale for European, as well as American, expositions during the early 20th century was a belief in the racial superiority of whites over non-whites. By publicizing the supposed 'otherness' of non-white races, the 1904 fair translated America's accomplishments as grounds for acknowledging the lordship of Caucasian races over their colonial counterparts. Western technological achievements were exhibited alongside dioramas that framed colonial peoples as both exotic and backward, hence, the national progress of Europe and the United States was underscored as the true path. Underlying European and American fears, as well as overt racism, resulted in non-Western peoples being represented in exceptionally negative and demeaning ways.

The 1904 St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition is generally praised for its variety as well as the depth of its innovations.² An exceptional effort of urban design, international engagement, and technological development--the fair displayed architecture, industry, and the culinary arts on a grand scale. At the time of its staging, the 1904 fair represented the largest public event ever held anywhere on Earth. Likewise, it was hosted at a time when the United States was beginning to realize its future role as a world power. Parallel to this transformation, the United States had begun to acquire several overseas territories, including the Philippine archipelago. The exposition acted as an opportunity for the United States to flaunt its political and economic strength to the rest of the world.

The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition was also engaged in undeniable colonial misrepresentation similar to European depictions of their own vast imperial empires. The recent acquisition of the Philippines by the United States placed a distant and radically different place under American cultural influence and governance. A nation that represented a free, democratic, and republican society was ironically positioned in the role of a conventional imperialist power. As a window on an emerging empire, the 1904 fair's Filipino historical and cultural exhibits offered white audiences a biased montage of an exoticized Eastern world.³ The exhibits fed an insatiable curiosity to understand, or rather, to promote prejudices toward the Philippines.

Similar to the 'Human Zoos' established within European world's fairs, the 1904 St. Louis exposition notoriously framed Filipinos in exotic and uncivilized ways. The Philippine Exposition Board was comprised primarily of Americans and charged with developing a representational exhibit for the 1904 fair. This exhibit was meant to convey an 'accurate' depiction of Filipino culture and society to American audiences. In reality, it may be argued that a hidden agenda existed. Rather, the fair itself was intended as a propaganda machine that would celebrate the righteousness of American colonial power, particularly in its purpose relative to the Philippines. The Philippine Exposition Board supported the manner it portrayed the Filipinos and their culture as both fair and objective. As mentioned in Jose D. Fermin's book "1904 World's Fair: The Filipino Experience," a diverse society ranging at the time from highly developed and cosmopolitan cities, to farming communities and tribal regions was distilled into a caricature of backwardness. The fair profoundly impacted the negative image of the Philippines in the United States. Uneducated Filipino tribal people were presented as representatives of the Filipino people in general, while exhibits framed the Filipinos as both savages and headhunters. Fermin's book casts light on the 1904 World's Fair's complicity in advancing an inaccurate and condescending view of Filipino culture. Thanks to stereotypes promoted by the fair's exhibits, Filipinos were depicted as primordial, ignorant, and underdeveloped. This notion would filter the American perception of the Philippines throughout the twentieth century.

FROM NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS TO NATIONAL IDENTITY

It can be argued that the construction of national identity is derived, in part, from the negotiation of a nation's perception of itself, as well as foreign perceptions of the nation. National consciousness and national pride are central to an excepted nationhood, whether defined by national boundaries or a shared history. The perceived international perception of a "nation" from beyond its physical or psychological borders further conditions this phenomenon. Contemporary nations define their relationship with "country" relative to various shifting parameters. Historical nations such as Quebec and Palestine exist with blurred borders and identities, representing transitional notions of territory, sovereignty, and independence. Allegiance to nation-

hood may be further defined by ethnic and/or religious commonalities, as well as shared institutions, language, laws, and customs.

SHIFTING NATIONS-SHIFTING NOTIONS

The notion of what constitutes a "nation" has undergone a fundamental redefinition in the last century. The modern idea of nation is based on the Westphalian system of the mid-17th century.⁴ Under this political and legal framework, sovereign nations were established upon the mutual respect of physical territorial definitions. This national concept was further solidified through an ongoing development of relatively homogeneous populations with common cultures, histories, and languages. The Revolutions of 1848 were a major catalyst for the eventual unifications of various European people under the aegis of "nations" including Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. The demise of the supra-national empires of Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans, as well as the German Revolution at the close of World War I presented new opportunities for the establishment of modern nation-states based on powerful ideas of nationalism and territory. Additional matériel for the strengthening of the Westphalian concept of the nation-state was provided from the breakup of colonial European empires resulting from the extensive independence struggles in Asia and Africa following World War II.

After a relative high-point in the mid-20th century, territorially-based definitions of the nation state are being eroded due to unprecedented shifts in economic, political, geographic, social, and technological conditions in an increasingly globalized landscape. Critics such as Gurutz Jáuregui Berceiartu have proposed that the nation-state is in fundamental crisis. In his book *Decline of the Nation State*, originally published in 1986, he describes how the traditional nation-state is facing a new global reality, and is in danger of becoming irrelevant through its inability to respond to these changes. Social and territorial definitions that provided the basic foundations for homogeneous nation states are slowly being replaced. This replacement is on the one hand macro-scale multicultural and trans-national, and on the other hand a fast rising micro-scale cultural and ethnic awakening that had long been suppressed in favor of broader nationalist commonalities. In recent years, a new macro-scale political order based on supra-national

blocs and the increased power of international corporations and organizations has established itself. At the same time, micro-scale Balkanization processes stemming from rising ethnic and culturally-based nationalisms have fractured the integrity of nation-states. Combined, they are eroding historical definitions and providing viable alternatives to the traditional territorial nation-state.

FUTURE NATIONS

Such fundamental changes in the global order have raised many questions and uncertainties about the future of nations. Political theorist Hannah Arendt discusses in her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) how she believes that human rights are protected by a strong nation-state. In the chapter "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man" she describes her view that through citizenship and belonging to the balanced nation-state, human rights can be preserved. She writes

"Modern power conditions which make national sovereignty a mockery except for giant states, the rise of imperialism and the pan movements undermined the stability of Europe's nation-state system from the outside. None of these factors, however, had sprung directly from the tradition and the institution of nation-states themselves."⁵

Thus, the rise of totalitarian super-states in the inter-war period, and the subsequent decline in human rights, was at the cost of the devolution of the traditional European nation-state. For Arendt, refugees and the stateless are particularly subjected to the loss of human rights, because they do not have the aegis of belonging to a moderate nation-state. There is value in the protection of the idea of the traditional nation-state, as both a hedge against the loss of human rights and the rise of Totalitarianism.

In contrast to this view, beginning in the 1980's, writers such as Bereciartu in his book *Decline of the Nation State* described the older notion of the nation-state as a potential barrier to a healthy modern society. For Bereciartu, the nation-state is an idea of the past, that is unable to respond and adapt to the contemporary realities of globalization. He describes a Europe, that while pursuing further political integration under the auspices of the European Union, is simultaneously seeing a rise in local nationalist movements and an increasingly conducive climate

for the establishment of Balkanized micro-states. At the same time his critique includes a discussion of how the supra-national entities that are replacing the nation-state must acknowledge the diverse cultural and social traditions that exist in Europe at their own peril. Theorists such as German sociologist Ulrich Beck have identified new opportunity in the decline of the traditional nation-state. Beck offers a view that true cosmopolitanism and tolerance can be established when national definitions of the state are completely left behind. Beck discusses how the large-scale political apparatus of a supra-national Europe would be better equipped to handle new global trans-national problems such as terrorism and global warming. For Beck, the individual nation-state is unable to find traction for its relatively limited power in the new global landscape, and should be replaced by a "cosmopolitan" multi-state system in order to maintain a level of competitiveness.

CONTEMPORARY COMPLEXITIES

The theoretical basis of our academic inquiry was based upon these changing definitions of "nation." We identified the wide complexities that arrive through a discussion of the idea of nation, and attempted to use critical design research inquiry as a tool to arrive at a clarified definition of "nation"-a notion of nation that was not necessarily geographically, territorially, ethnically, or historically founded. The design studio was a means of exploring new ideas of what constitutes a nation, beyond these traditional definitions.

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Our exploration included specific "nations" that were intended to raise essential questions in understanding what constitutes "the notion of nation," and how flexible ideas of identity can be utilized to encourage thoughtful inquiry into this issue. The nations which were explored illuminated the multitude of

challenges that arise when adherence to traditional "nation" is strict. In the case of the nations of Palestine and Rhodesia, social groups that are devoid of territorial commonality yet identify as nations raised about what identity remains without geography, with Rhodesia in particular finding a new "territory" in cyberspace. The post-colonial nations of Pakistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo described nations that have ancient roots yet have come into existence very recently, with ongoing efforts in the development of a constructed commonality.

Identity can maintain a precarious tension between traditional and modern layers. The hypothetical condition of a historical nation no longer formally in existence, through both Rhodesia and the ethnically and geographically diverse Ottoman Empire, provided the basis for a critical inquiry into memory as well as the translation of an identity of a historical "nation" to contemporary realization. Slovenia presented an opportunity to understand the situation of a "Balkanized" nation that has very recently achieved independence from the multi-ethnic historical context of Yugoslavia, and has become a full member of the trans-national European Union. Along with Slovenia, Quebec provided a rich opportunity to examine how identity and nation can continue to exist and thrive as a layer within a larger political framework. Finally, Argentina provided insight into a nation that was based on immigration and the importation of external and preexisting identities, subsequently absorbed and amalgamated into a rich identity and unique notion of nation.

INTERCULTURAL PEDAGOGIES

Studio and seminar pedagogy included extensive research into the foundational theories, awareness of the contemporary discussions of the role of the nation-state, as well as exposure to the wealth of materials available about the eight specific "nations." Students were encouraged to develop an understanding of the unique particularities of the various nations through the perspective of identity, and how their uniqueness could contribute to a larger intellectual inquiry to establish a fundamental "notion of nation." Full immersion into the history, culture, geography (if applicable), visual arts, architecture, and urbanism of the nation was intended to provide a solid and informed base for speculative spatial design.

This endeavor was pursued through a concurrent seminar and studio, an arrangement which allowed for in-depth research as well as design. The participants were interdisciplinary, and included both architecture and interior architecture students. Interdisciplinary collaboration was utilized, with the intention to provide multiple critical perspectives as well as a more holistic approach to spatial analysis and design. Research included an in-depth analysis of World's Fair and Expo precedents, from identity issues to urban strategies, as well as detailed site research and comparative analysis of possible locations for the hypothetical staging of an EXPO event in 2012. Students engaged in holistic design from the urban to interior scales, and their responsibilities culminated in the design of a speculative national pavilion for their specific nation, informed by their research and understanding. Studio output reflected a critical reassessment of the notion of nation and its fundamental ambiguity in an increasingly interconnected world. Projects variously established a critical dialogue ranging from transitional buildings that challenged reigning national paradigms and aesthetics, to temporal experiences reflecting a high level of adaptability. All proposals challenged the conventional notion of nation, while assuming a role that channeled national identities independent from architectural authorship.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mattie, Erik. *World's Fairs*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998.
- 2 Fermin, Jose. *1904 World's Fair: The Filipino Experience*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005.
- 3 Ibid, Fermin.
- 4 Jackson, Anna. *Expo: International Expositions 1851-2010*. London: V&A Publishing, 2008.
- 5 Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Chapter 5: "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York, 1994.

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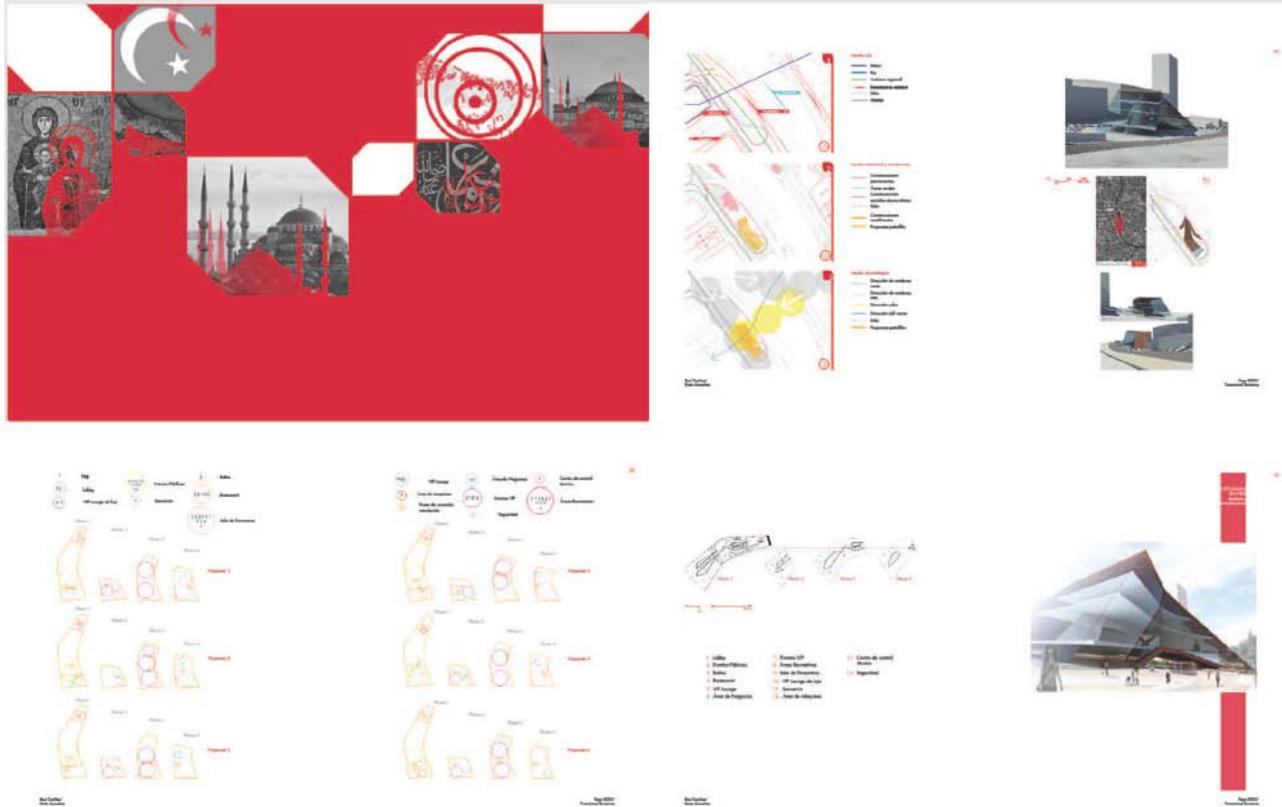
EXPO 2020: Transitional Territories

Research-Design Studio III, Fall 2010

University of Monterrey

"The Ottoman Empire"

Students: Raul Casillas (Architecture), Karla Gonzalez (Int. Architecture)

Figure 1. *The Ottoman Empire*, Research-Design Studio Fall 2010

Beck, Ulrich. "Nation-state politics can only fail the problems of the modern world." *The Guardian*, 14 Jan 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jan/15/politics.eu>

Bereciartu, Gurutz Jáuregui. *Decline of the Nation State*. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1994.

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Jackson, Anna. *Expo: International Expositions 1851-2010*. London: V&A Publishing, 2008.

Lynn, Greg and Zaha Hadid and Odile Decq and Hani Rashid. *Expo On-line: Less Aesthetics, More Ethics*. Venice: Actar, 2001.

Mattie, Erik. *World's Fairs*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998.

EXPO 2020: Transitional Territories
Research-Design Studio III, Fall 2010

University of Monterrey
 "Rhodesia"

Students: Paulina Audelo (Int. Architecture), Miguel de la Garza (Architecture)

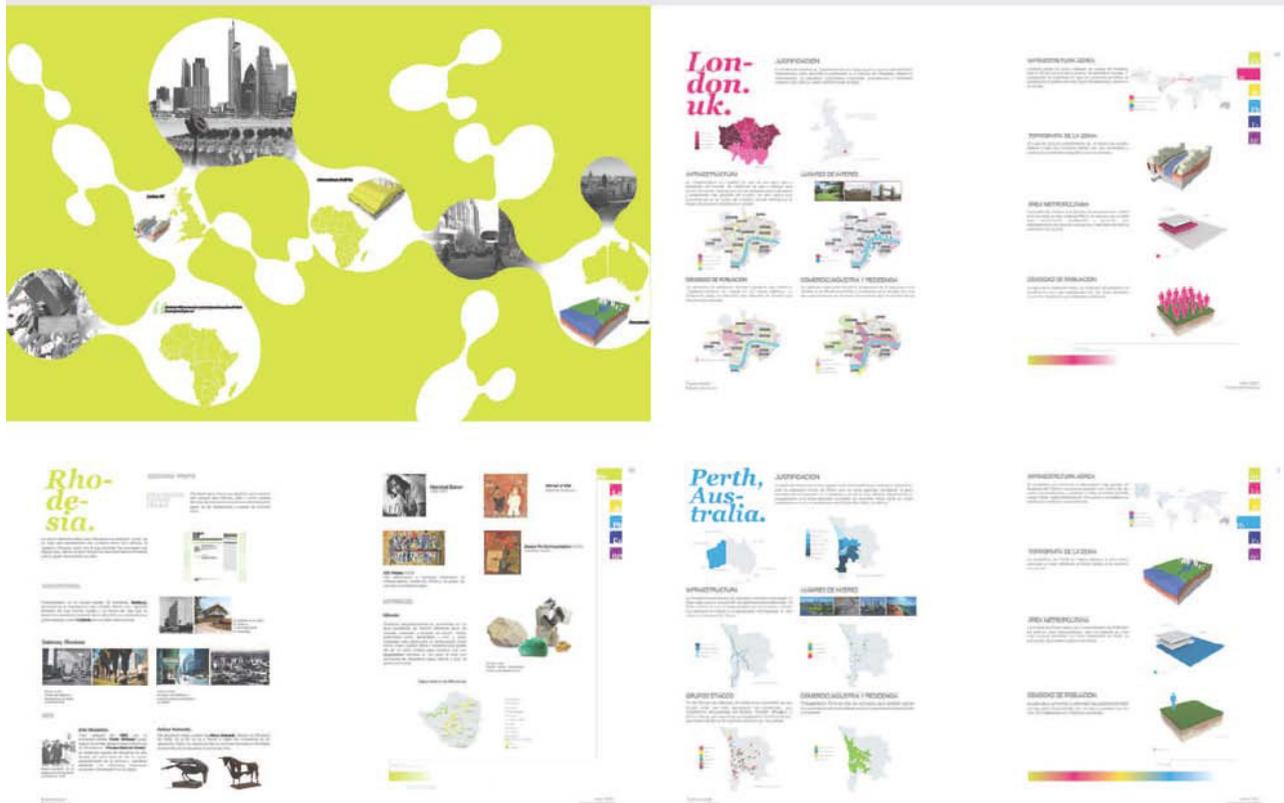


Figure 2. *Rhodesia*, Research-Design Studio Fall 2010

EXPO 2020: Transitional Territories
Research-Design Studio III, Fall 2010

University of Monterrey
"Rhodesia"
Students: Paulina Audelo (Int. Architecture), Miguel de la Garza (Architecture)

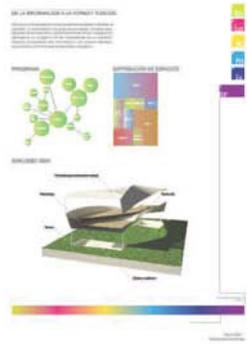


Figure 3. Rhodesia, Research-Design Studio Fall 2010