Concept

This studio invites students interested in approaching their thesis through the recursive relationship of the diagram and the detail. Our studio environment will thrive on iteration, reflection, and collaboration. Even the strongest of concepts will suffocate in a vacuum. Our studio will be rooted in the diagram – its greatest asset being that abstraction allows for multiple readings. Recurring dialog with your classmates, advisors, etc. will challenge you to explore any and all potentials uncovered by your abstract interpretations.

The diagram’s fundamental purposeful is clarity. Through iterative analysis and interpretation, we will seek to distill essence. In the words of David Dunster, “The diagram is, therefore, a maieutic [denoting the Socratic mode of inquiry] and hermeneutic device [concerning interpretation] – a form of intellectual midwifery that brings complex ideas into clear consciousness, through interpretation.”

One of the seminal moments for the diagram was the concept of phenomenal transparency. Defined by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky in the essay, “Transparency”, (phenomenal) transparency is utilized as a tool for study; it makes understanding and evaluation possible. Simultaneously it also enables the logical ordering of form during the design process, as well as its graphic representation.

The diagram has the ability to exist both singularly and in a suite – it is in the oscillation between these poles where reflection becomes essential. Iteration is nothing but quantity without its reciprocal of reflection to curate the relevant qualities that have been extracted. It is this relationship that will serve to ground our explorations as we move (recursively) through the analytical, interpretive, and design processes. The process alluded to above must be rigorous – allowing you to truly ground and clarify a concept. Concept, when allied with site and programmatic responses, create the parti, or essence, of a design project.

... we are often better served by connecting ideas than we are protecting them … when one looks at innovation in nature and in culture, environments that build walls around good ideas tend to be less innovative in the long run than more open-ended environments. Good ideas may not want to be free, but they do want to connect, fuse, recombine. They want to reinvent themselves by crossing conceptual borders. They want to complete each other as much as they want to compete.

- Steven Johnson, Where Good Ideas Come From
The vast diversity and unlimited combinational and connective potential of the ground suggests an expansive account of the site. Perhaps rather than limiting the site to its artificial political and economic boundaries, the site ought to be considered more as a special repository of clues — and opening to more extensive and varied grounds. Here are indications of complex ecological systems too immense to be contained in so small a place. Here is provocative evidence of human purpose, often in conflict and filled with new potential. Also, here are the diverse fragments of individual stories still waiting completion.

- Robin Dripps, “Groundwork”

Searching for site is one of the primitive acts of architecture. Be it a canvas for painting or the extents of a city, the first mark on the landscape is a powerful undertaking. Site can be explored through its physical properties, operations, and sensual impressions — as well as the myriad of interests that intersect the design field in contemporary culture. From sustainability to phenomenology, regionalism to smart growth, etc. — collaborations and critiques regarding site response(s) have challenged architecture’s role as totem for culture.

Our studio will take the position that a site’s character is revealed through design. Paraphrasing Elizabeth Meyer in her essay, “Site Citations,” we are simultaneously readers and editors. Editing — through amplification, subtraction, distillation, or compression — brings a site’s latent qualities and phenomena into clearer focus. In addition to manipulating sites, sites can be transposed. Abstracting the essential characteristics of a site, those interpretations can be transported to other sites.

As you cultivate your own site responses, you will be asked to analyze and synthesize a variety of written and built works - created by our studio’s Heroes of Site. Clark, Corner, Dripps, Siza, Thoreau, Waldman, and Zumthor are just a few of the names we will discuss.

Here is the palpable, haptic place, smelling, sounding, catching the eye; then there is the sense of an invented or special place, this invention resulting from the creation of richer and fuller experiences than would be possible, at least in such completeness or intensity, if they were not designed. Like cyberspace, a designed landscape is always at bottom a fiction, a contrivance - yet its hold on our imagination will derive, paradoxically, from the actual materiality of its invented sceneries.

- John Dixon Hunt
What if the terms of investigation – form and function – were reversed? What if the relation between the terms was fraught with self-conscious ambiguity, forcing the perpetual inquiry to habits, habitats, and associations of each? In other words, what happens if “form follows function” is replaced by “function fucks with form?” Here function is not reducible to form, and form is not the inevitable conclusion of programmatic dictates. Instead, a self-critical, imaginative, recombinative conception of function opens up a new territory for formal and spatial exploration.

- Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis, “snafu”

One of the greatest tools that the graduating architecture student has in their arsenal is the ability to question the given – this is by no means exclusive to architecture but this recursive way of working through a problem does prove to be a unique way to arrive at a solution. Program, or use, has had a tension-filled relationship with design for quite some time, alluded to by the quote above by Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis, and therefore program is not a topic to be taken at face value. Some typologies have strict requirements (i.e. hospitals) others are more fluid (i.e. offices) - but if architecture is seen as a social art, then architecture acts as both a character and as a stage for events.

The explicit purpose of Bernard Tschumi’s *The Manhattan Transcripts* was to transcribe things normally removed from conventional architectural representation, namely the complex relationship between spaces and their use. Architecture should encourage and provoke the greatest possible number of meetings, and encounters between people. Thus providing a stage upon which the drama of social life may be enacted, with the actors taking their turns as spectators, and the spectators as actors.

As you cultivate your own programmatic responses, you will be asked to analyze and synthesize a variety of written and built works - created by our studio’s *Heroes of Program*. Darden, Eisenman, Koolhaas, Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis, Tschumi, and Venturi are just a few of the names we will discuss.

*Spaces are qualified by actions just as actions are qualified by spaces. One does not trigger the other; they exist independently. Only when they intersect do they affect one another ... the event is altered by each new space. And vice versa: by ascribing to a given, supposedly “autonomous” space a contradictory program, the space attains new levels of meaning. Event and space do not merge but affect one another.*

- Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*
Dialectics: Research Seminar

Our research seminar (ARCH 492) is intended to be an exploration of design culture and aid you in developing your thesis topic in the fall quarter. The development of a thesis topic can often be an accumulation of encounters acquired from past studios and seminar courses. A series of assignments will help you identify a general topic by reading, collecting materials, and writing. Each successive assignment is meant to allow you to ruminate and collect materials and thoughts that will in some way influence your final year of study. The course will stress the importance of a dialectic, an understanding of both supporting and counter arguments – and their synthesis as a reconciliation and/or transformation. Through readings, studies, and the making of drawings the course will investigate a series of dialectics on the following topics: Rhetoric, Narrative, Site, Program, Complexity, Technology, Proportion, and Material.

Collisions [lead to creativity] - the collisions that happen when different fields of expertise converge in some shared physical or intellectual space. That’s where true sparks fly. The modernism of the 1920’s produced so much cultural innovation in such a short period of time because the writers, poets, artists, and architects were all rubbing elbows at the same cafes ... That physical proximity made the space rich for exaption [borrowing]: the literary stream of consciousness influencing the dizzying new perspectives of cubism; the futurist embrace of technological speed in poetry shaping new patterns of urban planning.

- Steven Johnson, Where Good Ideas Come From

Caravaggio: The Incredulity of Saint Thomas
Michelangelo: Unfinished Prisoner

Carlo Scarpa: Brion Cemetery
Sverre Fehn: Nordic Pavilion
A design thesis in architecture is a thoughtful and spirited question about an issue that has its origin in inquisitiveness and aspiration. It is a question that will be visualized through various forms of making - nothing is out-of-bounds when it comes to exploring a thesis question. During the Fall quarter you will be asked to thoroughly nurture and investigate relevant context(s) around your question - in order to refine and articulate that question. In addition to the analysis and design processes you have explored in your education thus far, you will be encouraged to grow and foster relationships outside of your immediate department and discipline. The Vellum Competition will serve as your first esquisse - a sketch problem that will be a test of your initial question(s). With the body serving as a constraint for Vellum, your second esquisse - the Abstracts Exhibition - will derive its constraints from a more integrated investigation of your thesis. A trip to San Francisco, star gazing at Santa Maria Lake, kite flying in Morro Bay, and multiple group meals will also be part of this quarter.

*Process is more important than outcome. When the outcome drives the process we will only ever go to where we've already been. If process drives outcome we may not know where we're going, but we will know we want to be there.*

- Bruce Mau, “An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth”
Winter Quarter

The Winter Quarter will allow for your project to gain a greater depth within the breadth of your Fall Quarter discoveries. Explicit knowledge of design methodologies and inventions, coupled with inspired forms of architectural representation, will emerge - further revealing how a thesis question begins to materialize into an architectural design. Studio events and exhibitions of your work will allow for a critical review of your method(s), helping to embolden and/or modify aspects of your project. During Finals Week (or Spring Break) we will take a trip to New York City to explore the design and cultural influences the city has to offer.

*Architecture never derived its force from stability of culture, but rather from the expression of those moments when that sense of stability slipped.*

- Mark Wigley

[Student Work] Charlotte Whitlock: Inhabting Ground(s)

[Student Work] Brandt Hewitt: SpacePort America
Spring Quarter

The Spring Quarter culminates with an (not the) answer to your thesis question – in the form of a rigorous and thoughtful design project. Throughout your research and making during your Fall and Winter Quarters you will have been exposed to, and created, a variety of representational artifacts. This final quarter will focus on the refinement and a more nuanced articulation of your design project. Contemplation will be a constant theme throughout the year - in the design process it is imperative that you continue to reflect on where you have been, not just where you are going. You will be asked to continually reevaluate your narrative throughout the year - and this quarter will be no different. Our studio’s Final Thesis Show and Chumash will serve as venues for displaying your final constructs - celebrating a full year of exploring, thinking, and making.

What I try to do is the art of building, and the art of building is the art of construction; it is not only about forms and shapes and images. I work a little bit like a sculptor. When I start, my first idea for a building is with the material. I believe architecture is about that. It’s not about paper, it’s not about forms. It’s about space and material.

- Peter Zumthor, Thinking Architecture

[Student Work] Mark Moehring: Miami Museum of Modern Art
Biography [abridged]

Bryan Shields holds a Master of Architecture and a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Virginia. He is a Registered Architect in the state of North Carolina, where he has practiced since 2004. Bryan has taught Design Studios in Second, Third, and Thesis Years at the UNC Charlotte School of Architecture. In his practice, research, and teaching, Bryan strives to be an agent of change, prioritizing the human scale and human experience. This method involves investigating and interpreting cultural, spatial and environmental characteristics of a site in order to create a rich interface between the occupant and the existing context. His practice, flux DESIGN, explores both functional and didactic architectural responses to questions that arise from those investigations. Bryan has published both domestically and internationally on matters of abstraction and the diagram.

*I cannot convince myself that settlement, even the most thoughtful, the most beautiful, is better than wilderness. Even the mill is not better than no mill; but the mill is necessary for our existence, and therefore worthwhile. It is an image that keeps returning, proof that use of the Earth need not be destructive, and that architecture can be the ameliorative act which, in thoughtfulness and carefulness, we counter the destructive effects of construction. Nothing else is architecture, all the rest is merely building.*

- W.G. Clark, “Replacement”
Bibliography [selected]

» Corner, James, and Alex MacLean. Taking Measures: Across the American Landscape. New Haven, [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 1996.