TACTICS

IMPROVISATION IN ARCHITECTURE
This studio invites students interested in developing a tactical relationship between problem and solution. We will begin by probing a perceived boundary within the discipline of architecture, looking for opportunities to slip through and connect previously unrelated entities. If strategies of architecture seek to institute, fix, and broadcast convention, then tactics seek to dissect how conventions become conventional. The tactical maneuvering within the conventions of contemporary discourse requires a recognition of complex values, imperatives, codes, and constraints. Through this lens, generic programs provide a fertile ground for examination of recognizable architectural conditions. A critical architecture challenges the familiar, seeking out what has been forgotten in the making of the conventions and norms of the standard, everyday architecture.

Our studio environment will thrive on iteration, reflection, and collaboration. Even the strongest of concepts will suffocate in a vacuum. Our studio will be explore a design process through mixed media — allowing for multiple readings while probing for abstract relationships. Recurring dialog with your classmates, advisors, etc. will challenge you to explore any and all potentials uncovered by your abstract interpretations.

Strategies demand locations of power, require competition, define legitimate modes of research, and establish the boundaries of acceptable practice ... Tactics, on the other hand, lack a specific location, survive through improvisation, and use the advantages of the weak against the strong. In particular, tactics are the modes of creative opportunity that operate within the gaps and slips of conventional thought and the patterns of everyday life.

- Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis, “Situation Normal ...”
QUESTIONs, NOT ANSWERS

Architectural conventions often insure that tenuous social constructions remain unexamined. Our research seminar is intended to be an exploration of design culture and to 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. **Privileging process over product**, you will investigate a topic via a series of low-stakes writing assignments, compiled in a journalistic format. 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 design studio. This assignment structure will create a running document filled with marginalia, paired with specific thresholds intended to curate and refine your evolving argument.

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 allowing you to refine a site selection and proposed occupation of that site.

*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 exaptation [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

[left] Bernard Tschumi: Manhattan Transcripts [right] Aldo Rossi Teatro del Mondo
SITE: A REPOSITORY OF CLUES

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.

The vast diversity and unlimited combinational and connective potential of the ground suggests an expansive account of the site ... 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”
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, 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 provides 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*
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.

To help constrain your research methods, during the Fall quarter you will be asked to thoroughly investigate a site, and all of its relevant context(s), 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 Abstracts Exhibition will serve as your first esquisse - a sketch problem that will represent your initial question(s). The exhibition affords each student the flexibility to create an artifact(s) that best represent their particular thesis concept. Developing a design tactic, you will be asked to challenge the familiar, seeking out what has been forgotten in the making of the conventions and norms of the generic and everyday.

With the body serving as a constraint for the Vellum Furniture Competition, you will test your working methodology at a 1:1 scale. You will research an established convention at the scale of the body, and develop an artifact that serves as a tactic to challenge that convention.

A domestic trip to (perhaps to Chicago, for the Architecture Biennial), will allow us to explore design and cultural influences outside of the classroom. Additionally, star gazing at Terrace Hill, kite flying in Morro Bay, and other regional outings will 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”
The Winter Quarter will allow for your project to gain a greater depth within the breadth of your Fall Quarter discoveries. Iteration and Speculation will be the themes of the Quarter, challenging you to marry the maker energy of your foundation years, with the rhetoric you have developed through your thesis research.

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. Models will be our primary method of communication, as we move from analytical maquettes to more nuanced understandings of space. This iterative practice will culminate in an exhibition of our studio’s models - celebrating the process as a product.

Studio events/exhibitions of your work, a class-wide Section Show, and a Qualifying Review will allow for a critical dissection of your method(s), helping to embolden and/or modify aspects of your project. The Winter Quarter asks you to sharpen your argument through a rigorous design proposal - we will complement this individual focus with a series of group meals and peer-to-peer discussions. The power of, “picking your head up,” is underestimated during this phase of your design process.

If we elect to do so, our domestic trip could be shifted from the Fall to Winter Quarter to (perhaps to the Pacific Northwest during Finals Week), allowing us to explore design and cultural influences of the region. Additionally, star gazing at Terrace Hill will be part of this quarter.

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
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. The Spring Quarter will have a large portion of studio dedicated to making, affording you the time to create artifacts worthy of your inspired thesis question. Throughout your career, a healthy studio culture has been forged by mutual respect for your own work and the work of your studio-mates. As a way to amplify that camaraderie during your final quarter, we will come together weekly, in small groups, to share our current thoughts and strategies.

Our studio’s final exhibit and the 5th Year Showcase will serve as contrasting environments for displaying your final constructs - celebrating a full year of exploring, thinking, and making. Our final exhibit will be consist of a final review of your work and an open house to share your research and design thinking with the entire department. For links to previous year’s exhibition photos, please refer to the Biography on the following page.

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

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 and has taught design studios in Third and Thesis Years at Cal Poly since 2015. Prior to arriving at Cal Poly, he taught design studios 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 photography, representation, 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”

Previous Studio Show/Exhibition Photos
2017: thes-ish
2018: CMYK
2019: Now Playing
BIBLIOGRAPHY [SELECTED READINGS]

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