

towards a new common sense: making architecture make a difference

jackson studio
2025–2026

For questions about thesis in general, or my approach to studio in particular, you can watch a video that I made, [here](#).

Also, I made a shorter, supplemental video, which you can find [here](#).

I made the first video a number of years ago, when I was younger, and had slightly more hair. I think I still more or less agree with most of the things I say in the video, but I would recommend watching the second, more recent, video as well.

Even so, you can always email me to set up a meeting if you have more questions about thesis, or my studio. My contact info is on the last page of this prospectus.

This thesis design studio is a think-tank and design laboratory dedicated to a broad-based critical inquiry into contemporary possibilities for architecture to demonstrate new performances, new experiences, and new understandings of the world—in order to make the world more representative of and meaningful to more individuals.

Rather than adopting a narrow focus, this studio welcomes a diverse range of possible thesis investigations. This diversity of interests will stimulate a lively discourse within our studio that will help you to clarify and refine your ideas, and will also enable you to better articulate them and advocate for their value.

Just as this studio supports a diversity of interests, it also encourages a diversity in approaches— from extremely speculative and experimental to those that are realizable with present or near-term materials and techniques. It welcomes thesis arguments and projects that range from those that are unquestionably architectural, to those that question or expand our thinking about what architecture might be, or might include—such as discoveries and modes of thinking from other fields. These various concerns can push the boundaries of architectural thinking about form, space, material, organization, technology, performance, subjectivity, identity, culture, representation, and more—in ways that open up new understandings of and new possibilities for architecture. And the various thesis arguments in the studio will be manifested in an incredible variety of compelling thesis design projects that could include buildings, furniture, cities, processes, graphics, games, and virtual realities. These might be demonstrated and represented across a variety of media and formats that include renderings, drawings, diagrams, animations, physical models, full-scale prototypes, fictional or sci-fi narratives, films, and graphic novels—or through some other creative means.

What will unite this diversity is a collective passion about your work, and a commitment to making the most out of the incredible opportunity that the thesis provides.

You will also have a dedicated thesis professor who has over 20 years of experience teaching thesis studios, and who will act as a supportive mentor and guide throughout every stage of your thesis—from framing your area of investigation, to crafting your thesis argument, to developing architectural strategies, and to the design and representation of your final thesis project. I am always excited by every project in the studio, and am committed to helping you become the strongest possible advocate for your ideas.

Students who have taken this studio have leveraged their thesis experiences toward impactful futures in both professional offices and in academia. Past students of the Jackson Studio include Principals, Associate Principals, and Design Studio Directors—at firms that range from their own independent practices to major offices such as SOM, RIOS, LEVER, and Gensler. Others have made major contributions as designers at innovative firms such as Morphosis, Eric Owen Moss Architects, Reiser + Umemoto, PATTERNS, Neil M. Denari Architects, SHoP, LTL, and Sou Fujimoto Architects. In addition, many have also gone on to pursue graduate education at universities that include Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, MIT, the Bartlett, the AA, and Cambridge—and some of those are now pursuing PhDs, or have begun teaching careers, both in the US and Europe. Finally, some have used their thesis experiences to initiate careers in other design fields, including urban design, real estate development, and user-interface/user-experience design (UI/UX).

Whatever your future holds, just as with the students listed above, I will remain a life-long resource, advisor, and champion—always available to help with advice, or even to just grab a beer.

In the meantime, I am committed to helping you through a year defined by rigorous research, thought-provoking discourse, radical experimentation, and compelling design work—culminating in a thesis that can serve as the beginning of a long and fruitful career of culturally significant and meaningful work, and through which you will serve as a powerful and persuasive advocate for design that *makes a difference*.

Reyner Banham wrote this essay on his deathbed—in ballpoint pen on a yellow legal pad, while being hooked up to life support—and it was only published posthumously. Not surprisingly, it has taken on almost a mythical status in architectural discourse.

Introduction: Why Architecture Begs to Differ

Because architecture, in its most basic sense, is a kind of world-making, our discipline is fundamentally entangled in the politics of space, culture, power, and ways of life that define our world—to an extent that escapes the common, but problematically narrow, equation of it with the mere design of buildings. This implicates architecture in the problems and injustices of the world in a manner that is not sufficiently recognized. Specifically, architects give form to the social and cultural institutions that support many of us, but disenfranchise others. As a profession beholden to these dominant institutions for many of its opportunities to make space in the first place, architecture must acknowledge its own compromised position.

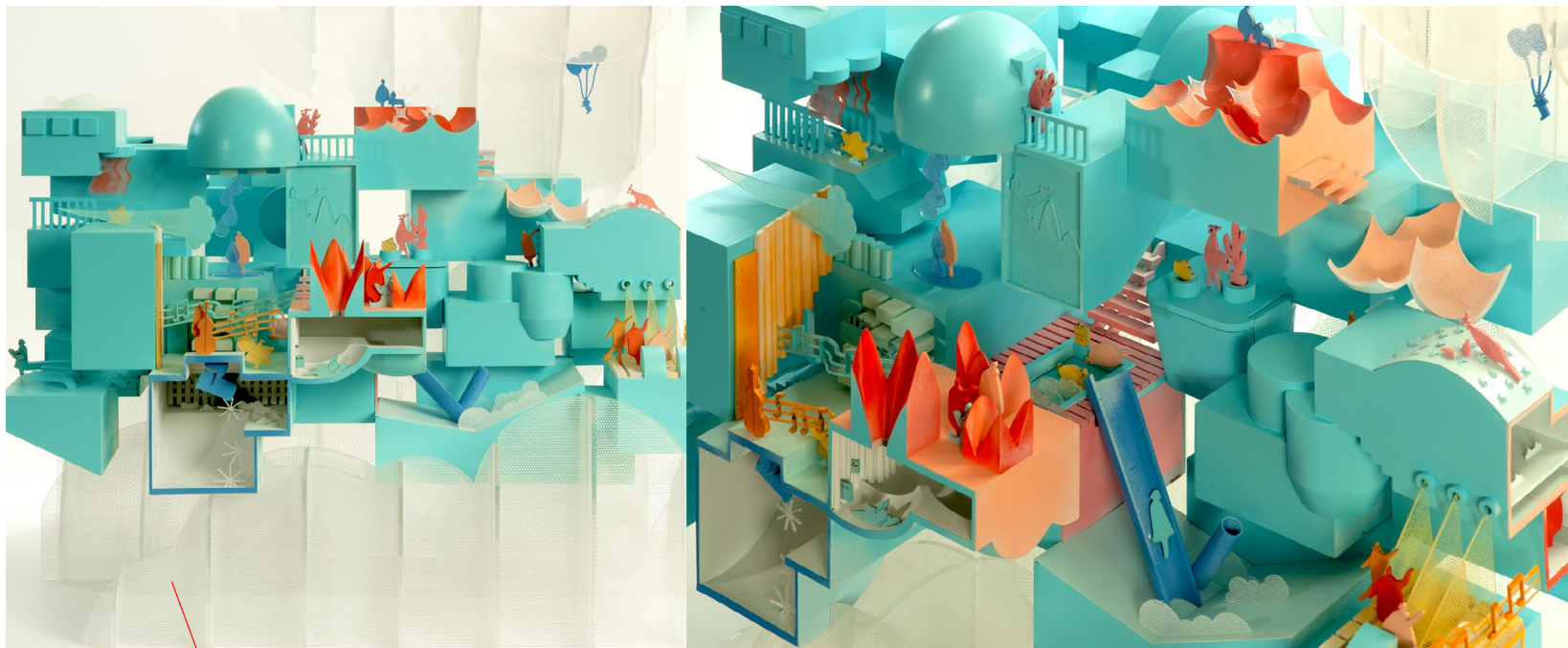
Nevertheless, architecture's multi-dimensional entanglement in these social and political structures and systems also means that it has a unique capacity to engage them, and to effect positive change. As a fundamentally speculative and aspirational discipline, architecture always maintains the *potential* to rise to the occasion by envisioning and designing unprecedented spaces and experiences that expand and diversify the world.

To preserve its capacity to respond to new conditions, architecture must maintain a degree of openness and flexibility that is not characteristic of other disciplines—one which enables it to continually redefine its nature. Rather than a discipline founded on enduring truths, or the slow accumulation of irrefutable knowledge, every idea on which architecture is based is perpetually up for debate. This debate—the *discourse* of architecture—can be seen as a record of the architectural discipline's ongoing struggle to remain meaningful and impactful within continually changing social and cultural contexts.

As a result, one might say that the architectural discipline is a decidedly *undisciplined* one—wherein ideas are continually questioned, discarded or upheld, recycled, or adapted to address the needs, opportunities, and emergent realities of fluid and unpredictable times. Architecture, in the post-classical period anyway, is built for change. It depends on it, and it can also be instrumental to enacting it. Although concealed behind a seemingly assured and confident rhetoric, architecture's true nature is fluid, and also inscrutable. The famous architectural historian and critic Reyner Banham famously likened this aspect of architecture to a “black box”—an entity whose inner workings are fundamentally mysterious. However, this uncertainty lends architecture a corresponding flexibility—one that allows it to engage the manifold and evolving aspects of reality, and to take on new forms and afford new experiences that address the problems and opportunities of the present moment in the hopes of affording a better future.

¹ Reyner Banham, “A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture,” in Mary Banham ed., *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 299. The essay originally appeared in *New Statesman and Society*, October 12, 1990, pages 22-25.

right: House Party, by Celia Chaussabel, argues that idiosyncratic self-expression within virtual spaces assumes a quasi-public character—a condition that, in its propensity to catalyze unplanned encounters with the ideologies and desires of others, better fulfills the aspirations for urban public space than the actual spaces of contemporary cities. She notes that this idea was first disclosed in the 1970s by the historian and critic Robin Evans in his essay *Figures, Doors and Passages*—in which he suggests that a return to what he described as a programmatically heterogeneous “matrix of rooms” might be more socially productive. Celia suggests that this idea influenced the programmatic experiments of Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi, but that their works never succeeded due to their failure to account for how individual subjectivities affect the perception of, and willingness to engage, architectural affordances. In response, Celia demonstrates a new, fictional form of urbanity comprised of idiosyncratic domestic “rooms” interlaced with public circulation spaces that can be spontaneously appropriated for unplanned encounters and events. The architecture is designed to trigger these unplanned public occurrences through the careful perforation of boundary conditions that allow for the leaking of interior effects (lights, sounds, smells, etc.) in proximity to suggestive forms that afford activities that benefit from the appropriation of these effects.



Celia just graduated from MIT. Her master's thesis applied her undergraduate thesis' focus on subjective experiences and personal narratives to argue for and develop new narratives of material re-use, in order to cultivate a cultural concern for material lifecycles.

Violeta is now a Design Researcher at MASS Design Group, where she extends the work she began in her thesis through her research work for their Restorative Justice Design Lab.



left: Landscapes of Resistance, by Violeta Smart. Violeta's thesis argues that conditions of precarity are formalized by architectural and urban spaces that prioritize the norms of dominant cultural groups at the expense of others. While domestic space provides a potential refuge wherein one can act in accordance with one's identity, such freedoms are compromised by the substandard (or absent) domestic conditions of many marginalized individuals, and are not available at all within the public realm. As such, and as articulated by philosopher Judith Butler, these individuals are denied their fundamental "right to appear" as co-equal members of the public. In response, Violeta's thesis project envisions a mixed-use structure, containing housing and community service programs, that demonstrates a new, quasi-domestic form of public space. Within this hybrid space, forms and surfaces afford a plurality of actions and performances that stray from cultural norms in order to validate the identities and desires of those individuals who are currently marginalized. These non-normative performances are enabled by the entanglement of spaces for domestic and public activity, and by the artful deconstruction and confounding of the boundary conditions that would otherwise clearly separate them.

The importance of this flexibility is evident in the way that architects are educated. In fact, one could say that it is in architecture school where this constitutional fluidity is most apparent. Architectural education is unique in its *discursivity*. It is founded on conversation—both in the everyday back and forth of a desk crit, as well as in the more formal presentation and defense of a design project during a review. This discourse foregrounds the voices of the participants, both faculty and students, and suggests that the exchange of ideas is crucial to developing the skills necessary to advocate for and give form to new ones.

The undisciplined nature of the architectural discipline means that, hopefully, its students are not really disciples. Instead, it is more productive if emerging architects are educated to become eventual leaders and agents of change. The inclusion of a *thesis* as the concluding experience in an architectural curriculum is one of the many ways that academic institutions demonstrate a commitment to cultivating such an ability.

In developing your thesis, you are asked to pursue novel ideas for architecture—ones that are non-obvious, and are thus subject to debate. You must then defend your thesis against reasonable objection by developing a persuasive argument that is situated in a lineage of prior discourse, which you can extend or re-direct as appropriate, and also by developing a thesis design project, which is expected to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of your thesis argument, as well as its architectural implications. As a result of this experience, wherein you are asked to redefine the possibilities for architecture, and to defend the value of such a redefinition, you will learn to appreciate, and work with, architecture's inherent discursivity—in order to become strong advocates for new and meaningful forms of architecture.

The challenge of bringing forth such a new idea, however, is the necessary displacement of the "common sense" that underpins our everyday reality. This supposed common sense is never truly *common*, as it always excludes particular individuals and their sensibilities. In addition, its apparent inevitability obscures and impedes the recognition of, or belief in, any alternative. A thesis must, therefore, always offer a new sensibility, one that can redefine our common sense.

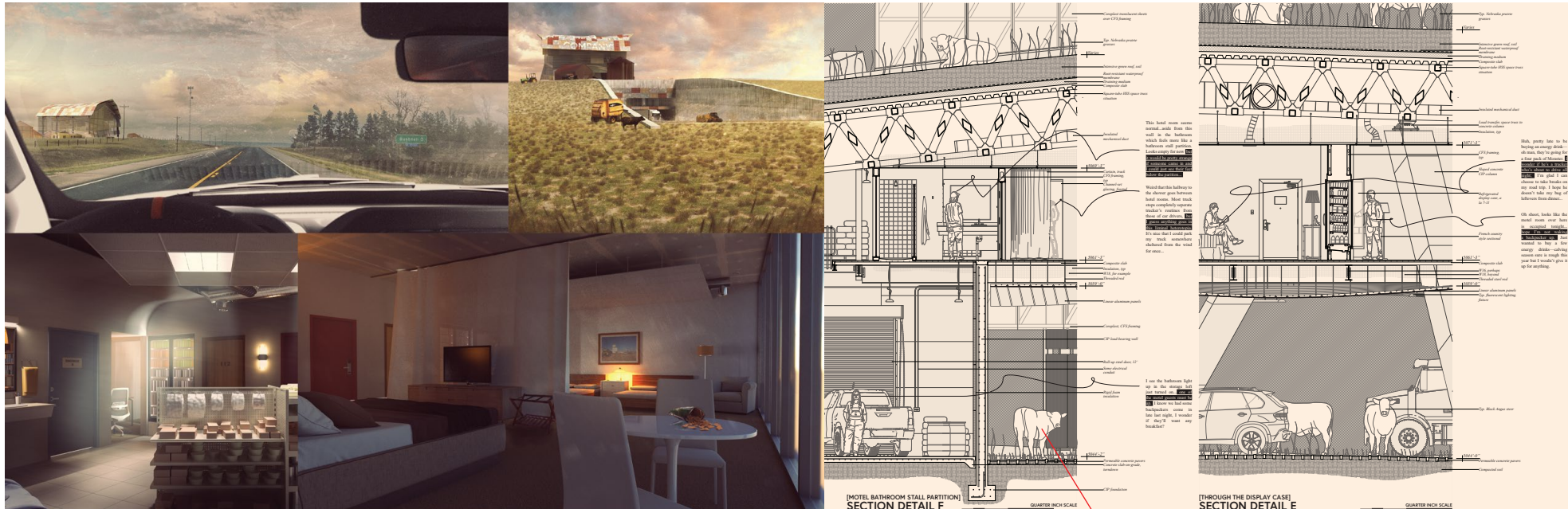
While the everyday practice of architecture routinely conforms to, and therefore upholds, the common sense understanding of reality, there are nevertheless occasions where it is possible for architecture to act unconventionally—to take on new forms, and enact new performances—in the hope of bringing forth new experiences and ways of living that make the world more representative of and meaningful to more individuals. The experience of undertaking an architectural thesis is meant to prepare you for such occasions: to enable you to recognize them, and to envision and persuasively advocate for a collective response to them.

Our present time—defined by, among other things, the emergence of the Anthropocene, the environmental degradation and human exploitation underpinning globalization, the dominance of neoliberalism, rampant precarity and injustice, and prejudice and hate masquerading as politics—desperately needs new architectural ideas, perhaps even new architectural paradigms, that might begin to address these problems. We need to believe that architecture is capable of rising to the occasion.

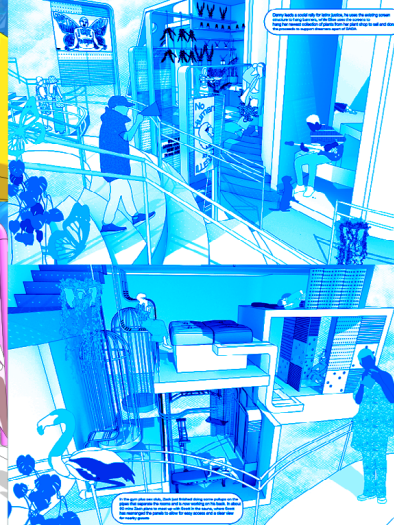
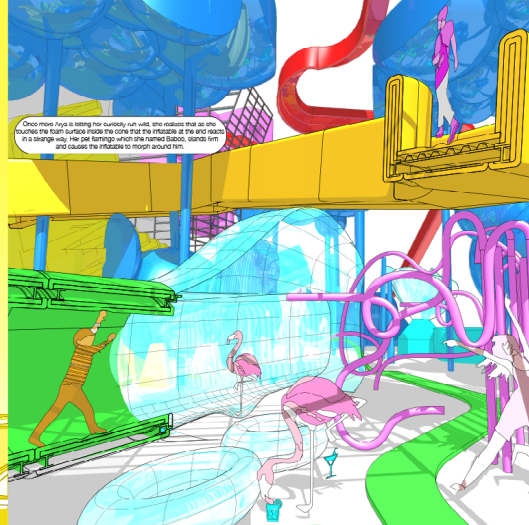
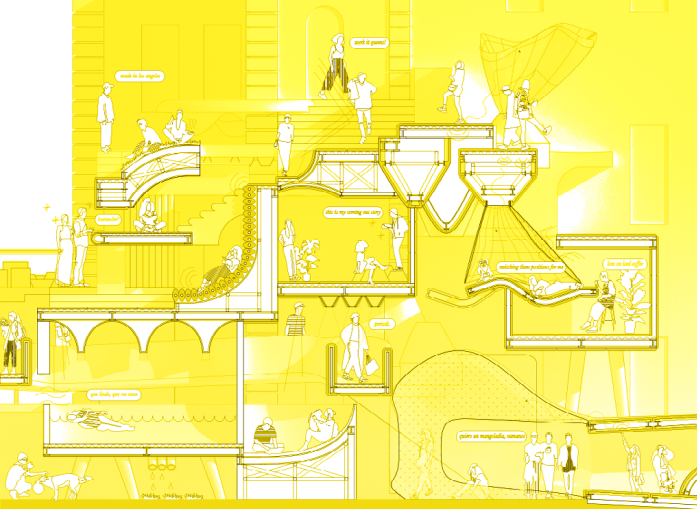
It is undeniable that these problems are massive, wicked, and complex—and, if we just abided by our so-called common sense, it would be too easy to simply assume that they are beyond the scope of architecture. Yet architecture is entangled in all of these problems, and this entanglement means that it can be redefined to more squarely engage them. This ability to be continually redefined is a fundamental virtue of architecture, enabled by the very inability to define it that so horrified Reyner Banham. The “black box” is not empty, as Banham feared. Rather, it is a treasure chest, one filled with all of architecture’s future possibilities.

The world you are about to enter into is a particularly challenging one. In fact, it has always been so. It is a world that will require the continual re-making of our collective spaces, again and again, into new and different ones—in order to adequately redress the harm experienced by those who are marginalized, underrepresented, or outright oppressed. This is, of course, a profoundly difficult task. However, it is the eternal potential contained within the architectural “black box” that enables architecture’s perpetual reincarnation—its unique ability to be forever different. And it is, after all, in its pursuit of this difference, and its ability to give form to such difference, that architecture is ultimately capable of *making a difference*.

below: Americana Love Song: Complexities, Boundaries, and Signs, by Jacob Bodinger, responds to the contemporary socio-political problem wherein self-sorting into ideologically homogenous groups limits identity complexity and, in turn, fosters political intolerance. Using the liminal space of a truck stop in rural Nebraska as a programmatic framework, Jacob develops a series of formal, organizational, and aesthetic strategies designed to confound normative interpretations of space, use, and behavior. This is intended to foster new perceptions, ideas, and actions that deviate from the norms associated with the socio-political subgroups with which the individual visitors to the truck stop otherwise identify—and enable the possibility of mutual recognition and understanding across pre-existing socio-political divisions.



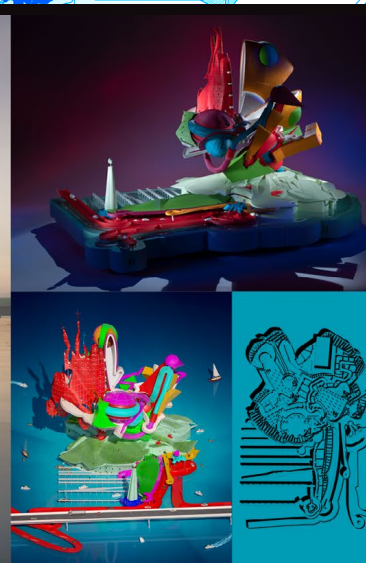
Jacob works at HOK in Chicago. But, unfortunately, I don't think he has many opportunities there to draw cows.



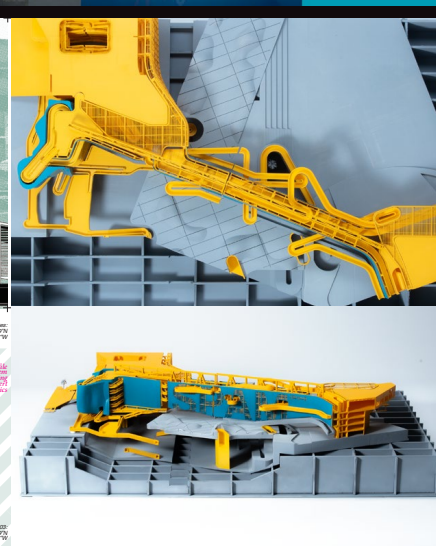
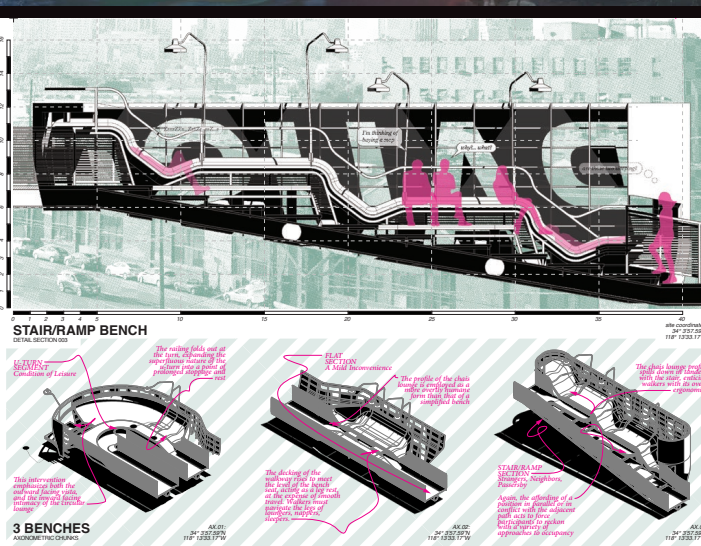
left: Not Your Usual Playhouse, by Adrian Estrada, translates Judith Butler's arguments about queer performativity to an urban formal and spatial setting. In Butler's terms, it is not sufficient to claim that gender identity can be performed across a non-binary spectrum; rather, there must first be a social acknowledgment and validation of non-binary performances before they can be enacted. Adrian responds to and extends this argument by synthesizing it with James J. Gibson's theory of affordances and Sylvia Lavin's concept of "kissing." In doing so, he develops an architectural ensemble of primitive forms near Olvera St. in downtown Los Angeles, adjacent to the 101 Freeway, which clearly affords non-normative performances and, in turn, queers normative ones. As a result, even simple acts such as circulation require creative ergonomics, undo normative socio-spatial categories, and recalibrate the public's common sensibility regarding the very idea of what constitutes "the common"—thereby validating a plurality of identities, subjectivities, and performances.



Chad just completed his MArch II at Princeton, where he won the Thesis Award. He now works for MOS Architects.



left: The Immaculate Conception, by Chad Miller, takes as its point of departure Reyner Banham's final essay, "A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture," which decries the mysterious elusiveness of architecture's core values. Chad, in turn, argues that it is architecture's mystique that is its most crucial value—insofar as the inability to absolutely define architecture affords it the capacity to redefine itself in response to new concerns, opportunities, and ideas. As this continual redefinition requires the successive pronouncement of the "death" of architecture in order to enable its subsequent rebirth, Chad employs the idea of architecture's end as its essential means. He therefore weaves an alternative deathbed pronouncement that transforms themes of architectural death, dysfunction, and despair into narratives that give rise to new architectural performances. These are demonstrated in a proposed project for a hybrid monastery and travel center along Highway 1 in the Florida Keys, and are enacted through the careful deployment of formal and programmatic paradoxes—wherein basic assumptions regarding architecture's signification and usefulness are confounded.



left: Hello, Neighbor—Or, the Existential Angst of Coexistence, by Emmet Holton, synthesizes the urban critiques of Henri Lefebvre, Jacques Rancière's theory of political aesthetics, and Judith Butler's concept of performative assembly in order to define an arena of action for architecture to foster new political relationships between the housed and unhoused populations of Los Angeles. Drawing from Butler's observation that precarity is a relational condition between those who experience it and those who do not, and Rancière's general claim that such inequitable relationships are sustained through aesthetic fronts, Emmet's thesis deconstructs the aesthetic frameworks that make certain urban activities—such as sleeping in public, or living in one's car—subject to stigmatization. Instead, Emmet proposes a riverfront park along the LA River that offers clear architectural affordances designed to validate such behaviors—to both visitors seeking leisure, as well as to unhoused residents who live at the park.

What is an Architectural Thesis?

"Life is a question, an unending question. So from that point of view, I'm interested in the unending questions that architects protect. We don't answer the question; we protect the question. So we find ways to keep the question alive."

—Mark Wigley²

A thesis takes on different forms in different disciplines, at the distinct curricular levels within which it is incorporated (undergraduate, graduate, or PhD), and in response to the unique pedagogical philosophies of the various institutions where it is administered. Unlike in scientific disciplines, where a thesis may take the form of a hypothesis to be proved or disproved through experiment, in the architectural discipline the thesis more often takes the form common to the humanities: as a theory or premise that is defended against reasonable objection.

The fact that such a thesis needs to be defended suggests, therefore, that the argument being put forth is not an obvious one. Rather, a thesis is inherently questionable.

An architectural thesis becomes meaningful to pursue either when it engages one of the many questions that perpetually haunt the architectural discipline, and which have enriched it with successive attempts to innovatively respond to them, or when it identifies a new question that has the potential to do the same. In other words, the value of an architectural thesis is correlated to its capacity to stimulate further architectural discourse and production. It is therefore always intended as an intellectual contribution to the architectural discipline.

The architectural thesis can range in type from pragmatic to theoretical, and in topic from something that is familiar to the architectural discipline to something that attempts to expand or redefine the boundaries of what can be considered architectural. In fact, one of the enduring questions of architecture is the very nature of architecture itself—and its possible intersection with, or even incorporation of, ideas or problems that were previously considered outside the scope of the discipline.

² Mark Wigley, in Monika Mitášová ed., *Oxymoron & Pleonasm: Conversations on American Critical and Projective Theory of Architecture* (New York: Actar, 2013), 72.

right: Micro-Narratives for Mega-Futures, by Josh Amaya, argues that novel technologies—such as artificial intelligence, resource exploitation from near-Earth asteroids, space elevators, gene editing, 3D printing of organic tissue, and prosthetic implantation—cannot realize their transformative potential without first recognizing, and preventing, their otherwise inevitable usurped by institutions and forces dominated by neoliberal ideologies. Accordingly, this thesis comprises a series of visual representations, along with accompanying narratives, that speculatively envision the architectural and technological realities of a future world wherein the aforementioned technologies are leveraged to perpetuate, and even radicalize, the existing conditions of precarity, oppression, segregation, social stratification, and marginalization that characterize the cultural and political realities of late stage capitalism. These images and narratives collectively serve as a dystopian critique of these conditions, and a warning of the potential consequences of the future conditions that might eventually arise if these technologies are not decoupled from their current capitalist imperatives.



Josh made all of these images years before the public availability of AI image generators, such as Midjourney. Instead, these were all painstakingly produced through Blender and Photoshop.

Because an architectural thesis works within an enduring question, the problems it addresses are not those with easy or definite solutions. Rather, in many cases, architectural theses re-examine problems to which solutions may already have been proposed—in essence, making problems where there previously had been thought to be none, and opening the door to further speculation. This act of *problematization*—the articulation of a previously unrecognized problematic with relation to a particular idea or practice—is crucial to the definition of an architectural thesis.

While the **architectural thesis** is, at its most fundamental level, a persuasive argument for a new architectural idea or performance that is not obvious and therefore must be defended, a major portion of that defense takes the form of a **thesis design project**. This is a project that is designed to demonstrate the merits of the thesis argument through the incorporation of specific design techniques correlated to the thesis claims, and which uses strategic forms of representation as a form of visual rhetoric—in order to persuade others of the validity of the thesis, and to cultivate a desire for its realization.

During your thesis year, the process of crafting an architectural thesis, and designing a corresponding thesis project, is not a linear and sequential one. During the Fall quarter, design research and experimentation will be undertaken in tandem with preliminary forms of literature research and writing, and each will inform the other. Even in Winter and Spring quarters, where the majority of your work will be focused on your thesis design project, its progress will continue to inform your writing and argumentation.

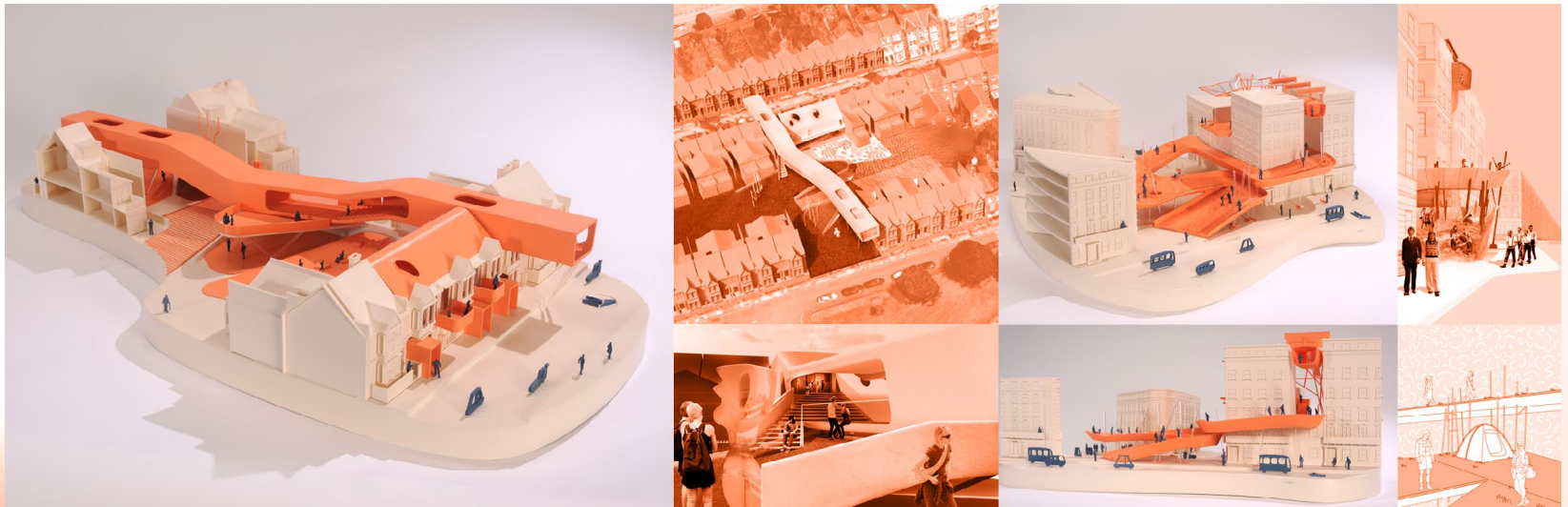
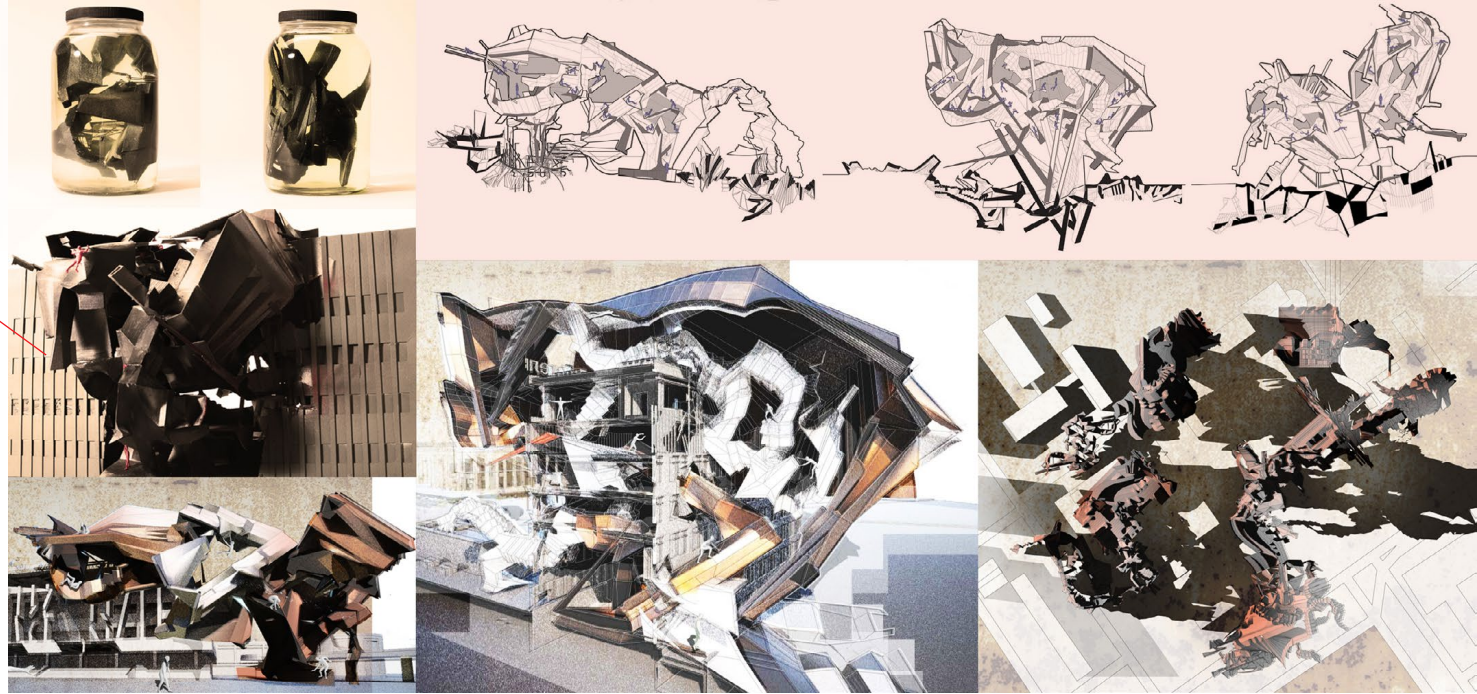
More information about how the Fall, Winter, and Spring quarters are structured can be found on pages 10–14.

below: *Americana Redux*, by Henry Kosinski. Henry's thesis argues that the identity inherent to American vernacular architecture results in a problematic aesthetic condition that inhibits the recognition of individuals' subjective, performative, and ideological differences—and the possibility of productive political dissensus. Leveraging the Deleuzian concepts of the fold and the the objectile, he proposes a new figural and organizational method that he terms "objectility"—wherein the American domestic typology and its vernacular image are estranged. This is achieved through the inclusion of abnormal programs and affordances, an irregular organizational strategy that perforates and confuses the boundaries between those programs and thereby enables the emergence of new uses and appropriations, and figural and scalar confusion that fosters uncertainty and curiosity about the architectural environment and those individuals that occupy it. Henry demonstrates these strategies of "objectility" in a mixed-use complex located in Muscatine, Iowa—a small town in which registered voters are split almost equally between Democrats and Republicans.

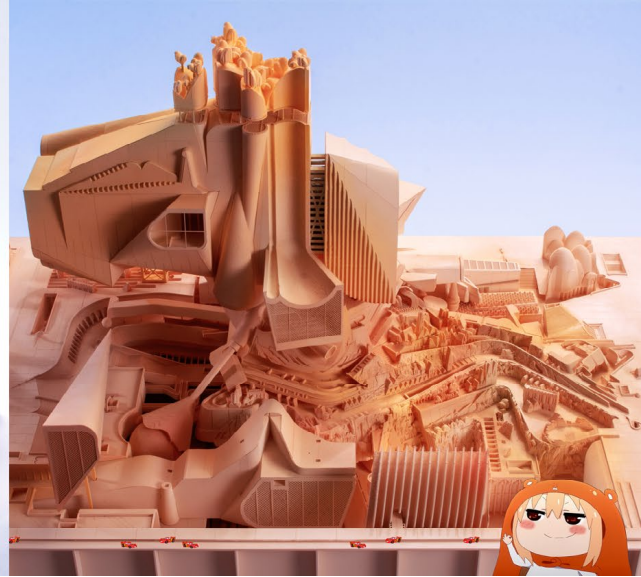


below: Toward a Monstrous Architecture, by David Hupp. David's thesis argues that the architectural discipline's rhetoric of radicality and innovation masks an overwhelming conservatism. He contends that architecture is inherently constrained by history and precedent, by its own discourse, and by the premeditated and authored nature of design itself—all of which narrow the field of potential for architecture's formal and spatial production. Consequently, David explores forms of spontaneous production and differentiation which occur through evolutionary processes of mutation and selection, and interrogates the possibility of such heuristic and wasteful forms of production as a type of "undesigned" and evolutionary architecture. Such an architecture would privilege monstrosity, freakishness, and otherness—and might ask humanity to evolve in relation to it, rather than assume humanity's current condition as its basis for evaluation.

David's monstrous thesis interventions are meant to erupt from the existing buildings on the site like violent mutations. So, instead of a conventional model building approach, where one might build the existing building and new intervention at the same time, David instead decided to build a complete model of the site building first—and then attack it with a vicious karate chop, in order to create the void necessary for the model of the monstrous intervention. It was pretty spectacular.



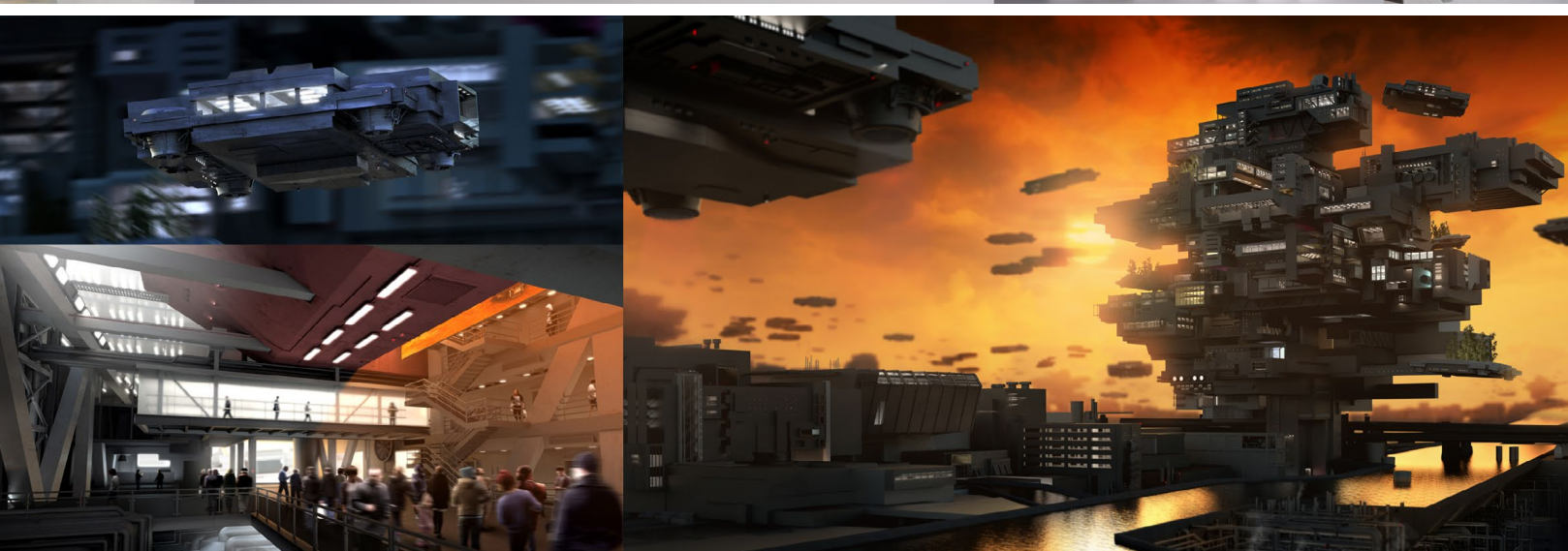
above: IDIOSYNCRaCity, by Natacha Schnider, proposes a series of interventions designed to introduce difference and idiosyncrasy into the modern city as a means to mitigate the homogeneity of use and activity that results from modern city planning's emphasis on zoning similar uses into segregated urban zones, as well as its requirement for large amounts of time to be spent in transit through unengaging circulation spaces. Located in London, Natacha's interventions take cues from the internet's abundance of idiosyncratic, individually authored, and customized content that can be aimlessly surfed through. They then translate this affordance of non-identical, inexact, and unpremeditated experience into physical spaces that allow Londoners to wander, discover, invent program as they go along, and revel in their own and others' craziness.



left: The Agony and the Ecstasy, by Adrian Tsou. Adrian's thesis argues that the manner in which humanity employs various technologies, including language and architecture, to formalize the world into stable and discrete objects and categories, problematically obscures actual and possible realities—and in so doing limits the possible practices and performances of individuals. Since architecture is one of the primary means by which the world is framed, Adrian argues that its formal techniques should be deployed to cultivate a surreality within which forms, spaces, and activities become uncertain—thus flattening the distinction between cultural and performative normality and abnormality. Adrian's thesis project demonstrates this in a formal and programmatic grotesquerie located in Manhattan's Upper East Side, within which all architectural qualities—form, space, program, structure, etc.—become flattened into an ontologically singular medium that is manipulated to proliferate unstable and conflicting interpretations.



left: Meditations on Memory: Melange and Mirages, by Munira Alesia. Her thesis argues that modernism and capitalism replace heterogeneous cultural spaces with uniform and homogeneous spaces devoted to the production of capital, rather than the production of cultural memories. These cultural memories, she contends, are unique to each individual, and differ from the top-down, seemingly irrefutable narratives of the past promoted by authoritarian regimes, their monuments, and their museums. Targeting the replacement of the original urban fabric of Kuwait City by corporate modernism, she proposes a new cemetery and perfume production facility as a site of public appropriation and memorialization. To stimulate diverse experiences and memories, she employs formal, organizational, and material strategies based on the concept of "irresolution"—employing excessive or insufficient detail, or confounding normal programmatic or spatial zones, so that each visitor must uniquely resolve their own experience, and develop unique memories.



left: Sublimation: A New Aesthetic of Urbanity, by Grant Mattingly. Grant's thesis recognizes that, in the age of global economies and global-scale computing, the reality of our immediate physical contexts is heavily influenced by forces that are remote or otherwise invisible, and that this leaves individuals incapable of visualizing or understanding the actual contexts within which they live. Accordingly, Grant argues that architects need to develop techniques to aestheticize these invisible forces, giving form and physicality to the unseen aspects of the contemporary world, and thereby creating a new subjectivity that is able to recognize and respond to these forces. His thesis demonstrates a parafictional image of Los Angeles that represents this expanded reality—creating a new form of the sublime that reveals the complex amalgamation of systems, forces, and users that constitute contemporary reality.

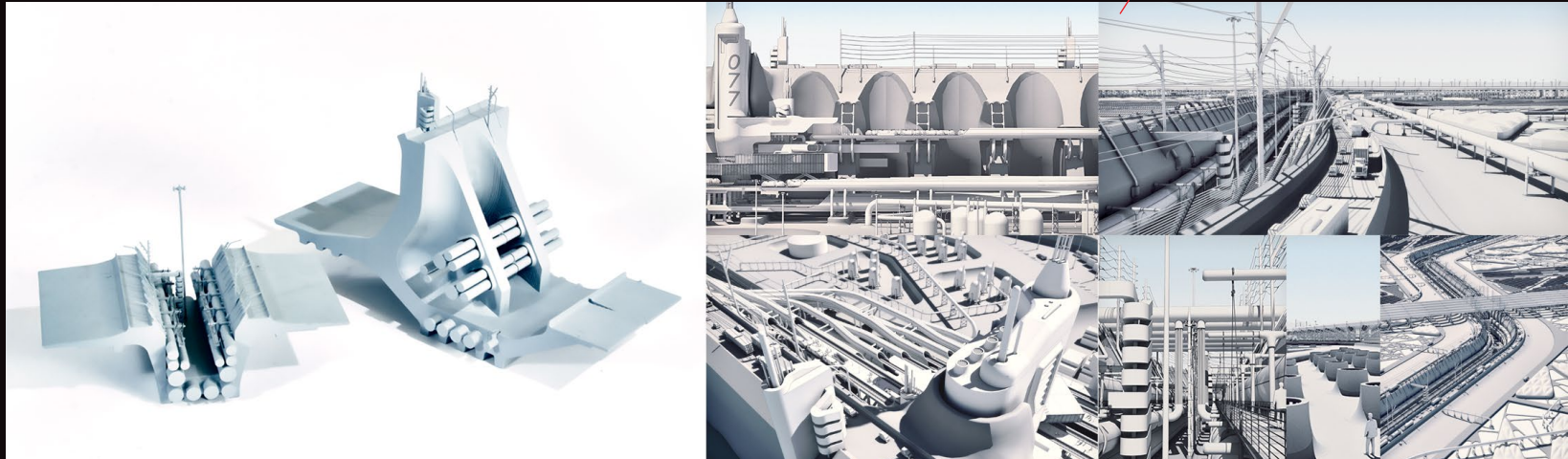
Studio and Seminar Descriptions

The overarching goal of the thesis studio and associated seminar class is to formulate, investigate, demonstrate, and persuasively defend new possibilities for architecture. While the realm of professional practice rarely provides the opportunity for such a dedicated self-reflection of the architectural discipline, it is nevertheless crucial to the healthy growth and development of architecture—as it continually negotiates its relationship to constantly evolving social, cultural, political, and technological realities.

The studio and seminar are designed to help each of you produce a *thesis argument* that is conceptually profound, rhetorically convincing, well-researched, and of disciplinary consequence—and to help you demonstrate that thesis argument in a *thesis design project* that is thoroughly designed at multiple scales, architecturally compelling, and strategically represented in a diverse range of media that might include high-quality drawings, renderings, animations, diagrams, physical models, full-scale prototypes, fictional or sci-fi narratives, films, graphic novels, and more.

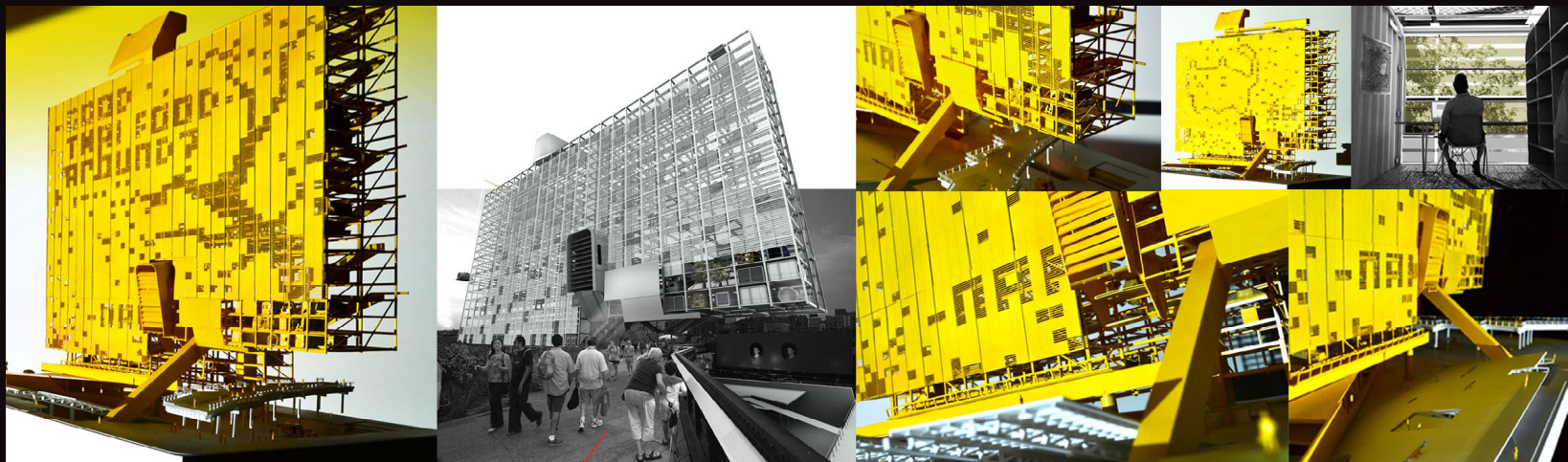
The following pages more specifically describe how the Fall, Winter, and Spring Quarters will be structured to help you achieve this.

right: Tales from the RAMPART, by Tyler Armstrong, considers the distinction between “the map” and “the territory”—famously conflated in the short story “On Exactitude in Science” by Jorge Luis Borges—and argues that not only has architecture always conflated the abstract and idealized intellection of the map with the lived experience of the territory, but also that the course of modernity has marked a social and technological evolution wherein this conflation has gradually become transposed from its unique locus in architecture and the arts to the arena of everyday life—which is now thoroughly penetrated by technologies of virtuality and data. Considering this, Tyler’s thesis demonstrates a speculative reality in which this condition is radicalized, and wherein humanity occupies a space that is the infrastructure necessary to transform the virtuality of the map—its political boundaries—into a physical reality, and in which the enclosed territory is reduced to a material resource to support this infrastructure.



Tyler received his MArch II from Princeton, and now works for Reiser + Umemoto Architects.

right: Networked Authorship, by Sam Clovis, postulates that an architecture that truly engages the network would be one that monumentalizes the competing flows of authorship and feedback that characterize the contemporary experience of social media. The resulting immersive quality of perpetual experiential remix is demonstrated in a large micro-housing complex along New York City’s Highline—comprised of a matrix for DIY individual dwelling pods linked by an array of responsive space-making mezzanines and partitions within a shared atrium, and screened by a “pixel skin” that amplifies the spontaneous social media interactions between the inhabitants and the public on the Highline and city streets below.



Sam also received his MArch II from Princeton, and is now a principal in his own office, Clovis Baronian. He also teaches architecture at the University of Houston.

Studio and Seminar Descriptions: Fall Quarter

Arch 481 Studio

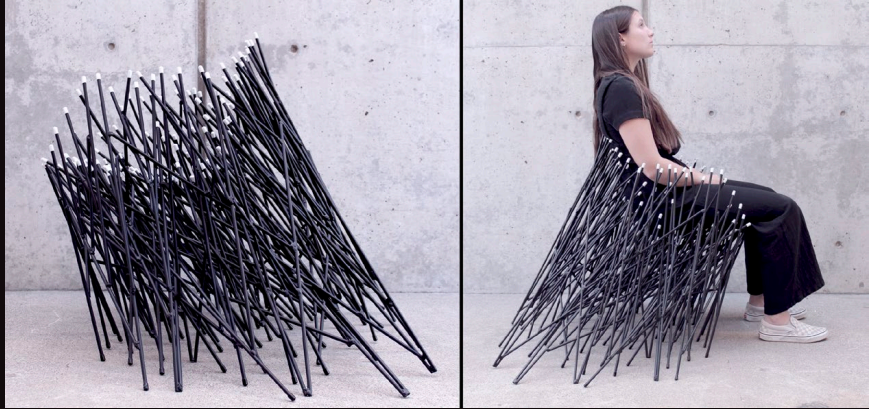
The Fall Quarter will begin with the development of an architectural thesis position. One-on-one discussions, group discussions, and suggested readings—both in studio as well as in the associated Arch 492 seminar—will assist each of you in developing your specific interests into an actual thesis argument. Meanwhile, additional reading, research, and writing will help you to focus and refine your thesis, help make it more relevant and compelling, and also help you to identify an architectural design project in which to demonstrate your thesis. Concurrently, you will conduct a series of preliminary design studies, which are designed to help each of you to develop specific architectural strategies correlated to your thesis argument, and which will serve as a useful complement to the reading, research, and writing that is occurring both in studio as well as in the associated seminar class (see below). These design studies will include the design and construction of a large-scale physical construct that will serve as a conceptual study for your thesis, and which will be in the form of a conceptually critical piece of furniture to be submitted as part of the Vellum Competition (see page 12).

By the end of the Fall Quarter each of you will have not only developed and clarified a thesis argument, but will have identified a thesis design project within which to demonstrate that thesis, and will also have begun significant work on that project.

Arch 492 Seminar

The seminar class in the Fall Quarter is meant to provide an intellectual foundation to the studio as a whole. In this class we will read texts and engage in intellectual discussions designed to increase your command of important architectural issues, opportunities, and critiques. This is designed to assist you in framing your own unique interests and ideas in relation to new and ongoing concerns of the architectural discipline. These readings and discussions will cover topics of concern ranging from historical to contemporary issues, and will do so with an emphasis on encouraging an engagement of these topics from multiple perspectives in order to facilitate a vibrant and productive discourse. These will be tuned along the way in order to most effectively relate to and clarify your theses and thesis projects as they develop. Some of the issues that might be discussed include:

- the political dimension of architectural aesthetics, and how new forms of architectural aesthetics can bring forth new ideas and performances with respect to society and the environment
- social subjectivity and precarity through the lens of queer and political theories, a critique of the way in which architectural form and space have induced precarity by endorsing and empowering certain subjects at the expense of others (based on race, gender identity, ideology, etc.), and an examination of the way in which the queering or othering architectural form and space can afford new performances, habits, customs, and perceptions that empower and validate a plurality of individuals—including those that are either marginalized and oppressed, or which fall outside of the limited categories imposed by dominant cultural frameworks
- a critical look at contemporary concepts of “nature” and the “environment” through the lens of the Anthropocene and its associated critiques of technology and techno-scientific positivism, including an examination of the manner in which humanity’s actions are entangled in spatial and temporal scales that exceed human perception and predictability
- the history and critiques of the modern city, and the possibility for concepts such as play, ludic space, openness, appropriation, mis-use, and individual creativity to constitute a form of urban or civic critique, and to serve as the basis for more pluralistic and idiosyncratic forms of collectivity that recognize and validate diverse individuals, orientations, and performances
- architectural agency and authorship, and how these concepts have evolved from the pre-Classical understanding of authorless architecture, to the 16th century origination of the idea of the architect as the primary author, to contemporary concepts of split-agency and multiple authorship associated with post-industrial forms of production (digital, open-source, crowd-sourced, etc.)
- the relationship between time and space in architecture, especially with respect to pre-modern and non-Western concepts of space-time, and the effect that various concepts of time and space have had with respect to the understanding of architectural space
- the rise of Artificial General Intelligence and the possibility of a post-anthropocentric world, and how a resulting post-human or trans-human world might give rise to a new aesthetic perception, the perception of new forms of space, and new ways of life
- modes of architectural speculation and representation across diverse media, and how various media impact our understanding of architecture and its possible performances
- the distinction between representational and performative techniques in architecture, and the manner in which each produces cultural value
- the relationship architecture and virtuality—including the question of whether architecture is really “real” or operates more like a simulation, and the manner in which new technologies for producing experience are appropriated by architecture



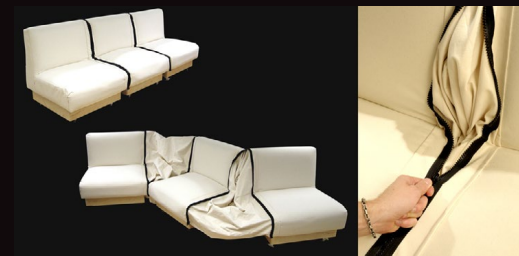
above: Mick Atkins, *post/human_post/ure*

below: Stephen Zecher, *Aug. Vision*

below: David Hupp, *The Twinns*



below: Abby Dorrell, *Adam and Eames*



above: Greg Schaal, *Sling Chair*
left: Shaler Campbell, *Revolve*



left: Chad Miller, *The Cactus, The Bunny Rabbit, & the Windsor*



above: Marki Becker, *The Strangers*



above: Grace Choy, *Möbi*
left: Michael Charters, *Extenze*



above: Celia Chaussabel, *Norm*

Studio and Seminar Descriptions: Winter and Spring Quarters

Arch 481 Studio

The design studio in Winter and Spring Quarters will support the continual development and refinement of your thesis project, concluding with the public presentation of your work.

During the Winter Quarter your thesis projects will be developed thoroughly, with an emphasis on the plausible and compelling manifestation of your unique thesis position within your design project. Desk crits, reviews, and peer-discussions will be geared toward facilitating design development across multiple scales of consideration, and through multiple media. In addition to this ongoing design development, I will also help each of you to clearly and convincingly articulate your design ideas—graphically, verbally, formally, and spatially.

Spring Quarter, in turn, will be primarily devoted to the refinement and public presentation of this work. Since your thesis project is unique in terms of its scope of critical inquiry and design speculation, the studio calendar is designed to allow you ample time in Spring Quarter for the production of unprecedented forms of design representation.

At the conclusion of Spring Quarter each of you will have a unique, profound, and thought-provoking architectural thesis and thesis design project that is fully developed and compellingly represented. These will be on display in a final comprehensive studio exhibition. In the past these studio shows have been curated and designed by the studio as a collective, and have resulted in a variety of engaging exhibitions (see page 14).

There will also be a 5th-Year Thesis Final Review at the end of Spring Quarter, with esteemed architects, as well as educators from other academic institutions, invited to Cal Poly to serve as guest reviewers.

Finally, sometime during the year we will also take at least one major studio field trip (see below). The specific destination and time of such a trip will be decided by the studio as a whole. Past trips have included visits to Tokyo, Kyoto, Mexico City, Seoul, Barcelona, and New York. Likewise, we will also do other things as a studio—day trips, dinners, drinks, etc.—both to bond as a studio, and also just to have fun.

Studio Field Trip

below: images from field trips to Tokyo, Kyoto, Seoul, Mexico City, and Barcelona





left: Fixation, 2023



left: Resolutions of an Unresolved Dream, 2025

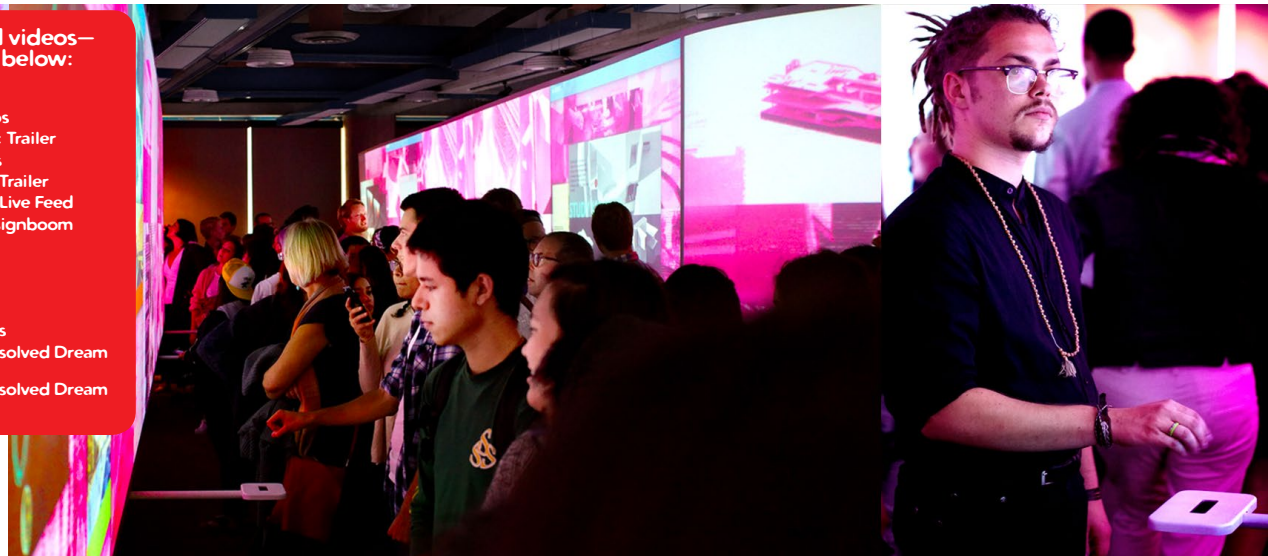
Studio Exhibition



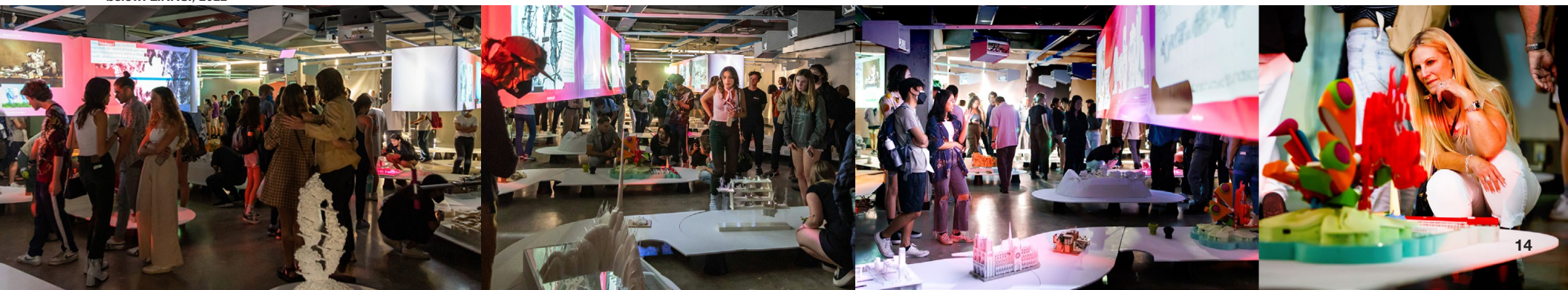
above and right: Striptease, 2015

more photos and videos—
click on the links below:

Probe 2013 photos
Everything 2014 photos
Everything 2014 video: Trailer
Striptease 2015 photos
Striptease 2015 video: Trailer
Striptease 2015 video: Live Feed
Striptease 2015 on Designboom
Lucid 2016 photos
Headrush 2019 photos
LINKS! 2022 photos
Fixation 2023 photos
Disclosure 2024 photos
Resolutions of an Unresolved Dream
2025 photos
Resolutions of an Unresolved Dream
2025 website



below: LINKS!, 2022



Bio

I am an architect, writer, and educator. Prior to coming to Cal Poly my entire career revolved around questioning assumptions about architecture, designing work that embodies new ideas about architecture, producing compelling writing and images about that work in order to disseminate its ideas through publication, figuring out how to get that work built, and sometimes even constructing that work myself. Now, at Cal Poly, I am thrilled to get to help students do all of that as well.

Previously, I served as a principal along with Wes Jones in the award-winning and internationally-acclaimed office of Jones, Partners: Architecture (J,P:A), and during this time our innovative work was widely exhibited and was featured in numerous national and international publications, including the monographs *Instrumental Form* and *El Segundo*, published by Princeton Architectural Press in 1998 and 2007 respectively. While I was with J,P:A I was responsible for the design and management of a variety of projects, including the Confluence Point Bridges and Ranger Station in San Jose, the Andersen Consulting Corporate Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, the India Basin Technical Center in San Francisco, the “Shuffle” installation at SCI-Arc, the HSI Productions Satellite Office in Culver City, and numerous innovative residential projects. I was also the graphic designer for our award-winning monograph, *Instrumental Form*, the graphic director for our follow-up monograph, *El Segundo*, and the author of our firm’s patent for our Residential Program Deck (PRO/dek) system.

Currently I maintain an independent design practice whose constructed as well as speculative design work has been featured in numerous books and design journals, and has also been exhibited both nationally and internationally—including at the Architecture + Design Museum in Los Angeles and the GA Gallery in Tokyo. I am also the author of a book titled *SOUPERgreen!—Souped Up Green Architecture* (for which I received a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts), and the guest editor for a special issue of the *Journal of Architectural Education* titled “Environments.”

I am a licensed architect, and I received my BArch from Virginia Tech and my MArch from Princeton University. Before coming to Cal Poly I taught undergraduate design studios at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), where I also advised thesis students, as well as graduate design studios at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where I was the Hyde Chair of Excellence (an invited position that has also been occupied by Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelb(l)au and Peter Cook of Archigram). In addition, I have served on studio and thesis juries all over the place, including SCI-Arc, UCLA, UC Berkeley, USC, CCA, Rice, Harvard, and Columbia.

If you want to talk to me about thesis studio and/or your thesis ideas then please don’t hesitate to get in touch. You can email me and we can set up a time to chat.

▶ dojackso@calpoly.edu

If you would like to find out even more about me, you can check out an interview I did on the “Second Studio” podcast, [here](#).

below: some images of my own work

