

WHO'S AFRAID OF TOTAL DESIGN?

BY TOM DI SANTO

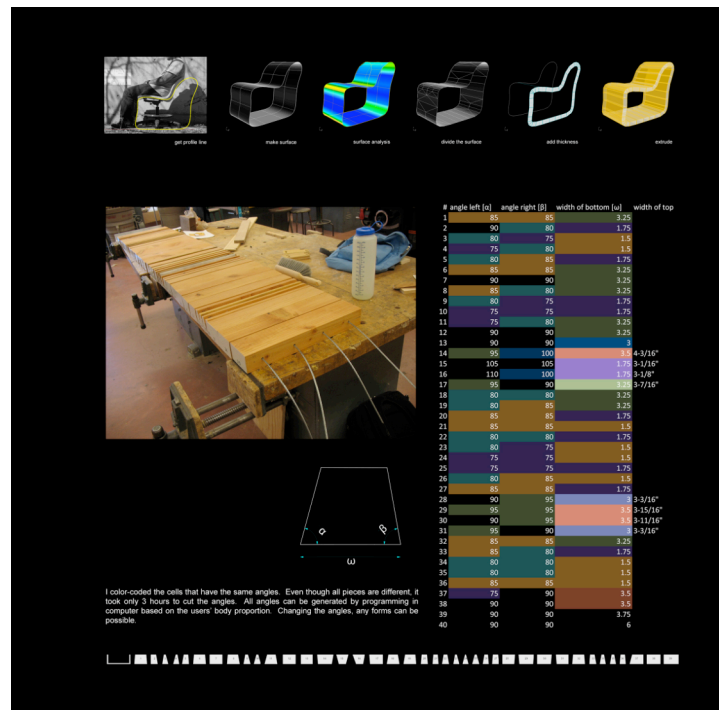
“Total design has two meanings: first, what might be called the implosion of design, the focusing of design inward on a single intense point; second, what might be called the explosion of design, the expansion of design out to touch every possible point in the world. In either case, the architect is in control, centralizing, orchestrating, dominating.”

-Mark Wigley, 1998

Who is afraid of Total Design?

The concept of the “total work of art” dates back to composer Richard Wagner’s 19th century, with crescendos at the turn-of-the-century Vienna Secessionists and Arts + Crafts movements. The Bauhaus (1919 -1928) was another high-water mark, and the concept, having fled Nazi Germany in the suitcase of Walter Gropius, was successfully taken up at the Harvard GSD. The notion of imploding and exploding design influenced the works of a host of brilliant architects including Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Carlo Scarpa, Charles Rennie MacIntosh, Bruno Taut, Josef Hoffman, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Peter Behrens, Le Corbusier, Mario Botta, Peter Zumthor and Frank Gehry. In the 19th century context, the phenomenon of architect-designed furniture also added strength to the idea of Total Design with the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which implied a consistency of idea and effort at every scale: the furniture, the building, and even the landscape.

However, after being a part of the basic vocabulary among practitioners and academics alike for close to a century, the mode of thinking took a hit during the postmodern era. Even ten years ago, Mark Wigley was left pondering “Whatever happened to Total Design?¹” Now with the acceleration of digital media and the “paperless studios”, Total Design is conspicuously absent from contemporary debates and seems to play an even lesser role in schools today than it did



even a decade ago. The sad irony is that Total Design is more necessary now than it ever has been. The computer screen discounts the role of peripheral unfocused vision in our experience of interior volume and of live experience in space. The monitor flattens, and reduces design process to a retinal journey. Emotions and senses and the various capacities of the imagination get isolated in separate layers. The central processing unit creates a chasm between the maker and the made.

Consequently, If we are to discuss Deoxyribonucleic Acid and fingerprints in the act of making we, of course, need fingers, and not just on the keyboard. Although the position herein does NOT view the computer as wholly un-beneficial; rather, it is stressed that despite the design efficiencies inherent in the machine, it is paramount to the success of the student that they focus on other tools as well.

If architectural education has difficulty with the aberrant, the intuitive conjecture, the blister and certainly the scar marked by our distinct spatial tales of origin, it has further difficulty with the peripheral, the unfocused, and the haptic unraveling of the bias of vision on student work. This is precisely where Total Design can re-assert itself as a viable pedagogical tool to challenge our imaginations... to transform the “nowhere” into “now here”...to turn back the material and spatial deficit in the real, and to re-tool the sensual and sensory qualities in design education.



I would posit in a critical conversation that the ignition of Total Design in the studio can:

1. Re-express the importance of the modality of touch and the role of the body as the locus of perception -- not so much to suppress the bias of vision, but to re-assert the sensual and sensory qualities of design education and architectural, material and spatial experience as well.
2. RE-confirm the rule that architecture students can seek validation in their work through the design of furniture, form analogs, tectonic studies, full-scale details and installations.
3. Re-support the case that designing at the scale of a teaspoon or urban plan can also inform experiential architectural design.

All of this comes in the service of re-calculating the value of singular authorship in a democratic studio culture.

For a further elaboration of Total Design in the studio, please refer to the Studio Prospectus attached herewith.

