Play!

Ludic Furniture Studies in the Design Studio

For the past two years I have taught an undergraduate thesis design studio in which each student’s independent design thesis has shared a common critique of the contemporary disciplinary emphasis on form, image, novelty, and performance. Under the umbrella title of Trash-formalism, the students’ work has instead offered projective propositions that respond to contemporary digital culture’s interest in the multiplicity of formal embodiments over singular form, the fluid manipulation of social networks, the intertwining of formerly discrete spheres of existence (domestic, work, etc.), and the rise in individual authorship and content creation. However, given the students’ lack of prior exposure to these ideas within the design curriculum, the principle of play has become instrumental as a means of investigating these issues and speculating on useful non-formal or trans-formal architectural tactics, prior to beginning work on their thesis projects.

Upon entering this year-long (three-semester) thesis design studio, many of the students have never considered the cultural consequences of digital technologies from an architectural perspective. Although they are immersed within a digital age culture in which these issues are readily apparent, their design education up to this point has occurred within an academic culture that still hesitates closely to the traditional conception of architecture as the genius production of the discipline. For a non-playful object.

The further requirement that the students actually design and construct transformable and playful furniture objects as the culmination of these studies not only allows the students the opportunity to test their ideas in physical form, but also requires them to confront the economic, material, and constructional issues that are crucial to their realization. As constraints arising from these considerations become apparent, students are forced to consider viable alternatives that preserve their theoretical and conceptual propositions. In addition to helping to offer the students a certain degree of wisdom regarding the materialization of their concepts, the consideration of alternatives also reinforces the studio’s pedagogical de-emphasis on singular formal embodiments.

In order to disseminate the studio’s ideas within the larger school (and local community), the students’ design work is exhibited throughout the year in public gallery shows. The playful furniture objects, in particular, are exhibited twice during the year, during which visits to the gallery are invited to play with and transform the objects. The first show is part of a larger, highly publicized annual furniture exhibition at a downtown gallery that draws a large number of students, faculty, and local residents. The second gallery show is a studio-specific show held at a large gallery on the university campus, and allows the students to show their work and the ideas behind it as a group. During this latter show, the furniture is on display and is also supplemented by graphic material and projected videos of the furniture being used. Visitors to the shows are encouraged to engage with the furniture and to see firsthand the viability of their ideas about play, engagement, and social negotiation.

The period of these thesis studies occupies the first two weeks of a 30-week thesis design studio. Although the students are also conducting research during this period, the assignment nonetheless represents a significant investment in terms of time. However, this investment has, in part, proved its value in terms of its ability to inform and catalyze the students’ thesis work. Although it falls outside the scope of this poster to also include samples of the thesis work produced, these thesis projects are characterized by vitality and innovative propositions about temporal and transformative space, a focus on individual co-authorship of spatial conditions, an ability to fluidly shift between various social and spatial realities, a high degree of wit, and a thorough command of the structural, constructional, contextual, and other practical realities that need to be negotiated in order to plausibly realize the innovative propositions embodied in the work. Students who have taken the thesis design studio enter into the discipline not only with a critical awareness of the current state of the discipline and its inability to truly engage the conditions and interests of digital culture, but also with viable strategies and techniques to address the disciplinary falling and concomitant sense of responsibility for and stewardship of the discipline.