Dear All,

Welcome to your Fifth year!

Following you’ll find a prospectus for Thesis Section 9; including a brief introduction to the Wild Forms Initiative, as well as a declaration of what I consider a thesis to be, and an outlined methodology for getting us there.

You have a lot to consider over the next several days as you review the studio prospectuses and complete your studio selection forms. If you have any questions, or would like to meet in person to discuss your plans for the thesis year, please do not hesitate to contact me.

In the meantime, I look forward to reviewing your statements and to spending the next year helping you to develop those interests.

All my best,
Brian

Hyperspecific
Caroline Fletcher, Section 9, Class of 2018.
**WILD FORMS INITIATIVE**

During the 20/21 academic year, Thesis Section 9 will continue its Wild Forms Initiative—a platform for spatial and formal speculation based on an interrogation of the methods and conventions of architecture and its discourse.

The Wild Forms Initiative is based on the premise that architecture reifies our ontological assumptions—it gives physical form to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. More importantly, if approached critically, architecture also has the potential to enable new ways of seeing—of situating—ourselves, both physically and philosophically, within a selected context.

I use the term *wild* in an effort to think with the work of Jack Halberstam. In their introduction to *Wildness*, the July 2018 volume of the South Atlantic Quarterly, Halberstam and co-editor Tavia Nyong’o note that wildness has always functioned as a foil to civilization. It is a dumping ground for all things other; the unmanageable, the undomesticated, the politically unruly. Wildness, they continue, names what hegemonic systems would interdict or push to the margins. While this label—*Wild*—has been used to cast out that which does not fit; to assure us of the correctness of past decisions, it also provides us with an opportunity to confront and challenge them. To do so, Halberstam and Nyong’o call for a re-wilding of critical theory. This action—to make wild—includes, as Halberstam has said elsewhere, the unmaking, or undoing, of the logics and ideological systems of this world in an effort to move towards a new and better world. Thinking in this way, can architecture also be wilded? What logics, ideological systems, and spatial orders, which underpin our built environment either quietly or overtly, require undoing?

This studio does not have a specific topical or formal agenda. Instead, the Wild Forms Initiative is interested in your individual concerns and interests related to the built environment. The studio will provide a methodology for developing that critique and inventing new formal and spatial strategies in an effort to confront architecture’s status quo.

One after another, major events call into question our past assumptions. For instance, Global Warming calls into question our relationship with nature, the environment, and its resources. The recording and broadcasting of violence against black bodies exposes deep-seated racism within our society. The routine failure of industries reveals the effects of technology on contemporary culture and the role of labor and production in the shaping of our built environment. With each event comes an opportunity for new ideas: new forms of urbanization, new potentials for public behavior and performance, new definitions of the domestic, new relationships between our objects and property, new theories of aesthetics, new ways of telling our histories...

This opportunity to question current values and related systems of order will form our studio’s shared interest in the wild. We will try to be polemical—to say, *this* is how things are done now and we can all agree on that. But *here* is the problem with how things are done, and *here*’s how we might think differently about it. We will try to take a stand. To take risks with our thinking. To see design as a form of protest, or détournement, which does not only call attention to problems but also incites actions around them. Finally, we will work to withhold assumptions about what *must be*, in order to allow for the possibility of what *could be*. We will use naiveté as an advantage by following it up with a lot of guesses.

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WHAT'S A THESIS AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO A PROJECT?

Section 9 understands an architectural thesis to be a specific type of design research with the primary objective of producing new knowledge. It should question existing cultural and disciplinary protocols and practices in order to imagine new potentials—new methods and new materialities with new formal outcomes that result in new behaviors. A good thesis makes a speculative proposition about what architecture could be that is based on an informed critique of what has been and what is.

I agree with the Architecture Department website where it says that an architectural thesis should include 4 things:

“a critical assessment of architecture’s current values and practices, a proposition for a valuable new idea or direction for architecture, research of existing discourse and precedents in support of this idea, and a demonstration of the value of this idea in the form of a thesis design project.”

It is important to note from this quote that thesis is not synonymous, nor interchangeable, with project, but instead includes a design project, among many components, for the purpose of testing its larger ideas in a specific context. As such, the thesis has implications beyond the scope of any single design project and utility to a larger constituency than a single work of architecture can possibly serve.

Through the design studios that you have been a part of up to now you have worked on a number of projects. These projects have given you experience with a range of design approaches, offered ways of responding to contextual and programmatic types, allowed you to test formal methods, and integrate various building systems and material concerns into the design of a building. Of course, a thesis does include a project and, so, is a chance to experiment further with and demonstrate your competence in all of the areas above. However, to see the thesis as merely another project would be missing the point. The more important work of a thesis, the hard part, is in framing the project—defining a problem worth working on, crafting an argument for how the problem should be approached, developing the formal and spatial methods you’ll use to respond to the problem, determining the appropriate context to test your response, and finding representational methods to communicate your work. Considering the architecture curriculum at Cal Poly, these are aspects of architectural work that you have not had experience with.

To provide this experience, the thesis year is broken into 4 courses each with specific objectives. The Thesis Seminar (ARCH 492, Fall) will focus on defining your thesis topic, informing your position within that topic, and crafting a speculative argument for architecture. I’ll talk a lot more about the seminar later in the prospectus. In the fall, the Thesis Studio (ARCH 481, Fall) will focus on developing design methods that best suit your research. Whether these are specific formal techniques, contextual analyses, zoning speculations, event planning, fabrication experiments, etc.…we’ll work to find them by conducting a series of design experiments at a variety of scales including object, furniture, and building. In the winter, the Thesis Studio (ARCH 481, Winter) will focus on testing your argument through an architectural intervention in a specific context. We’ll present our projects as evidence of our architectural arguments at the Qualifying Review at the end of the winter quarter. Finally, in the spring, the Thesis Studio (ARCH 481, Spring) will focus on projecting our work and research back into the larger architectural discourse. We will sharpen our methods of representing the work through final drawings and models, we’ll refine our arguments through writing, and we’ll exhibit the work at our own Studio Show, at the 5th Year Thesis Show, and in your own Thesis Books.
MAKING ARCHITECTURAL PROBLEMS

A fundamental aspect of every thesis is defining a problem to work on. In your normal life, I imagine that you spend a good deal of your energy avoiding problems. In a thesis, though, without a problem you have nothing to work on and no way to know if you’re making any progress. Through our work, especially in the ARCH 492 seminar, we’ll tease out your initial insights and interests in order to create architectural problems.

Good problems are specific and significant. Problems need to be specific enough that they can be worked on. They should elicit a response and provide some way of evaluating its success. They should also be significant enough that they cannot be responded to too easily, or haven’t already been responded to many times by others. While a good problem is born out of a personal insight and interest of yours, your work on the problem should be of value to others as well.

Importantly, a successful thesis defines a problem that can be worked on through architecture—that is through material, formal, and spatial means. A thesis explores the discipline’s capacity to engage the world. It addresses culture through architecture and vice-versa. While the research may draw from a wide range of sources within and outside the conventional boundaries of architectural discourse, including philosophy, art, science, current events, and popular culture, the method of exploration will ultimately employ (or push the limits of) the tools of architectural production and critique. Therefore, it is important that you define a problem in a way that allows you to work on it through architecture.

Finally, all this talk about problems and not a single mention of solutions. A thesis doesn’t need to ‘solve’ the problem. And we want to be careful that we don’t create a scenario where solving the problem is our only measure of success. Instead, a better goal would be that, through your work on the problem, you are able to disrupt common understandings and challenge current practices. This will be your contribution to an evolving lineage of architectural ideas.

Factory of Alternate Production
Aly Austefjord, Section 9, Class of 2020.
ARCH 492 SEMINAR: FROM INSIGHT TO ARTICLE

We will use the ARCH 492 seminar as a space for developing a draft of the written component of your thesis, which we will produce in short iterative pieces over the course of the quarter. I care about the written thesis because I can see that taking the time in the fall to draft a clear thesis argument provides a great foundation for, and takes a lot of the anxiety out of, the rest of the year. The thesis article situates your own ideas and work within the context of cultural and disciplinary history. In this way, the article establishes you as an agent of that history, with the capacity to shape it rather than only react to it. I appreciate the way that the Knowlton School of Architecture at Ohio State has positioned their Exit Review program as a platform through which their students might launch their own professional career. I hope to model that in our thesis section as well.

Although design and research are both iterative rather than linear processes, we can think about the development of the written thesis over several phases...

Getting started requires that you begin with an insight. An insight could be something you’ve experienced or observed, something you are suspicious of or curious about. Whatever the starting point for your thesis, it is important that it inspires excitement and wonder in you. Wonder, as Mark Lee notes in his explanation of his curatorial approach to the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, “does not imply complete understanding but instead triggers further inquiry.” As you inquire further into your initial insight you will work to define a problem that can be worked on through material, formal, and spatial means. Part of working on that problem will require that you position your work within an existing discourse. We will draw on a wide range of sources within and outside the boundaries of architectural discourse; including philosophy, art, science, current events, and popular culture in order to shape our positions. We will read and discuss some of these references together, which will provide a place to start and some common threads through our studio. Other references you will find and review on your own. In seminar we will discuss ways of becoming active participants in that discourse. While some of this research will focus on reference collection, we will also pursue projective design research methods that are born of making and experimentation. While much of the design work will occur in the ARCH 481 studio, we’ll use the seminar to find the tools and techniques of exploration that are best suited for your particular interests.

Your thesis article will put all of the above together in order to articulate an architectural argument. One of the best, and most exciting, pieces of instruction that I have received on crafting a strong argument is that arguments are in fact arguable. A good argument is not safe, it does not state the obvious, or reiterate the status quo. Instead an architectural argument is inherently risky, original, and asserts a critical position.
NOTES ABOUT DESIGN RESEARCH

Research is a term that we use often but rarely take the time to define. We tend to limit our use of research in design to passive tasks such as collecting information, whether it be at the library, over the internet, in a lab, or on a site.

Research is also about exploration and experimentation; the testing of architectural ideas. In this way, research is projective.

Research methodologies are different for every field. As it relates to the projective practice of design, research is less about proving a fact than it is about finding an opportunity. Data alone is not research. Research should help situate one’s work in history and develop a self-aware position from which to speak. It is equally about finding and making: gathering evidence, and experimenting with what can be done with that evidence.

In the context of an architectural thesis, the rigor with which you develop and apply research methods will be the single most important factor in your work. What tools and techniques of exploration are best suited to your particular interests? How do you transform available tools and make those techniques your own?
In Loving Memory

Christian Salkeld, Section 9, Class of 2019.
STUDIO SHOWS

Throughout the year you will have several opportunities to present your work and receive input from your faculty members and colleagues. Each review will have a different format and we will discuss the deliverable requirements for each as a group as they come up. These may include: Abstract, Vellum, Section, Detail, Qualifying Review, and Chumash, as well as those reviews and shows dedicated to our own studio section alone.

In the spring quarter we will have the opportunity to mount an exhibition of the work of our studio. After working throughout the year on an individual project, the challenge of the studio show is to develop an approach to curating the work of the studio as a whole. This provides a useful format for looking at your own thesis project with a fresh perspective late in the year.
On June 26, 2015, The Supreme Court of the United States ruled in Obergefell v. Hodges that the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed same-sex couples the fundamental right to marry. This groundbreaking ruling—coming at the tail end of a series of LGBT civil rights successes—emphatically declared the legitimacy of the gay couple, both symbolically and legally. Marriage equality marked a significant step toward the assimilation of gay people within society. As Colin Walmsley writes, "[marriage equality was] an assertion that the gay rights movement had reached an important milestone, transcending basic issues of health, safety, economic security and social stability."

Marriage holds an important place in American social structure. In reshaping the public perception of gay and lesbian people—from the sexual deviant to the domestic family figure—marriage equality would open the doors to other LGBTQ civil rights battles.

What perhaps was an unintended side effect of this magnitude of political engagement was the institutionalization of the LGBT movement. The mainstreaming of LGBTQ culture as well, has become a double edged sword. The queer environment—the socio-economic, political, cultural, and spatial context in which queer people are situated—has been appropriated and reduced to bite-sized easily consumed memes. It has become increasingly difficult to identity actual support of LGBTQ causes versus capitalist marketing strategies designed to earn the attention and buying power of the LGBTQ community. Even more subtle in its effect is the strange Disneyfication of the queer environment. Alan Bryman identifies four aspects of Disneyfication: theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor. The ad hoc nature of Greenwich Village has become Disneyfied to a superficial front of what queer culture used to be neatly packed and cleanly presented as fun, sassy, brilliant, rainbow, safe. A mantra of "We're not different. We are just like you. We're fun!" floats in the ethos.

Artists David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo saw the abandoned piers in the Hudson River as "an anti-commercial site for creative expression and artistic exploration...It was disruptive and novel. This in-between place felt wild and completely unlike the city. " Artists living in Greenwich Village brought to the surface an added layer of meaning, purpose, and complexity to the dilapidated environment around them. A queer architecture—a truly queer architecture not architecture for LGBTQ people or architecture with LGBTQ affiliated programs—has the potential to create something "entirely familiar, strangely new, continuous with the world as we know it, free of history, communally legible, and full of possibility."

Queerness, to Andrew Holder, is "at its root...a choice to reorganize the body and its environs for sex and pleasure. " By drawings from queer source material, one can begin to develop the framework for a new architecture.

In using typography as a form of the readymade, I begin to create a process to desystematize traditional readings of architecture. Iterative processes are performed against the typography, structure, and surface of the project as a means of creating a descriptive architecture - one that grows, changes, and evolves as one experiences it. The rise of trans theory within the queer discourse has marked a shift away from ordering, typing, and cataloguing toward a 21st century idea of multiplying, confusing, and unsorting. The main goal in these series of buildings is to push for sense of spectacle to exist on the exterior by reversing the interior vs exterior relationship. The interior / domestic zone is an uninhibited free performance space while the exterior / public zone is typically heavily monitored and policed.
I believe that it is important that you develop your thesis in the broadest possible setting and see group travel as an excellent way to expand the influences on the work that happens within the studio.

Over the past three years in Section 09, we have had great travel experiences. In the 2017-18 year we traveled to Chicago to visit the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial. The format of the biennial provided a great set of references for our theses. In 2019-19 we went to Miami. In the last decade Miami has initiated a campaign to become a center for contemporary architecture, with landmark projects by OMA, Herzog & De Meuron, Arato Isozaki, Foster and Partners, Leong Leong, Jurgen Mayer, Aranguren + Gallegos Arquitectos, and many more. It was such a great visit that we were planning a follow-up trip for the 2019-20 cohort until the COVID19 pandemic limited our ability to travel. It is unclear if travel will be possible during the coming academic year, however, if it is, we will take advantage.

Domestic and International travel is a great opportunity to learn from unfamiliar cultures as well as share your thesis work with professionals from outside the comfort of Cal Poly. I encourage this opportunity and we will discuss as a group when and where the most appropriate travel will be.
BIOGRAPHY

Brian is trained as both an Architect and a Landscape Architect. He received the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture from Cal Poly and worked as a Landscape Designer and Planner for seven years in San Luis Obispo. He moved to New York City in 2006 to study at Pratt Institute, where he earned the Master of Architecture. While in New York, Brian worked as an architectural designer for SYSTEM ARCHITECTS, a practice led by Jeremy Edmiston and Douglas Gauthier, as well as the Design Office for Research and Architecture (DORA) led by Peter Macapia.

Brian remained in New York until 2012, launching his design practice, BOTH, with partner Carmen Trudell and beginning teaching with simultaneous appointments at Rutgers University and Pratt Institute from 2008 to 2012. Brian was awarded the Virginia Teaching Fellowship at the University of Virginia and moved to Charlottesville. In 2014 he accepted a tenure track appointment in the Landscape Architecture Department at UVA where he remained until 2016. Most recently, Brian has held the position of Assistant Professor of Architecture at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo; happy to be home in California where he was born and raised.

Brian Osborn’s current work champions the use of environmental sensing techniques as both generative design practice and framework for design research. Brian applies this scholarship through his teaching of 5th year thesis studios at Cal Poly as well as through a parallel research agenda that investigates the ways in which materials, both organic and inorganic, behave dynamically in relation to their environments toward the production of form and experience. In addition, Brian also teaches second-year building science and technology courses at Cal Poly where he coordinates content in the area of site and contextual systems. His work and writing has been featured in several books, including: Landscape Architecture and Digital Techniques, edited by Jillian Walliss, Representing Landscapes: Hybrid by Nadia Amoroso, Performative Materials in Architecture and Design by Rashida Ng, and Codify, by Bradley Cantrell.