

**AN IMAGINARY FIRST YEAR DESIGN COURSE**

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**Abstract:** First year design has initiation as a common denominator amongst all curricula in schools of architecture. The preparation and the anticipation for the choice made by the students and their expectations for the ‘journey’ that begins, culminate in this specific moment, which will soon prove to be the first in a series of such instances that wait to be experienced.

As such – the first in a series of architectural design experiences and points of architectural epiphany – first year design requires strategic planning since it represents the awakening towards consciousness in architectural composition. Methods of approach, analytic processes, representational tools are taught on one hand, inspirational thinking, abstract expression, and abilities to bridge different disciplines is sought and triggered on the other.

This paper gives an insight to an imaginary first year design course based on a number of experiences: a critical approach of the first year design studio in the school of architecture, art and planning of Cornell University, in the late eighties. An analysis of a series of influential articles, papers, statements, addresses, essays and course overviews on the education of the architect and the first-year architectural design course, will assist in gathering information for the education of young architects.

The scope of the paper is to re-establish the way we see pedagogy in architectural education, through a curriculum on top of the academic program but in direct relationship with it. The theme: “Dreaming First Year Design Education: Utopias, Expectations and Reality”, gives this opportunity to express these thoughts, which happen to be more realistic than utopian, since all educators seem to function in a similar manner.

keywords: initiation, journey, imaginary, impromptu, consciousness

Imaginary as an adjective is used in this title in the platonic manner of the ideal; a utopia that does not suggest an unattainable future, but one that presents a situation “up there, in heaven” that functions according to a system, the way it should, as one person or more feel it should. At the same time it asks of this person or people to abide by its rules – their rules – not by heading up in the clouds but by living according to them in their very pragmatic and every day life. It also represents my skepticism on the institutionalized system and set of objectives of how an education occurs, since I am convinced that specified and codified teachings are boring to listen to and follow where as confusion and impromptu discussions are the real virtues of architectural academia.

“... the possibility of the right program is a myth, and the belief that the program is the essential carrier of a pedagogical position - that it both says what is most important about learning to be an architect and does so straightforwardly - is a fiction.” That is what Peggy Deamer, Assistant Dean at Yale University's School of Architecture, underlines in her published essay in *Perspecta*, #36, with the title: “First Year: The fictions of Studio Design”. She continues to determine that more essential than the program are the network of relations, “the exchange between critic and student, between student and product, between critic and product” and thus if “we are interested in producing an architectural citizen, a person interested in contributing to civic life via her/his skills as an architect - the entire net of relationships of the studio teaching - the critic, the program, the object and the student—needs to be examined.”

To this systematic and very real assessment, I remembered my Deans' welcome address in my freshman year in Cornell University back in 1988. To be exact I found his words – the same ones that he used to greet us upon our arrival – on a keynote address that Prof. William McMinn gave for a symposium in the school of Architecture and Urban Design of Kansas University in November 1990 entitled “The liberal Education of Architects”. Amongst many he said and wrote: “Perhaps a liberal education occurs best in the personal relations between faculty and students, students and students, as well as in the extracurricular enrichment of exhibits, concerts, travel, lectures, and thoughtful discourse late in the evening in the local coffee shop or the famed all-night sessions in

the studio. Perhaps it is here, in these activities that challenge the mind, the senses, and often the body, that students recognize the world around them, and which becomes the foundation for the liberal education for the architect. Perhaps it is here, rather than the formalized packages of knowledge called liberal arts courses collected in hourly measure, that ensure a liberal education. No other discipline of education has this informal arena of discussion and inquiry; one which develops individual and group relationships and promotes an understanding of complex environments.” (Domer and Spreckelmeyer, 1991)

McMinn spoke of the studio as the hive of architectural buzz, humming and vibrating with ideas, challenges, debates, fights, revelations and conquests. He also suggested that which we all soon discovered in our first year and the rest of our years in Cornell; the extension of space from studio to the coffee shop, the bar, nature, the public building, a concert hall, a movie theatre, a construction site; also the expansion of time from the programmed hours, to all-nighters one after the other, to overlaps between courses, to power sleep sessions, to truancies for explorations.

What also came as a reality was our relation with our teachers. In the most informal manner we communicated with them on a first-name basis as if we were schoolmates and we also received in the most formal sense their criticism on architecture.

This informal character of our relationship with our teachers on the one hand, their harsh but justified criticism on our projects based on the twofold “you say it, you show it” on the other, the talks about architecture all the time, the sketchbook to have around even in a theatre so as to exercise in blind drawings, the proof that they don’t tell us something that they do not believe it but the live by it themselves, the ability to make sense and after a while to not make sense, the heavy whys’ on the analysis of the context and the personal interest in your inspirations and thoughts, the excruciating corrections on our verbal skills of communicating an idea and their openness in its representation – as long as it showed what we had just said that it will – the search for an underneath thesis, for a hidden agenda which had nothing to do with the program of a building but had everything to do with its architecture, the constant re-reading and redefining of the program as if to underscore its inability to sustain essential information unless we reveal it by

questioning and contradicting it, are some of these aspects that were not described in the overview of the courses.

In a statement delivered at a conference at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, in 1974, Colin Rowe addressing the subject of Architectural Education in the USA, makes a parallelism between christianity and modern architecture, adopts a “pseudo-theological tone” and refers to architectural education as if it was the apple from the tree of knowledge; simultaneously a temptation and a trap. He continues in his well-known sarcastic manner to presume architectural education to be a very simple matter; and the task of the educator specific as the following:

1. to encourage the student to believe in architecture and Modern architecture;
2. to encourage the student to be skeptical about architecture and Modern architecture; and
3. then to cause the student to manipulate, with passion and intelligence, the subjects or objects of his conviction and doubt. (Rowe, 1996)

In another case, Colin Rowe was asked about some extra but essential requirements for the education of the architect. He said that there should be two courses required of all architects; first, a history of ideas, how they develop, influence each other, and inform people and cultures; second, geography, to understand the nature of the physical world, the sense of place, and relations between the environment and human development within it. A third possible course was the discipline of a second language, which enriches the first language in its use and expression. (Domer and Spreckelmeyer, 1991)

Stephen Grabow, from the University of Kansas gave in the same symposium about the liberal education of architects, a prefatory address with the title “Sailboats and Sonatas”. And by borrowing from Gestalt psychology the term “isomorphic correspondence” – the idea of similar structural relationships occurring in different media – he related Bernoulli’s principle (which states that if a moving stream passes across a column of air or liquid, the pressure is reduced over the column – as if the force of the stream going over it “pushed aside” gravity momentarily), with the lurch that you feel when you bring the sail of a sailboat into the right aerodynamic curvature, and the roof of the Kimbell Art Museum by Louis Kahn

thus connecting architecture to science. In the same manner he connected architecture with the arts through music and more specific with Beethoven's sonatas through rhythm, harmony, proportion, alternation, repetition, variation, in composition and by the ability of both – architecture and music – to give form and shape to the tensions, ambiguities, contrasts and conflicts that permeate our feelings. (Domer and Spreckelmeyer, 1991)

In the zeitgeist of the sixties, Hans Hollein publishes his manifesto in the Viennese architecture magazine *Bau*, entitled “Alles ist Architektur” – “Everything is Architecture”. His everythingizing project echoes the multidisciplinary in schools, magazines, and practice that was briefly to sweep through architectural schools toward the end of the 1960s. “Alles ist Architektur” is deeply imbued with the decade's countercultural revolt against the narrow conformism of the 1950s. Whether more somber - as with Debord and the Situationists, the Groupe Utopie in France, and Herbert Marcuse in California - or more madcap and Pop - as with Archigram in England, Archizoom in Italy, and the Metabolists in Japan - the basic approach was the same. Hollein's own revolt was paralleled by similar developments in all fields of arts and sciences. At the same time Hollein was writing “Everything is Architecture,” Joseph Beuys was claiming “Everything is Art,” and John Cage “Everything we do is Music.” (Lefaivre, 2003)

Alberto Perez-Gomez in his introductory essay in 1999, entitled “Education of an Architect: Unravelling a Point of View” for the republication of the book “Education of an Architect: A Point of View. The Cooper Union School of Art & Architecture” gathers in his conclusion the following: “... the architect needs to be well-educated, not as a filing cabinet of specialized know-how and discrete information but rather as someone who knows where he or she stands, becoming responsible for a personal making in view of the dilemmas of contemporary culture, understanding *why* one makes (and what one accepts as an ethical task), and not only *how*. We have come to realize that words are indeed important and that the architect must learn to articulate poetic intentions in language, grounded in history, whose horizon, like the space of architecture, is also linguistic. The ethical imperative of architecture demands that we learn to speak properly in order to act properly. Our fragmented and often hidden traditions must be reconstructed through language, and this discourse, our stories, truly our memory, can then

effectively be projected into work as a conjecture for a “better life” through the architect’s ethical imagination. Language is not merely a convention. When it speaks through us to reveal something significant, it discloses something other that grounds it, a more-than-human world. By analogy, architecture operates in its own universe of discourse, opening up worlds for human action, novel poetic sites for dwelling that must be construed as spatio-temporal situations, not only as objective spaces or aestheticized forms” (Hejduk, 1999)

If the First Year Design Course was an architectural project what will its program be? How would one begin to analyze the aspects and areas of knowledge that need to be included? What would the scope of such an introductory class be? Which would be the key parameters that would safeguard its results? Do we know what these results ought to be?

Professors Val Warke and Mark Morris in their course overview for the First-Year Design Studio in the Architecture School of Cornell University for the Academic Year 2007-08, describe their work in the following manner:

“This semester will entail a journey: one that implicates new skills and techniques, that provokes unforeseen and unforeseeable ideas, and that reveals and suggests a variety of social operations. But the journey will be unlike any other you may have encountered in an academic situation: straight paths will be consistently interrupted by irregular bumps and meanders.

The topic that will drive the semester both as metaphor and device is the 'Archipelago', and it will serve to introduce the following themes that will be elaborated throughout the first semester: De-familiarization, Abstraction, Space, Speculation, Internal Dialog, External Dialog. The Studio encompasses a broad skill-set. Freehand writing, drafting, and orthographic projection will be introduced in addition to a variety of modelling strategies. Scale, proportion, ordering systems, sequence, and translations between two and three dimensions are key aspects of the course. 'Archipelago', as theme, also treats particular notions of site and narrative.”

They introduce the idea of a journey. They also suggest that the road will be bumpy. They don't secure the students with a catalog of events, nor with the fact that they know what they are about to experience. There is no assurance, that the choice to study architecture is countable and specific. A topic is introduced, with an unknown word as if to dazzle them by the splendor of their first assignment; as if it is more important than the tools and mechanisms they will invent to explore it. A sense of a veiled secret scents the air; mystical, welcoming and maybe dangerous...

So studio but also a coffee shop; believe in architecture but be a skeptic with passion and wisdom; orthographic projections but enriched and expressive language as well; isomorphism to relate architecture with arts and sciences via sonatas and sailboats; a journey towards Ithaca "that by now you must already have understood what it means". A network of relations created between teacher/critic and student; between student and student; between an architectural citizen and both architecture and society. A translator between two and three dimensions – maybe even a fourth;

Architecture cannot depend on formal processes of precedent or measured experimentation with codified results. The method is imprecise, the judgement is subjective; the program or problem of architecture needs to be transcribed according to the demands of time, the complexity of the world and its society.

What Deamer underlined emphatically was the importance of the net of relationships of the studio teaching and the failure of a program to hold an axiomatic value; what McMinn exemplified was the expansion of these relations out of the school defined area; what Rowe urged us to do was to demystify architectural education as a religion whose followers will be accepted in the scheme and that we need to stand with passion and intelligence against the irrationalities of a doctrine; what Grabow applied was a way – isomorphism – to create bridges with the arts and the sciences; what Hollein manifested was that "everything is architecture"; what Perez-Gomez suggested was that by learning to speak properly we act properly in architecture and that we have to enter in the discussion of the education of the architect the *why* and not be content with the *how*; what Warke and Morris initiated was a journey of discovery.

Yet there are constants which need to be met. But the variants are so many and constitute the real treasure of architecture. And still the introduction to architecture is not in either.

It might be on the learning of things that we already know by looking at them through a new filter. It might be the understanding of a different kind of thinking that is needed to present the idea, which will become architecture. It might also be “that architecture really does not exist. Only a work of architecture exists. Architecture does exist in the mind. Someone who does a work of architecture does it as an offering to the spirit of architecture... a spirit which knows no style, knows no techniques, no method. It just waits for that which presents itself. There is architecture, and it is the embodiment of the unmeasurable,” as Luis Kahn suggests.

We need to initiate the new students to this irrational, confusing and self-contradictory new world. An educator could undermine his or her own conceptions of how architecture is taught, by constantly challenging his or her definition and concepts of architecture. But it is up to the personal relations that we establish with the students; it is up to this impromptu curriculum, outside of the academic program that will engage them in the seriousness of their choice. To make them understand that the real task is to achieve consciousness and not authority in architecture and in their lives. And to that one has to offer only comradeship, since it is not a prerequisite for educators to have achieved it nor does it come with experience alone.

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