

# Actions to Reset Studio Culture: A Case Study

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**Decolonization isn't only reclaiming aggressively settled territories, it is also reclaiming the traditions and processes inherited from the logic of colonization. In architectural education, agency is evaluated through form, aesthetics, and systems. However, could a new pedagogical approach that measures architecture through the representation of its constituents lead to social values in the discipline? Could this shift in studio education create an environment that incorporates student diversity rather than neutralizing it? In the Fall of 2020, the instructors and students of a third-year architectural design studio at the University of New Mexico leveraged the drastic change in platforms of learning to challenge and reset traditional pedagogical models in these spaces.**

## INTRODUCTION

This paper details the actions taken to restructure the architecture studio pedagogy and environment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, while confronting realizations about systemic racism, inequalities, and exclusions in academia. The pandemic alone has redefined the ways we feel about urban density, public spaces, and homes as they've been retrofitted to act as a catch-all for our lives. In many ways, having the backdrop of our homes forces us to present and own realities about our lives, all the while the exposure can surface the disparities between us.

With most schools in the country have transitioned to some format of online teaching; we have an opportunity to reset architectural education and commit to new social values. This specific case study is about taking advantage of the unprecedented virtual format and challenge the model of the architecture studio to directly deal with issues of equity both in the classroom and in the subject matter. Throughout the paper, we will present a contrast between traditional models and transformative actions taken to include culturally and economically diverse students.

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE PROJECT AT UNM

In Fall 2020, The University of New Mexico (UNM) joined the Student Experience Project (SEP), a cohort of the College Transition Collaborative (CTC) that seeks to increase degree attainment through creating equitable learning environments and fostering a sense of belonging on campus by exploring new methods of inclusion through studio policies and syllabus language.<sup>1</sup> Three faculty from the School of Architecture + Planning (SA+P) applied to this study claiming that the architectural studio was riddled with Eurocentric ideals that have gone unchallenged, despite having a student body that is growing increasingly more diverse.<sup>2</sup> Chosen by SEP as Implementation Fellows, these faculty members were tasked to implement SEP guidelines to create a more inclusive studio culture in fundamental and transitional studios.

Beyond the SEP parameters of revising the studio syllabus for active de-stigmatization of available resources and adhering to a growth mindset, the fellows also used the same breath of energy to restructure studio formats and policies. The goal was to eliminate unproductive colonized hierarchies in architecture education and allow a new environment to re-orient studio content towards social justice issues. The question that guided the fellows asked: if more inclusive pedagogies reverse the (racist, exclusive, toxic) culture of the architectural studio, and collectively builds towards an (equitable, inclusive, healthy) culture, does that produce more student success and ultimately a more diverse discourse and profession?

## NEW SUBJECTS FOR THE STUDIO

Entering the UNM 2020-21 Academic Year, it was clear that over a few summer months, we would be spatially distributed throughout the region and country taking shelter with loved ones. Coupled with a polarizing election year and civil unrest; conversations about mental wellness and politics that were once too difficult to have were becoming the first thing on everyone's mind. In addition, the COVID-19 outbreak that occurred in the early months of 2020, caused the Spring semester to abruptly transition to an online learning format. This impact interrupted the student's development of critical digital skill-sets and cohort building, contributing to an overall loss of confidence and optimism (Figure 1). It was clear that

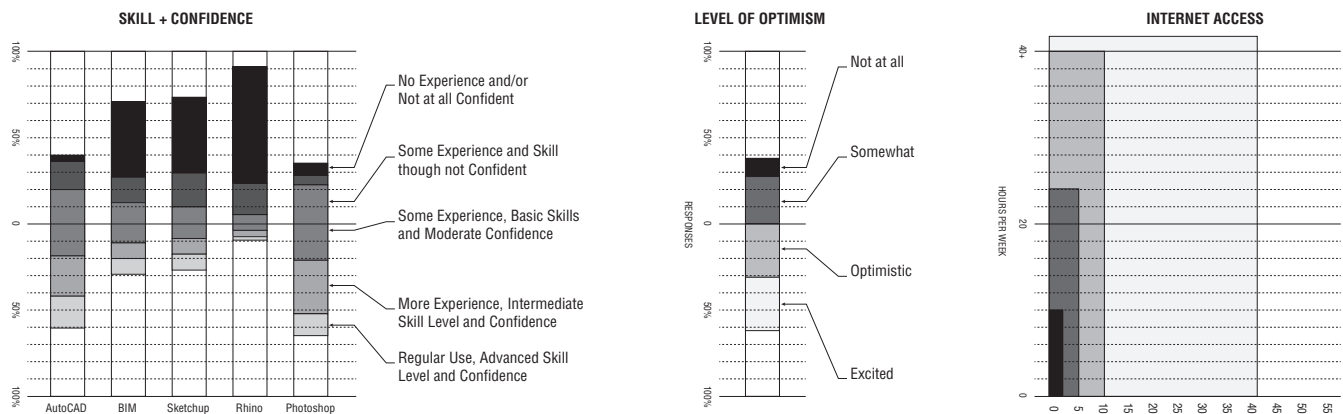


Figure 1. Survey measuring students access to platforms, levels of confidence and optimism entering the Fall 2020 semester. Survey designed by Michaele Pride (studio coordinator), Cesar A. Lopez, Alaa Quraishi.

rather than asking students to assimilate to the studio; the syllabus, policies, and project briefs all needed to reflect the students and the physical and online context.

**Action 1—Including the Community:** The UNM SA+P is one of the most affordable design educations in the country. Beyond low tuition, the city of Albuquerque has an overall low cost of living, taking the edge off students who are experiencing financial pressures while undertaking such a demanding form of study.<sup>3</sup> However, living in such an affordable city also means that students are living in communities that have likely been discounted by architects and planners. Polling students on the first day revealed no student grew up in a custom designed home. Instead, they all learned to fit into what their families were able to afford. This means their idea of who architecture is for, skews toward privileged individuals and institutions who could afford design.

**Action 2—Including the Profession:** In the American Southwest region, patterns of population growth include more diverse demographics. The effects of an architectural education in which diversity is valued will yield to a transformation of how designers interface these growing populations. The architects and planners entering practice today will have a key role in shaping the region. There lies an opportunity to prevent the established exclusion dynamics that riddle major cities today such as deprivation of public and recreation spaces, and the economic driven segregation of communities.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the UNM SA+P is the only accredited school in the state of New Mexico. Because our graduates tend to stay in the region to practice, this suggests that many architectural practices within the state are run by alumni of the School. Instilling social justice values in future practitioners of the region allows for architects and planners to design with the community in mind.

**Action 3—Including the Students:** Collaborating with students in a state with the second highest poverty rate in the country<sup>5</sup>—we realized that within our community, we interact with a

cross section of marginalized populations who need architectural agency the most. Architecture programs situated in cities similar to Albuquerque’s size and demographics can expect to find a number students facing the same challenges (Figure 2). In fact, many students, especially those who are financially disenfranchised, are already balancing a full-time job and a full course load. Only a click away from the classroom to the workplace, the online format has been squeezing away the ability to use spatial distance traveled as a moment of rest.

A new open enrollment model implemented in the last six years has also encouraged a higher retention and graduation rate from the school<sup>6</sup>, moving away from a model that only allows students to succeed if they are independently wealthy and unattached. Historically, in times of economic hardship, college enrollment goes up.<sup>7</sup> Our discipline can capitalize on this moment by broadening our student population to more cultural and economic diversity, fundamentally reorienting the disciplinary values.

However, student diversity doesn’t simply stop at race and ethnicity. There is a diversity of financial backgrounds, political alignments, and age groups. Many of these students are experiencing first-hand the marginalization that our discipline should be actively working against. Therefore, we ask them to leverage their experiences towards a new role for the discipline. As instructors, we further support this approach by exploring a studio environment and content that asks students to identify architectural agency in their projects that address social justice issues—aligning their acts as a designer with their values as individuals in a collective.

## RE-STRUCTURED COMPONENTS OF STUDIO CULTURE + LEARNING

The syllabus for the studio began with a Pedagogical Statement that immediately reframed the studio. We aimed to convey an environment that builds on collective knowledge, detaching from the typical studio where students are indoctrinated into

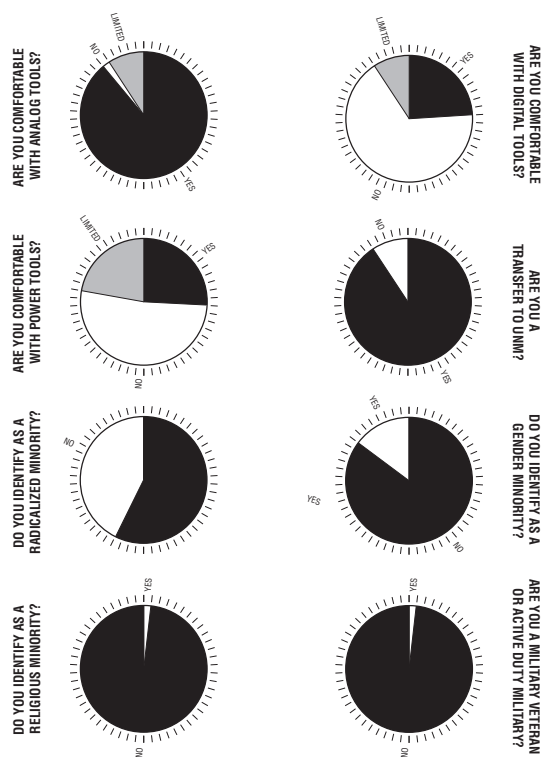


Figure 2. Survey measuring students comfort levels with analog and digital tools as well as their demographics entering the Fall 2020 semester. Survey designed by Michaele Pride (studio coordinator), Cesar A. Lopez, Alaa Quraishi.

the instructor’s ideology. Instead, the studio is formatted to help students develop their ideology individually and within the collective.

*This architectural studio is a place where everyone is encouraged to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table and build on our collective knowledge. Together, we will increase your exposure to the architectural discipline, from learning fundamental and evolving skill sets to developing work that pushes the boundary of the discipline itself. Exploring the fringe is encouraged; exposing topics that might find continuum in your future design thinking. Architecture is not a neutral action; instead, it is inscribed with power dynamics that influence how we live, work, and gather. In this studio, you will be asked to design from a sense of empathy—focusing our agency on marginalized subjects and environments.*

—Excerpt from syllabus

The setting for SEP implementations and our own actions was a third-year undergraduate studio entitled *Building as a Threshold*, which took students on a semester-long investigation on thresholds—threaded together by a series of projects increasing in scale, occupancy, and program. Thresholds were

framed as an architectural device that sets up inclusionary or exclusionary experiences within or around a building. The studio’s placement within the larger curriculum of SA+P is a threshold—where community college transfer students are intersecting with an already closely knit cohort. This is also when, in the curriculum, students are introduced to digital tools of representation.

Additionally, students were experiencing a cultural transitioning in content and dialogue, from fundamental studios framed through the Bauhaus model of hand drafting and crafting. Therefore, beyond the learning objectives, the challenge is to cultivate a *cohort* among the students that will carry on through their upper division studies and quite possibly their professional careers. Creating such a community is difficult and made exponentially more difficult during an online semester.

Like many architecture schools in the country, UNM SA+P transitioned to an online semester, humorously referred to by the students as a zoom-ester. This presented many challenges that not only required instructors to learn how to teach online but for students to learn how to learn online. The unconventional format intersected with unprecedented times became the perfect moment to introduce new models of architectural education that are primarily supported by spatial formats.

**Action 4—Re-format Studio Space:** In the physical studio space, hierarchies are implied through spatial formats that have gone unquestioned. From the differences of professional and student attire, to the way instructors stand over a student’s desk as they sit in place, a clear power dynamic is struck. The collapsing of domestic and education spaces into Zoom has challenged these dynamics. Athleisure is acceptable for all. Each tile in the software is equally sized and distributed. All domestic spaces are exposed, where our pets and household members prove to be disruptive. In 2020, Zoom became the ‘great equalizer’ of the studio space, as every person is sitting, equally close, and equally seen. The overexposure of our private lives, while uncomfortable for some, eliminates hierarchies and helps students confidently present their ideas. By students and instructors, seemingly on the same level, students can see a bit more of themselves in us.

**Action 5—Re-thinking Attendance:** Typically, a student’s punctuality can be impacted by traffic or mismanagement of time, which are all in their control. However, online, a student’s lateness can be due to poor internet connection or lack of access to a quiet space (Figure 2). Furthermore, students with limited visa permissions or undocumented statuses aren’t just worried about absences leading to drops or a failing grade, it can also impact their ability to stay in the country. Therefore, it’s critical that a studio implements pro-active communication and nimbleness on the part of the instructor, moving away from a zero-tolerance policy.

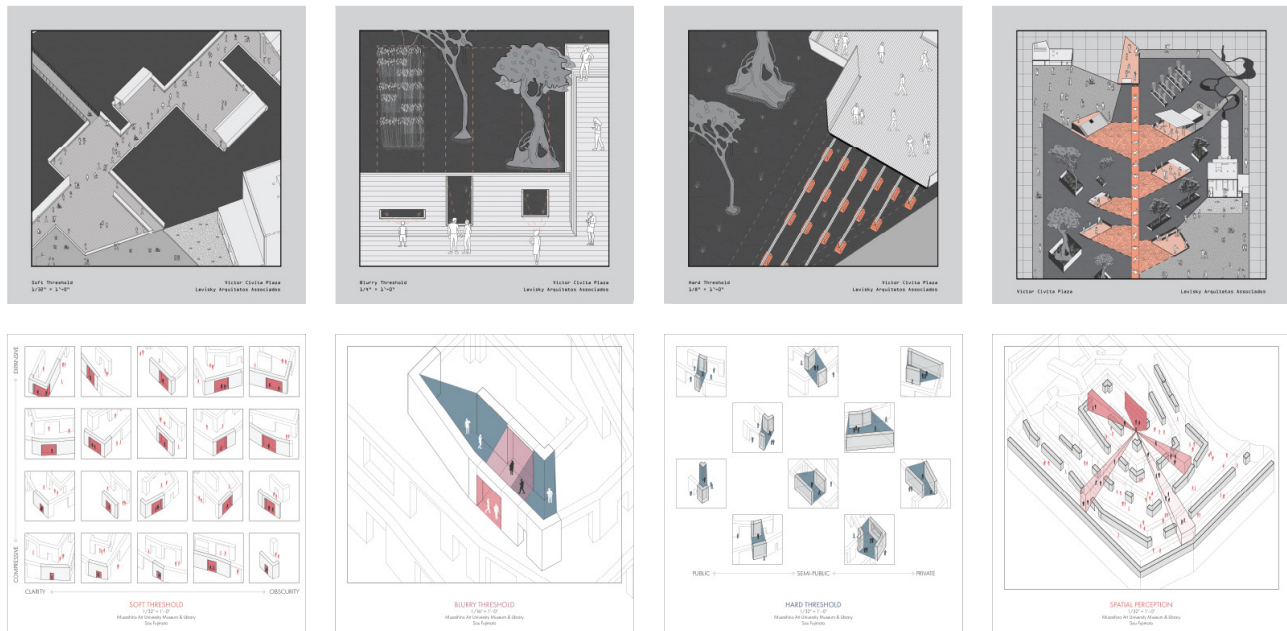


Figure 3. Architectural Investigations from Exercise 1: *Developing your Lens*. Work by: Ryan R. Sotelo / Victor Civita Plaza – Open Museum of Sustainability by Levisky Arquitectos Asociados & Anna Dietzsch, Davis Brody Bond (upper row), Brooke Lynn Williams / Musashino Library by Sou Fujimoto (lower-row).

**Action 6—Re-thinking Group Work:** Elaborate, heavy, expensive, massive site models *were* part for the third-year studio experience at UNM SA+P. The entire studio would spend their own resources in collaborating to build these types of models, and tensions would usually blossom in that collaboration. Instead, a set of mapping exercises framed on the analysis of the neighborhood’s constituents were produced in cross sectional groups, allowing students to build closer relationships in their cohort that, at most times, are only a sea of Zoom boxes on a screen. Transfer students especially appreciated the opportunity to directly communicate, create, and present with their new peers. This also de-emphasized single person authorship as students use pronouns, *we/us* instead of *I/me*.

**Action 7—Re-thinking Desk-crits + Reviews:** The spatial dynamics of a studio review or pinup have inherent hierarchies built-in. A student stands in front of their work as the instructor and other invited guests sit comfortably, legs crossed, but ready to pounce. This experience creates intimidation and can possibly breed resentment to the ways in which feedback is conducted. These forums often result in little value to the student, either because reviewers struggle with a pecking order or the student was too stunted by the intimidation to take away anything meaningful.

The virtual Zoom space helps in giving instructors, students, and guests an equal presence. No one is sitting, no one is standing. People are often overly considerate in making

sure all voices are heard in the larger virtual room. The chat function allows for parallel conversations to occur while the mute or remove control can eject disruptive or toxic behavior. The recording function allows students to be present in the conversation without furiously jotting down every word out of a reviewer’s mouth. Zoom re-choreographs spaces and formats for presentation that foster a conversation where growth stems from a productive dialogue that is inclusive of student voices.

### EMERGING NEW STUDIO CONTENT

Typically, a studio term starts with an assignment brief for a project that lists a site, programs, areas, and other parameters, all of which are chosen by the instructor. The ‘do as you’re told’ mentality is challenged by calling each brief an exercise, implying that the intent is to build confidence and skill. Because that is the reality. No one masters anything in architecture school; they build confidence towards acting as a designer. While this paper’s subject are revised policies and components—it would be difficult for a reader to access its viability without discussing how the studio content and sequence unfolded in this new environment. Below is the studio sequence that *restructured* traditional studio components towards equity in the content.

#### Exercise I: Developing Your Lens

At this point in the student’s course of study, the *threshold* is one of the most ambiguous architectural terms they have heard. Depending on instructors and readings they have



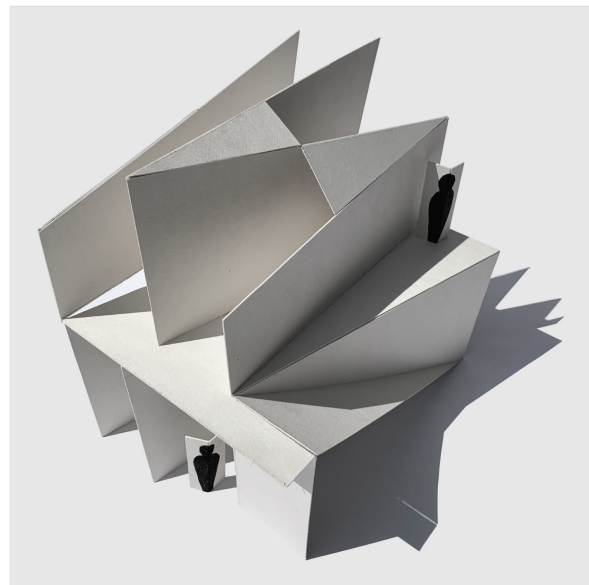
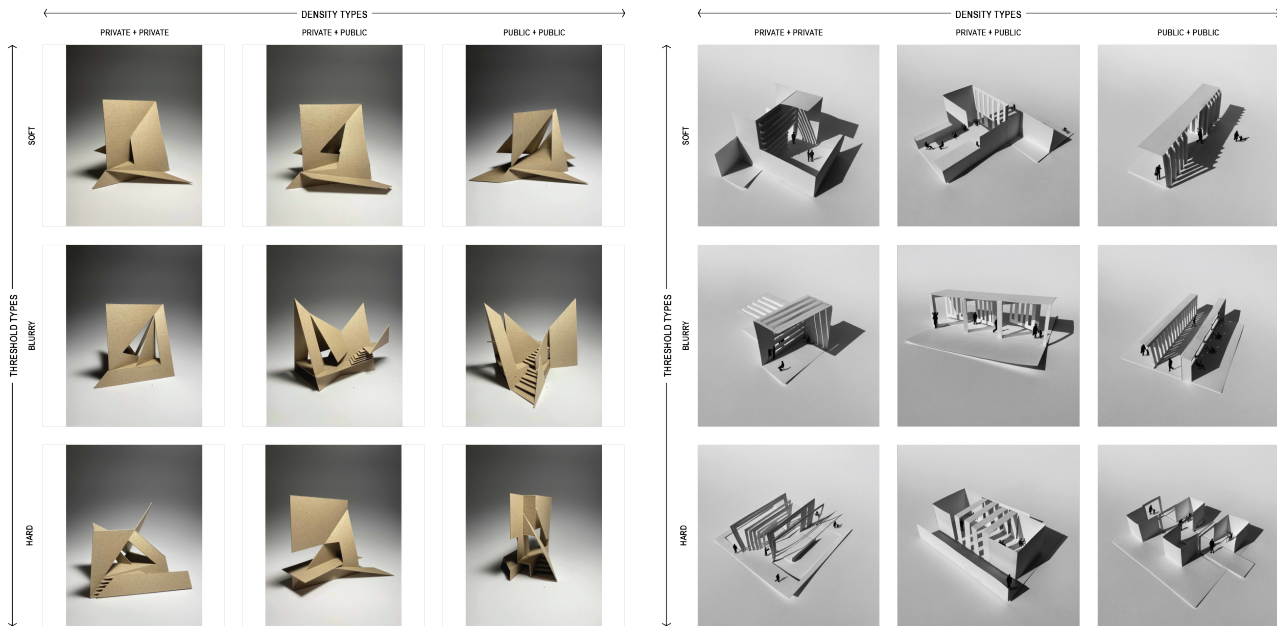


Figure 4. Simplified physical modeling techniques from Exercise 2: *Reoolings Matrix* (above) and *Reconciliation Models* (below). Work by: Brenden Alcalá (upper and lower-left), Joshua Jon Harder (upper-right), Amber Raquel Grovet (lower-right).

consulted in previous studies, the definition might dramatically vary; from passages, boundaries, openings, to even a space within itself. So, we asked students to develop a *lens* by unpacking a series of case-studies that could help them define thresholds for themselves.

**Action 8—Re-framing Precedents:** “This is not your typical precedent analysis,” we told the students. Rather than measuring a building of similar scale and type and treating the ‘author’ as a singular person with genius ideations, we asked them to

avoid a comprehensive study of the building. Instead, they looked into critical architectural elements and spatial properties to investigate, document, draw, and ultimately critique threshold conditions within those precedents.

The focus of their investigation was to evaluate thresholds from the perspective of the subject and the formation of a constituency, adding a new metric to measuring success. To present their arguments, students were asked to zoom in and identify threshold conditions that may have latent power

dynamics and define them along three definitions: *soft*, *blurry*, and *hard* (Figure 3). There were no right or wrong answers in this study—rather, the requirement for students to legibly conceptualize and rationalize their own definition of threshold.

### Exercise II: Retooling Towards your Ideas

A precedent analysis is often followed by an attempt to regurgitate the precedent itself in the subsequent studies. By reframing the precedent project as an investigation of architectural conditions, students enter the iterative phase of Exercise II with a diverse understanding of thresholds. They were asked to retool their *soft*, *blurry*, and *hard* thresholds in response to three types of social densities: *public-to-public*, *public-to-private*, and *private-to-private*—that resulted in a nine-square matrix. The intent was for students to expand upon the rigidity, malleability, and flexibility of thresholds found in their precedent studies, making the formal devices their own.

Next, students took their toolkit of threshold devices and combined them into a single model called the *reconciliation model*. This model inserted a new subject of their choosing in a structure simply intended for gathering, where retooled thresholds would inform interactions (Figure 4). At this point, the students had developed a sense of confidence and direction and began to naturally insert their politics in representing public or private spaces. To truly give students a sense of the spaces being created, it was critical that in an online semester, we figure out a way to produce physical models while keeping in mind the student's access to materials, tools, and space for production (Figure 2).

**Action 9—Re-working Models:** Architectural education often either forgets or ignores the cost of materials and printing. For students at the UNM SA+P, it would be disingenuous to ignore that many students are already working part and full-time jobs to maintain a living while in school. Here is where the Zoomester's equalizing force strikes again as students do not pay for print upon print. To re-incorporate a physical component while being mindful of student resources, we anonymously polled students about what types of fabrication capacities they had, and designed an exercise that used affordable, easily manipulatable chipboard for a series of abstracted interrogations drawn from their findings in the precedent study.<sup>8</sup> This allowed students to develop design skills off-screen, and further develop them digitally.

The models produced were *flattened* models as they used materials without thickness. In many ways, students become even more creative as they iterated quickly and therefore took greater risks. We then shifted back into the digital modeling software to provide material thickness and circulation, ultimately leading to a new *Architectural Archetype* of the students own creation—giving students a conceptual reference they would carry forward in the final project (Figure 5).

**Action 10—Re-presenting Vocabulary:** Let's face it. Architectural vocabulary can easily get out of hand. When working with students from one of the poorest public-school systems in the country, it was important to speak to students about conceptual thinking and development in an accessible way—while still instilling a sense of belonging. We *re-present* these terms with their standard definitions and their architectural interpretations.

**Retool** (*As we will use it*): you will be retooling the thresholds identified by adjusting its formal properties such as: scale, materiality, porosity, among others in response to specific conditions.

(*As Oxford defines it*): adapt or alter (someone or something) to make them more useful or suitable: *he likes to retool the old stories to make them relevant for today's kids.*

**Reconcile** (*As we will use it*): you will incorporate each threshold type into a single model where they will not only co-exist but work in harmony with one another and ideally suggest new conceptual understandings. This may require adjustments and calibration to reconcile all threshold types.

(*As Oxford defines it*): cause to coexist in harmony; make or show to be compatible: a landscape in which inner and outer vision were reconciled | you may have to adjust your ideal to reconcile it with reality. • make (one account) consistent with another, especially by allowing for transactions begun but not yet completed: it is not necessary to reconcile the cost accounts to the financial accounts.

—Excerpt from Exercise II brief

### Exercise III: A New Social Justice Typology

As we approached the final project, the students—through a series of readings, forum discussions, and case studies—had a clear sense that thresholds play a key role in the comfort and accessibility of a building. To the students, the public was a fleeting concept in a socially distanced world politically polarized. To address their studies and their unresolved feelings towards the public, we proposed a final project that captured the social issues and civil unrest playing out today, an *Alternative Response Unit*.

Over the summer months, as the number of protests grew around the country—the city of Albuquerque, which already has a steady rhythm of crime, experienced several violent demonstrations. In July, President Donald Trump proposed sending federal agents into Albuquerque and other U.S. cities to control the demonstrations.<sup>9</sup> This, in turn, prompted a debate surrounding policing in the community. For many students, this was already a sensitive topic, as some of the students had positive, negative, and firsthand experiences with law enforcement.

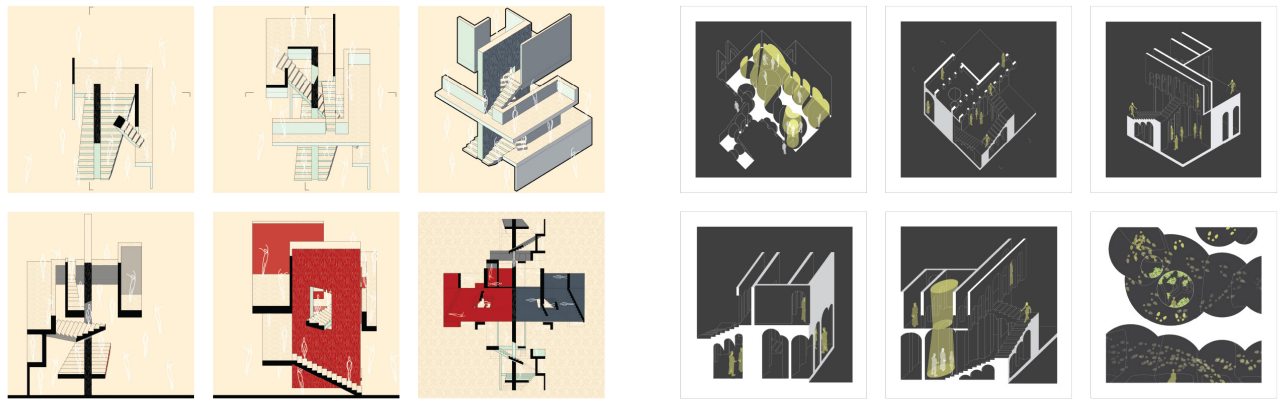


Figure 5. *Architectural Archetype* drawings further developing flattened model explorations. Work by: Krystle Amber Chapman (left), Danni Mosher (right).

The site itself acts as a threshold, sitting on a five-point intersection on the corner of the UNM campus. This prompted students to understand adjacent constituencies, including homelessness, home-owners, business patrons, and students. The typology of a police station is challenged to incorporate a community presence. Charged phrases such as ‘Defund the Police’ were quickly brought up. Instead of allowing conversations to center around political leanings, students presented their politics through their design, focusing on the architecture. Therefore, typical design project parameters and deliverables were restructured to give students agency in the prompt.

**Action 11—Re-presenting Program:** Typically, program in a final project is chosen by the instructor and strictly enforced, leaving little room for students to express their own interpretations on the subject or theme. Therefore, we provided a catalog of programs students could select from to composition activity within the building that better aligned with their values. This empowers students to act as a designer and vocal member of their community.

**Action 12—Re-presenting Deliverables:** Rather than students producing the traditional set of drawings: plans, sections, elevations, and perspectives; we asked students to imagine new representational drawing types that hybridize these projections while simultaneously limiting their workload in an already stressful time. Specific focus was given to subjects as opposed to their own authorship. These new drawings allowed students to emphasize their constituent’s narrative experiences through design and new representations.

**Action 13—Re-thinking the Conversation:** In addition to architects, we felt it was critical to expand the voices beyond the discipline, inviting agencies and community members who are actively implementing alternative response units in New Mexico. These multidisciplinary discussions instill in students that architects alone do not have all the answers. Instead, to truly solve the challenges of today, we need to engage outside the discipline.

## CONCLUSION

The implementations guided by the Student Experience Project and our more inclusionary values lent themselves easily in virtual space, where online education already felt like a different world to students and instructors. Spatial formats that were shaped in the virtual realm must now be translated into the physical realm. How does the Zoom equalizer play out in space?

Bringing politics and issues of social justice into the studio environment was difficult, especially given the unprecedented election year and the sensitivities brought on by the pandemic. In this term, students saw the studio as a distraction from the world. The distraction seemed only temporary, and the topics they were constantly overwhelmed by outside of school were suddenly incorporated into their studies in many instances, not just in studio.

The push we have put forward cannot allow us to default to traditional practices. Institutions around the nation are also starting to reframe coursework and insert meaningful and reactionary discourse to our current political climate. In many of these institutions, however, the conversations are extremely insular, but because of the various backgrounds of our students, the approach to these discussions are not homogenized or drowned out in an overly academic tone. The reactionary instinct must continue to restructure our discipline.

## ENDNOTES

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2. The SEP Implementation Fellows in the UNM SA+P Architecture Department included Professor Michael Pride (Studio 3 Coordinator), Assistant Professor Cesar Adrian Lopez, and Lecturer Alaa Quraishi. All fellows contributed to the studio culture policies, components, and learning objectives that are detailed in this paper.
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