

Vaults Versus Memorials: Evoking Fiction in the Architectural Drawing

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Part of a comprehensive studio design project, the exercise presented in this paper is a vehicle to investigate design thinking processes and how students construct intentions. The theme is the book and media. The semester's project begins with seminars on the history of books. The discussion delves into a book's craftsmanship and as a symbol for embodied knowledge and progresses to the roles books have played in society. Expanding the theme, discussion leads to the question of a book's preservation (vault) or its destruction in a digital society (memorial). The exercise is contingent upon the opposition created between the two spheres inherent to the title, *Vaults versus Memorials*. It positions the student in a manner that resists allocation to one sphere or another, an impetus for restructuring specified spheres according to new schemas. Written texts play an interlocutory role during the production of students' drawings. Each of the assigned texts offers an entry point to a tacit learning situation and a restructuring of semantic fields. With reference to Paul Ricoeur's research on interpretation theory, a mental distancing between text and drawing exposes students to ambiguities and the realization that prejudices play a role in understanding and interpreting meaning in the production of a visual work. The act of drawing produces its own frame of reference that we trace in three modes of production. These can be categorized as metaphorical interaction, textual dissection, and the guess. *Vaults versus Memorials* establishes a dialectical situation between explanation and understanding which lends itself to an open investigatory process. With the expansion of theme through drawing and by the depth of inferred meanings, students can speculate as to which interpretation is the most plausible fiction establishing probable, subjective criteria to carry forward during later stages of the design.

INTRODUCTION

Vaults versus Memorials is a drawing exercise that was administered over three spring semesters in two architectural design studios. The exercise is part of the larger theme that investigates media. It seeks to help students (a) identify notions and meanings inherent to the topic, (b) help each student establish

a position relative to the project's theme (c) open the notions and meanings to further inquiry throughout the semester-long project. Part of the first stage of an undergraduate comprehensive design project, the exercise begins with a survey of the role books have played in history, as an artifact of knowledge and as an object placed within the context of libraries. We review the transition from oral to written and visual traditions of books, the history of books, and the potential for their demise. In a survey of the history of libraries, we discuss examples that range from the Laurentian Library's Reading Room (including Ben Nicholson's analysis of its floors),¹ and the Baroque spatial glorification of dwellings of knowledge in the St. Gallen Monastery Library to more contemporary examples including the Seattle Public Library and libraries utilizing automated systems of book storage. We seek to open discourses about how spatial context and these diverse modes of storage and their expression condition meanings, and likewise, how books and their texts within the space of the library could alter the interpretation of the room in which they are kept.

Following the above seminars on the theme, an introduction to the exercise expands discussions on whether books are redundant or not, and what they stand for if they were to be destroyed. We look at memorials to books including the Bebelplatz Library, Berlin by Micha Ullman² and Rachel Whiteread's plaster casts.³ The discussions further delve into a book's history and craftsmanship (size, binding, material, texture, font, etc.), an artifact as a symbol for embodied knowledge such as in the book works of Anselm Kiefer.⁴ They lead to the question of a book's preservation (vault) or its destruction in a digital society (memorial). If it were to become obsolete, what is there to act as a witness of historical action, and does its absence augment the reading of its meaning? The setting up of oppositions in the exercise, we contend, coerces students into delving into the imaginary vis-à-vis a future condition. It invites each student to take a position relative to the project's narrative. The speculative nature of the exercise allows the instructor to refer back to each student's findings and to help each student question how their design perspective changes as they are introduced to other criteria and including its impact on the development of the project's concept. Theoretical arguments presented in this paper refer to a portion of Paul Ricoeur's work on interpretation theory, part of

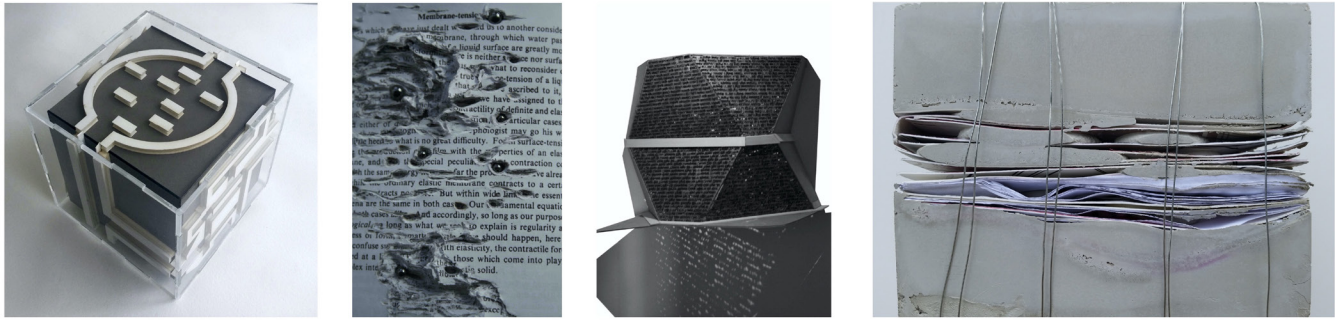


Figure 1. *The Book Hackers* : an introduction to the text; an initial exercise assigned prior to the Vaults versus Memorials exercise

a process that positions students to enable a design to uncover unforeseen meanings in their work.⁵ The theme provides a rich basis for an open investigatory process and the restructuring of ideas later in the design of the building project.

THE EXERCISE'S FRAMEWORK

A written text plays an interlocutory role in the design process. Students begin with an initial reading of an assigned text. The authors and texts include Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, Beatriz Colomina's *Privacy and Publicity*, Marcos Cruz's *Inhabitable Interfaces*, Manuel DeLanda's *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Elizabeth Grosz's *Architecture from the Outside*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Rosalind E. Krauss' *X Marks the Spot*, Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman*, D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form*. The texts were chosen to highlight diverse forms of knowledge and to show how each text's structure, content, and mode of thinking and expression speak about the singularity of its form, theme, or logic. Spatial qualities within the texts themselves were sometimes of the first order. At other times, a text's hierarchy, internal construction, or a particular way it manifests conceptual matter was foregrounded. We chose texts where either parts or the whole offer sufficient content for each student to uncover discursive formations in the mind and in dialogue with the making of drawings. For example, Kafka agonizes the human psyche in an irresolvable paradox. Thompson's logical exposition of phenomena (versus the instrumentality of scientific proof) opens a study of poetics in scientific forms. Cruz's wall-centric relationships among the human body, wall inhabitation, and inhabitable space place the reader in a transient condition between virtual and real. Each text offers an entry point to a tacit learning situation and a restructuring of semantic fields in the visual domain. An initial 3D model exercise, *Book Hackers*, immerses students into the sensorial and requires a physical transformation of the text to its structure, the content of a passage, or theme (figure 1). Students address the questions: *Can the text of the book speak about its vault or memorial? How can the vault or memorial condition the meaning of the text? Can the architecture of the vault or memorial be read as a text? Can the text establish a dialogue with another form of media substituting the book itself?* The text and these initial questions activate the interpretative process in the students' work and

generate alternative fictions in the artifacts themselves. This "detailing" of the book through making and drawing introduced at the beginning of the design process, helps raise questions beyond practicality. The drawings, then, act as conceptual vessels rather than proof of concept helping students to evolve a design idea toward implementation using progressively more technical drawings to assess and prove feasibility.

The diverse formations presented in the texts aim to accomplish the same enterprise: to engage students with an artifact that opens them to a means of thinking that can uncover notions that guide discourses through later phases of the design project. The text also takes on the role of another task: to ensure that the production of images remains dialogical, or as Richard Kearney states, "attentive to the demands of the other," the larger issues and conceptual formations that loom above one's engagement with the world.⁶ By positioning the student within a design situation that links a specific and finite exercise to the seemingly daunting questions surrounding a world issue such as the demise of books, the operation of dialogical exchange engendered by interpretation and assessment can continue more freely throughout the semester and help avoid superficiality during the later development of the building design project. Other phases of the design project (precedent studies, site analysis, utilitarian program analysis, building assemblies, etc.), can be reflected upon and always anchored to the fictive underpinnings, critical positions, and processes developed early on that guide each student's project. Each phase folds into the enrichment of the comprehensive design proposal and the construing of a framework that redefines the program of the media library (figure 2). For the *Vaults versus Memorials* exercise, the medium and techniques for the drawing are left open to the student's discretion. However, an emphasis is placed on developing the student's awareness of coherence of meaning and expressive character in relation to the choice of medium, technique, and surface treatment. Such choices also feed the translational process, from drawing to the means of representation pursued during the development of the building project.

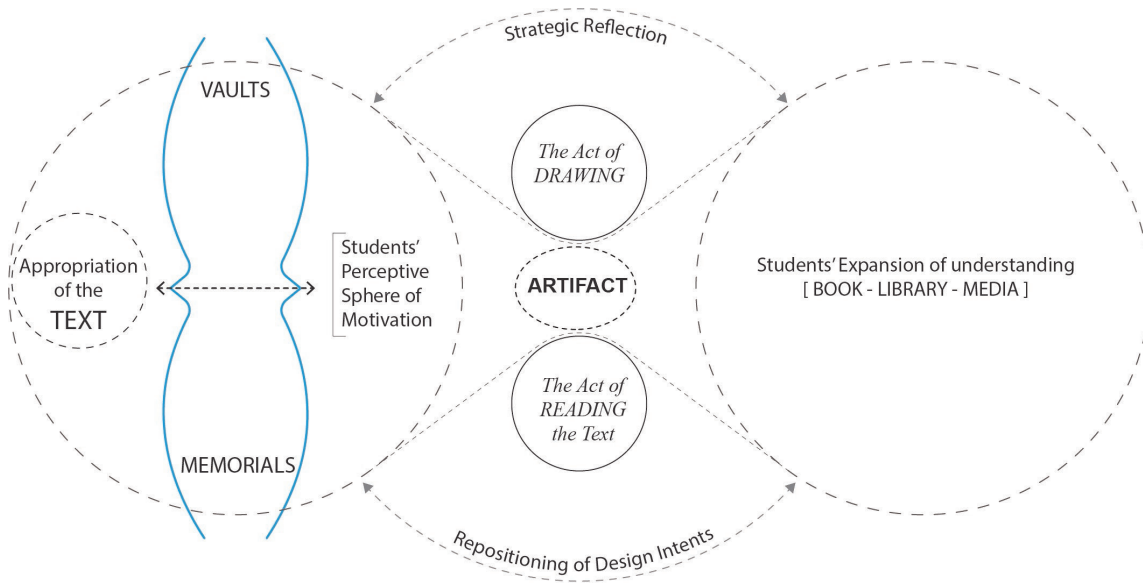


Figure 2. The exercise's framework

ENGAGEMENT OF TEXT AND DRAWING

An internal form of conflict occurs through students' appropriation of a text, "its application to a present situation...."⁷ Paul Ricoeur refers to appropriation as "understanding at and through distance."⁸ Distancing, according to Ricoeur, is the counterpart of appropriation. It mediates any objectification of the text and allows for the generation of self-understanding in front of the work.⁹ For the student, a distanced engagement with the text carries over from the reading to the act of drawing. Distancing in the production of the drawing could be understood as working in parallel with that of the text. It helps students identify domains of experience deciphered from a text and restructure the content of those domains into the body of the drawing (figure 2). Yet the translation of feelings, notions, or concepts from the text always implies an interpretive gap. It implies that interpretation can work between what Ricoeur states as the "ability to identify both explanatory cues in a work that shape plot and theme"¹⁰ as well as gain an overall sense for the work that moves outside what can be explained. The semantic differences at play during the reading and drawing discourage the student from fixating on explanatory forms of meaning and open a window to distinguish the non-ostensive reference the drawing makes to any proposition.

Distanced engagement brings students to the realization that prejudices play an active role in understanding and interpreting meaning in the production of visual work. As part of any interpretive act, detecting prejudices offers a means of comparative analysis with the text, the book, or comment on life (theme). It guides interpretation toward an understanding of the text as essential for acting even while the totality of the author's original intentions remains beyond one's reach. Appropriation together with distanced engagement then is a means of foregrounding

discourse during the making of the drawing. It allows for a space where the drawing gains semantic autonomy but is still guided by the event of the reading (its sense).¹¹ The concept is further reflected in the exercise's structure, by the tension between the two spheres (Vaults versus Memorials) of the exercise's theme in which the student is placed. Together, they situate the student within the dialectic of production that prods the student to avoid adherence to one camp or the other, vault or memorial, and the preservation or memorialization of the book. During the engagement with the text, to choose either might mean to devalue the text's content, dissolving the possibility of bringing new meanings to the work.

METAPHORIC INTERACTION

Appropriation initiates diverse strategies in the exercise. Often, students revert to the basis of a visual language as metaphorical, situating meaning between two or more figures. The figures work in such a way that they deny reference to one domain of experience or the other during metaphoric production. With reference to the work of Edmund Burke, Max Black, Terence Turner, and Paul Ricoeur among others, the association of different domains of experience accounts for interaction between them and an impetus for restructuring them according to new schemas. This interaction approach establishes a basis for new meaning contingent upon the joining of domains and, likewise, resists allocation to one domain or another. Tension occurs between interpretations of figures, and it is this conflict among figures that drives the metaphorical utterance. Its meaning says something from two seemingly unrelated references, and when effective, something about reality.¹²

The inventive nature of metaphor lends itself to interpreting a text that subsequently capitalizes on its metaphorical traits and

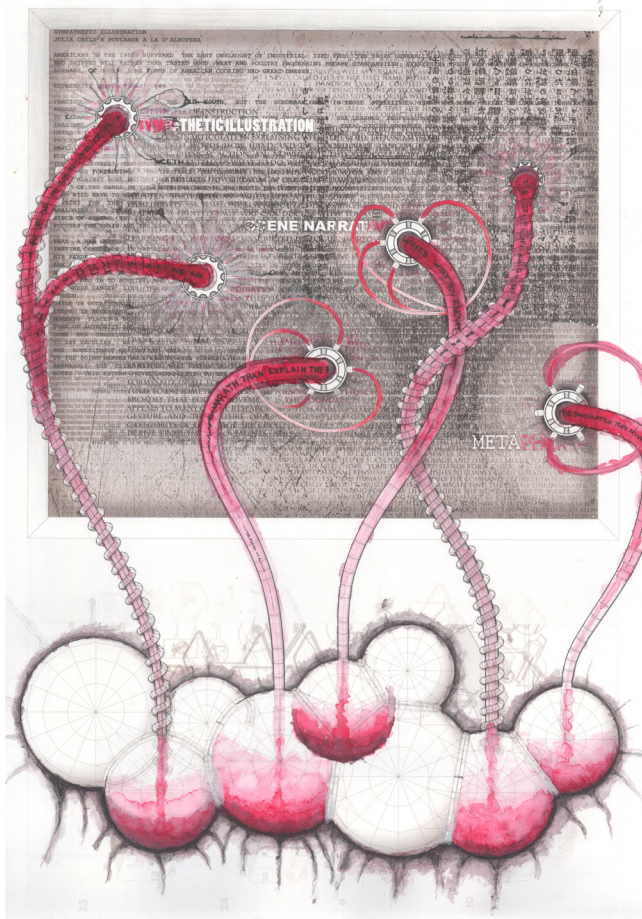


Figure 3. Metaphoric Interaction: The restructuring of content deciphered from a text denotes distinct domains in the body of the drawing.

speculates on them in the visual realm. Whether or not direct reference is made to a sentence or passage, or from conceptual notions emerging from the whole of the text, this means of imagining the world (beyond the text at hand), assures unity in thinking with the dispersion of meanings that can be generated in the drawing. The process of making the drawing entails aberrations made up by the ensemble of images. Sometimes students begin by drawing prescriptive images, identifying literal properties extracted from the text that highlight symbols. In combination, and often in contradiction with one another, the properties bring about the emergence of latent or secondary properties from their interaction, expanding the scope of meaningful experience (figure 3). This way of working between the text and drawing helps the student avoid the trap of literal likenesses, where a referenced image from the text is illustrated in a visual form diminishing its meaning and value as a discursive tool. Metaphors instead work actively, displacing literal interpretations and breeding new meaning from the interaction of often incompatible, disparate parts or domains of experience. The interaction of mechanical and organic domains, for example, brings to the drawing the possibility of building narratives from

metaphorical inferences (figure 4). The inferences remain outside either of the domains but simultaneously are reliant on each domain in their production.

The literal and figurative meanings of visual forms and their interaction¹³ can then be taken apart in dialogue with the student, identifying the semantic traits and how they help construct a broader comprehension of the project's theme through narrative. Both connotative and emotive evocations can be identified with the student and linked back to the text at hand. This back and forth of taking apart and putting back together¹⁴ lends itself to anchoring the meanings one grasps in the imagination and further exploring those meanings in the space of the drawing. Through the eyes of the student, the more salient symbols embedded in a drawing help them identify the differing evocations mentioned above, single out and embed a core issue into the project, and distinguish the diverse mechanisms at work in the formation of their projects.

TEXTUAL DISSECTION

In a textual dissection, the student identifies the text as an archeological site positioned between its preservation and memorialization. Constitutive parts of a text are 'excavated out' and reconstituted into the drawing. The analogy motivates a system of abstract movements. The restructuring identifies with rules of formal constructions and the decoding of meanings found within the text. They are then transferred and encoded into the surface of the paper (figure 5). The student often works intuitively. Each geometrical form identifies with a diverse characteristic that the student seeks to reference. Together, the drawing illustrates differing fragments. The textual strategy in building the drawing becomes a heuristic activity of deciphering the juxtapositions of the various references and their layering. The layers may be perceived as fragments, yet the tension created between the act of making the drawing and the textual references invites the student to coalesce them into revealing a wholeness among pieces and their meanings. In another case, the student constructs in the drawing several hierarchies and strata of information. The identification of different domains, human and natural, are dissected from the text. Differentiated and reordered at different scales, linear and non-linear structures aim to expose networks that cut across scales of time (figure 6). The activity forestalls the solidification of a concept by taking apart and identifying its elements. It helps the student (a) categorize diverse domains of experience and (b) evaluate their saliency with the theme. In each case, the drawing opens a space that invites the student to return to the text and seek out clues that bring deeper insight into the findings. The correlations can reinforce the uncovering of layers in the first place and help guide the student through a process closely tailored to the construct of the student's narrative. In the best of cases, the processes carry over to the projection of differences in internal organizations. Program, for example, is expanded to encompass a social commentary on the theme. The activity invokes a broader discourse about the purpose of the text in the first place, and how the text is a

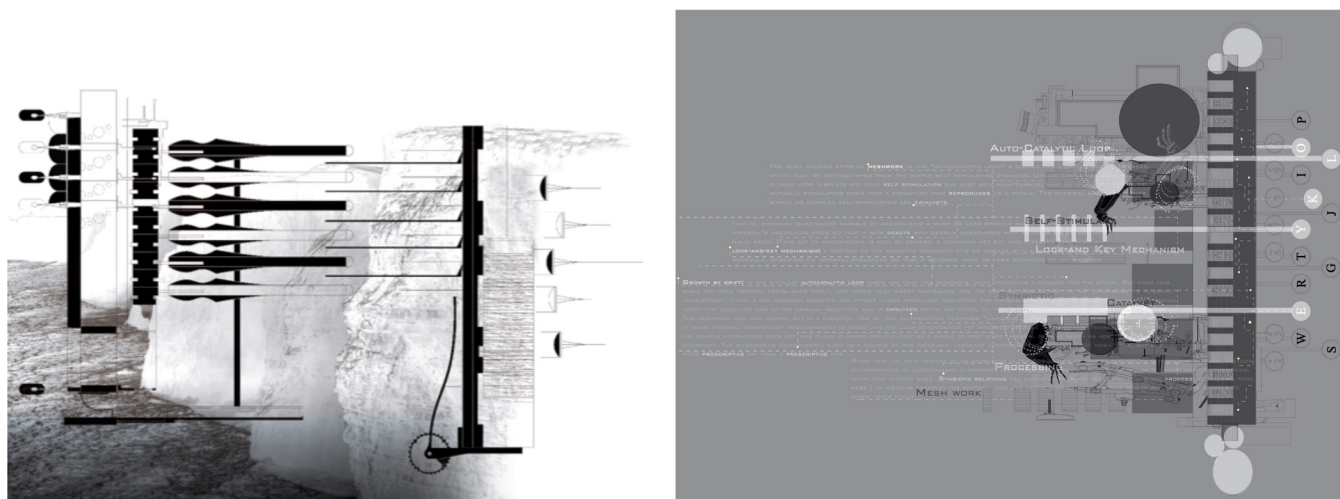


Figure 4. Metaphoric Interaction: The inferences remain outside either of the domains but simultaneously are reliant on each domain in their production. The kinship among domains is brought together through the metaphorical narrative they create.



Figure 5. Textual Dissection: Geometrical constructions identify with the decoding of meanings found within the text.

vehicle to forming a singular view of the project’s theme of the book and media.

In each of the above examples, the elements and their references are identified in the first operation (categorization), while the sense of the work identified during their evaluation opens another avenue for discourse. The elements and their references can then be connected back to the referent, the text, and a deeper comprehension of the author’s ideas by means of this dialogue. Likewise, a return to an analysis of what constitutes the drawing opens explorations into foreseeing their connections to other ideas, issues, or points of view. The text and drawing, therefore, share a space, a scaffolding of sorts where one builds on the other. The student becomes part of the dialogism of a shared event in the space between. It positions them to

reconstruct meanings from a distanced perspective with the goal of opening a singular purview or scope of influence to a more acute understanding of the library theme.

THE GUESS

Sometimes a project demands a leap of faith, a student’s reliance on a guess or vague sense of the source’s meaning. The author’s intentions are beyond their reach.¹⁵ The student surrenders to their fate and precludes the possibility of any direct collocation between text and drawing. The reading is abandoned to the degree to which the text and the content of the drawing cannot coincide.¹⁶ The work of the imagination, however, strangely guides the work of chance. “Distancing” works internally to the student and the work, allowing the drawing to gain semantic autonomy. Semantic autonomy implies the possibility of multiple

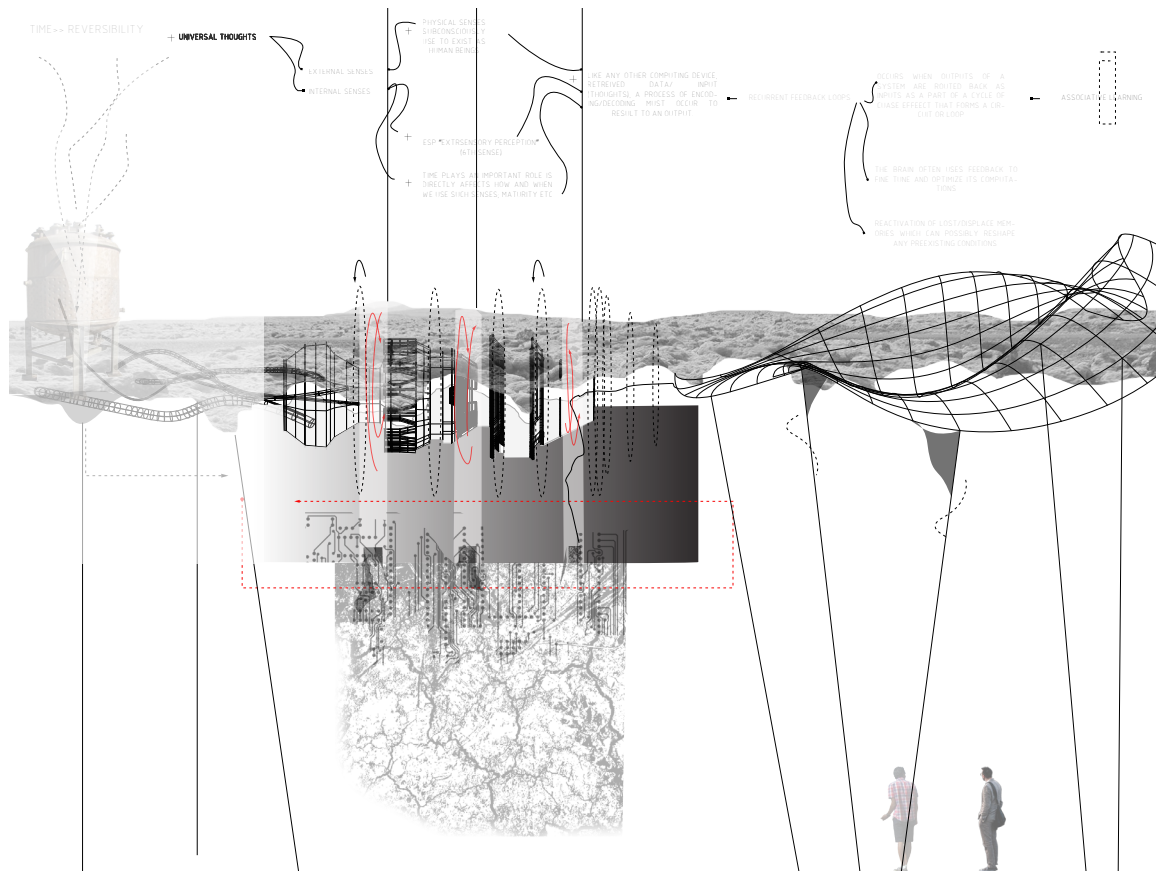


Figure 6. Textual Dissection: Linear and non-linear structures aim to expose networks that cut across scales of time.

readings in the drawing without any direct collocation with a source outside the human psyche. The elements, including fragments of spatial and formal constructs, can define configurations internal to the drawing (figure 7). The challenge here (including the dialogue among teacher, student, and artifact), is to find other modes of relation, the inferences made between drawing and text or theme. Michel Foucault refers to loosely structured inferences as a "...discursive formation and what makes it possible to delimit the group of concepts, disparate as they may be, that are specific to it, is the way in which different elements are related to one another..."¹⁷ Conceptual kinds can be classified as identifying with the human, natural, and built phenomena. Once differentiated, the kinds can be intersected with one another, testing the abstract terms of their definitions with the physical qualities of the drawing, and seeking both coherencies and differences among them. These orders feed possible narratives and better define the trajectory of the inquiry. The students who worked in this manner proposed projects foreign to their surrounding context. The learning process developed from within, and the collocation with sources outside the human psyche was difficult to track or ground to outside references. Simultaneously, those drawings manifesting an indifference to the text (working from feeling), yet an internal distancing from it, also tend to extend the boundaries of the imagination and the possibility of redefining the program.

The formation of a skeletal framework in these early stages of the comprehensive project is used to confront the original written text and the theme, and to identify intersections and divergences among kinds. They can fuse, echoing the infinite depth and fragility embedded in textual history; in other cases, the student's work and the theme are disassociated, and only through recomposing with the theme of *Vaults versus Memorials* can one extract from the drawing a particular internal construction, an inherent logic or partial organization. The kinds varied from abstract (constructed) gestures to highly methodical graphic tracking of chronological stages. Often, drawings of this latter kind work from the construing of details to the construction of a whole. The individualization of elements and their localization among conceptual kinds remains a guess, uncertainty persists, yet it also grounds the guessing nature of interpretation reidentifying with the experiences of the student.

CONCLUSIONS

The act of drawing produces its frame of reference. It enables students to replace categorical, static thought with fluid, synthetic thought. Hence, the meaning that one gleans might best be understood as ever-expanding in richness and depth, as opposed to being static or fixed. With the world opened through the drawing by the depth of inferred meanings, students can speculate as to which plausible fiction establishes probable criteria

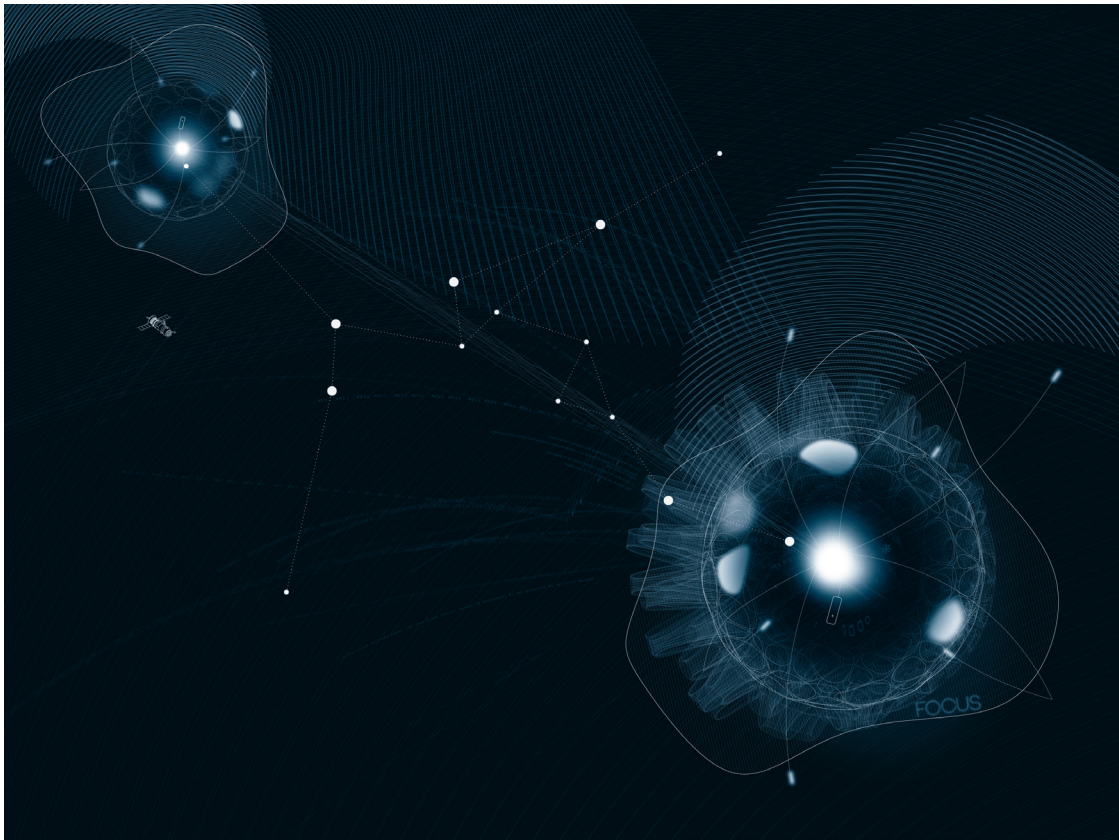


Figure 7. The Guess: The spatial construct is defined by configurations internal to the drawing, often through the expansion of a detail.

to carry forward in the inquiry. Once issues are considered in light of differing points of view, their connections to other issues and ideas can be analyzed and explored in context through the making of artifacts. Students can look to construct conceptual networks based on intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. These include the identification of categories, recurrences, associations, dissociations, and by extension, the taking on of new semantic content inherent to the play of forms.¹⁸ The process holds students in a state of distanced engagement with the work, which is a fundamental basis for enabling critical analysis in the design and widening the scope of meaning in a project. By challenging one's ability to view issues from multiple perspectives, the student must reflect and reposition design intents based on new interpretations as the scope evolves. Donald Schön's "reflection-in-action"¹⁹ discusses the principle of how an ongoing dialogue of questioning and discovering, how the construction of a student's design issues, strategies, and models can be furthered. The continual act of building echoes what Adrian Snodgrass refers to as the "inter-referencing of a projected whole and the particulars that make up the design situation."²⁰ The process includes reconciling contradictory positions and individual prejudices that permeate all understanding. It reinforces the notion of life as dialogic, a shared event, as part of the human condition. If a student's understanding unfolds as an interplay between text and context, the drawing then is the vehicle for coalescing past

and present notions of the theme into a singular and unique factor to be carried forward in the design situation. It intercepts "the worldly dimension of discourse"²¹ triggered by the conflict between seemingly opposed realities of the preservation of the text, memorializing the text, or ultimately its obsolescence. Placing students within a conflict, albeit discreetly, helps them establish a foundational design ethic harvested from the exercise's process. It advances an in-depth analysis of issues and a purpose connected to the larger theme of media, the formation of intents, to be examined in the subsequent phases of the architectural project.

In the results of the exercise, a third of the students delivered visual work equivalent to the figures illustrated in this paper, and another half delivered better than average results. The challenges and difficulty confronting students in this exercise created the space for debate. The discussions often centered around and questioned the transferability of text to the visual and its appropriateness or not as a beginning point for an architectural design. Yet the debates furthered class discussions on the theme of media and architecture, adding value to the initial appropriation of the text and to the alternative narratives grounded in the task of salvaging the "last" text through its memorial or monument.

As a propaedeutic exercise, the actual success could best be measured in the students' diverse approaches to the theme, their flexibility to diverting away from fixed schemas to an expanded field of comprehension of the theme, and the degree to which project narratives were instrumental in transforming each student's comprehensive building project into a singular, enticing mode of inquiry. The drawing process encouraged speculation about the future infrastructure of such a building program that went beyond the archetypal library. The production of visually evocative drawings, however, did not necessarily guarantee a student's advancement of a critical position in the building proposal. Yet the authors observe that many aspects of the program were implicitly affected, expanding variation of design inquiry within the studio. In all cases, the exercise anchored the students' socio-cultural understanding in a larger theme from the outset and moved all students to craft a new kind of program and role of a "mediatheque."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Figure 1: Boutros Bou-Nahra, Christian Steixner, Pieter Conradie

Figure 2: by authors

Figure 3: Pieter Conradie

Figure 4: Giovanni Campusano, Melani De Jesus

Figure 5: Collin Pierce, Emily Eden

Figure 6: Liovanna Simon

Figure 7: Nicholas Di Mattia

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19. Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner—How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
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21. Foucault, *Archeology*, 81.

ENDNOTES

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6. Richard Kearney, *The Wake of the Imagination, Toward a Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 365. Kearney makes reference to Mikhail M. Bakhtin. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1981.
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13. Ricoeur, *Interpretation*, 54.
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16. *ibid.*
17. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 59.