

# Crawl Space: Elective Design Studio

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## INTRODUCTION

### Studio Description

This elective design studio was intended for 3rd, 4th or 5th year architecture students. The studio met once a week for four hours and required several eight hour Saturday sections to complete the installation. The studio project was an installation and performance project entitled "Crawl Space" which was part of the Home Show exhibition. This exhibition which included work by three other participants explored the notion of the home. This studio project exposed the students to a broad range of critical issues involving the grafting of public art, architecture, sculpture, performance art and design theory, with hands-on production experience in the context of a large scale project. The exhibition was scheduled for November 17th, 1993 and ran through January 23rd, 1994 at the Boston Center for the Arts, Mills Gallery. The installation coincided with Boston's First Night festivities which provided extraordinary public exposure. The studio worked in collaboration with Eric Gould, a Boston-based architect and artist who has extensive public art experience. The installation was made for Dare Dukes, a New York-based playwright, director and performance artist. Dare Dukes used the installation as a stage set for six performances. When the installation was not being used as a stage set the public were encouraged to physically interact with this hybrid construction of architectural elements, sculpture, props and furniture.

### Pedagogical objectives

There were three primary objectives for this elective studio. The first objective was an attempt to establish a dialogue directly with the public; a venue not often possible through the traditional studio format. The second objective was an attempt to explore architecture through an authentic participatory experience. Lastly, this studio was an attempt to open up architecture to other disciplines in a way which avoids isolation from other disciplines such as fine arts or technology-based design methodology.

### Methodology

Basic history and **theory** of 20th century architecture and

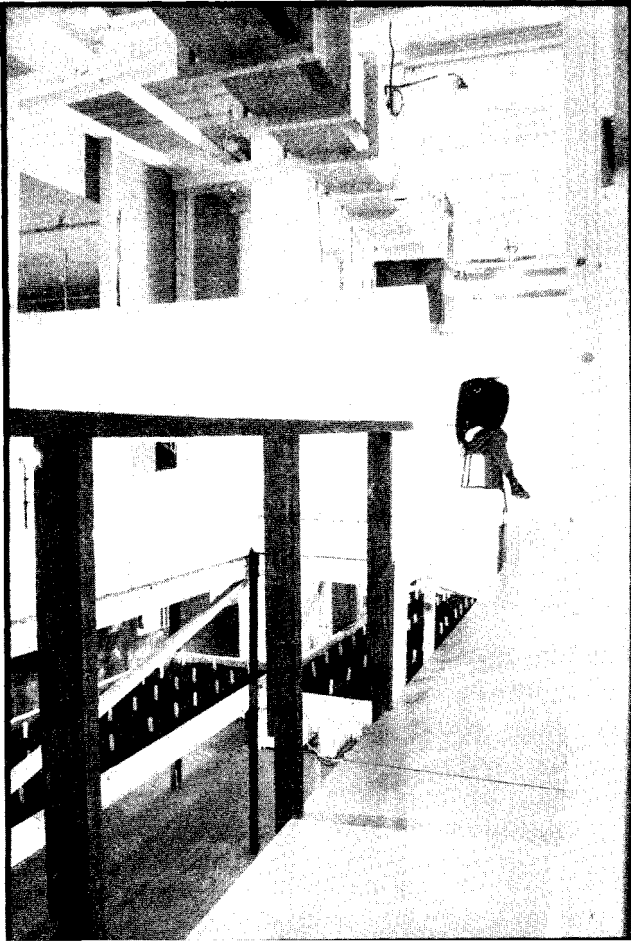
sculpture were taught so that the work produced by the studio would be understood in its proper historical context. **Craft** was emphasized through the introduction of woodworking and metalworking techniques which were the primary fabrication methods used. The **program** and design of the installation were conceived, when possible, as group projects in collaboration with Eric Gould and Dare Dukes. Team work and group participation were stressed in the design and fabrication of all work.

## METHODOLOGY

### Theory

The course is designed for upper level bachelor of architecture students. The pedagogical objective of this studio was to employ other disciplines as an instrument for exploring architectural issues in a way which avoids familiar associations and preconceived notions about the discipline of architecture. Basic history and theory of 20th century architecture and sculpture were taught so that the work produced by the studio would be understood in its proper historical context. The purpose of this studio was to render suspect a preoccupation with the strictly visible in architecture. It could be argued that contemporary architectural culture is preeminently concerned with the visible aspect of architectural built form. This concern reveals itself in the ubiquitous interest in architecture as image, as an aesthetic object, and the tendency for architecture to be formulated according to a stylistic framework. The position taken for this studio was that one must attend to the invisible in architecture and penetrate what is underlying in a design or design strategies to fully understand the complexity of the discipline of architecture. The title for the project "Crawl Space" was chosen by the artists because of its reference to the spaces within and below a house which are unseen but crucial to its construction and functioning.

To develop an understanding of the invisible influences which affect architecture the studio studied the core ideas underlying the work of 20th. century sculptors. The text used for this studio was *Passages in Modern Sculpture* by Rosalind E. Krauss. This text was selected because of its emphasize



on ideas as a crucial and invaluable part of the design process. The studio exercise, in part, was to develop core ideas from the text and apply them to the architectural condition at the Mills Gallery. The reasons for using this strategy were to limit and rethink the use of preconceived architectural languages, and to reveal the broader cultural influences which affects the discipline.

### Program

The program was formulated and developed by responding to three criteria. These were the space restrictions at the Mills Gallery, the theme of the exhibition, and an appropriate response to the other guest artists' work

This studio project forced the students to cope realistically with imposed architectural conditions. The physical limitations of the gallery environment had to be considered in the design of the installation; it had to fit into a limited space within the gallery, the parts made for the installation had to get through the gallery door, and also the parts of the installation had to be transportable from Wentworth to the gallery, and the design had to permit egress and satisfy building code issues. Lighting the installation also became a significant and interesting design problem. Finally, there were significant financial constraints on the studio budget for all phases of the

project including materials and transportation. Unlike many design studios which are thought of as a simulation of real practice, this studio was real, although it took place within a very limited scope. The students quickly discovered they could be very creative faced with significant limitations; the greatest limitation being the budget.

The theme of the exhibition was the concept of a home. In collaboration with Dare Dukes, Eric Gould developed the overall strategy for the installation which revolved around a series of metaphors related to the memory of the home. The students were asked to develop these metaphors into final objects which comprised the stage set, furniture and props. The objects were named; The Make-up Table, The Love Seat, The Sower's Staircase, The Confessor's Closet, The Faciliscope, The Fertility Bed, The Dream House, The Reasoner's Staircase, and The Walls. The process included preparing study models and drawings, and participating in group critiques before the final objects were built.

### Craft

Woodworking and metalworking techniques were the primary fabrication methods used. Training in basic woodworking and metalworking techniques was provided. Woodworking lectures encompassed milling processes, basic joinery, proper hand tool use and power tool use. Metalworking lectures covered TIG welding and MIG welding, grinding processes, metal cutting and bending. Most of the students had no prior skill in these areas, but most developed adequate skills in a relatively short period of time. The fabrication of the objects was labor intensive and visceral providing for an authentic participatory experience.

The program at Wentworth is designed to allow for the synthesis of cultural concerns and visual aesthetics with the pragmatic and technical approaches to the discipline of architecture. However, the architectural program at Wentworth tends to emphasize primarily the pragmatic and technical approaches to design due to the longstanding tradition of the school. The underlying assumption of the school is that an awareness of materials, fabrication techniques and structures provides the foundation knowledge which allows for authentic creativity. A strong understanding of the material nature of architecture affirms a methodological clarity which is incompatible with seductive surface technique, stylistic pastiche, arbitrary dogma or fashion. This studio project allowed for an interesting dialogue concerning the relationship of craft to the poetic content and purpose of the installation, and revealed to many students for the first time the complexity of the discipline of architecture.

### CONCLUSIONS

This studio was an exciting opportunity for the Wentworth Institute of Technology Department of Architecture to expand the scope of its program by providing a broader interaction with the Boston arts community specifically and the Boston community as a whole. The program at Wentworth

has derived a valuable benefit by participating in and contributing to the cultural life of our city.

The opportunity for the students to develop their designs from drawings and models into full scale built artifacts and the experience that this process requires to accomplish that was the most important lesson for most of the students. Hopefully, this experience will have a positive influence on

these students' approach to design by leading them to the understanding that the architectural design process does not culminate in paper drawings, but only begins there. Finally, the response to the installation was so favorable the Architecture Department at Wentworth has been invited to participate in two more public art installations at the Boston Center of the Arts in the fall of 1994 and the summer of 1995.

