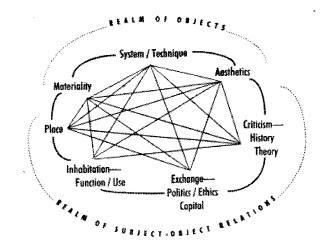# Beginnings outside the Realm of Objects

CHRISTOPHER MONSON
Mississippi State University

Architecture and its education are wedded to form, to the object. But when considered in all of its complexity, architecture today appears to find its possibilities in realms outside of the object; outside of the formal, material, and aesthetic questions which have largely defined the discipline and professional education for a very long time. This notion becomes apparent when the relationships between issues fundamental to architecture are thought of together as a whole, as a "grounding diagram." Inasmuch as contemporary trends appear to support this assertion, the study leads us to a polemic question: what might beginning design instruction be if it was outside the realm of objects?

GROUNDING DIAGRAM OF ARCHITECTURAL ISSUES

To pursue these possibilities, we must first conceptualize architecture as a system of issues and relationships. The diagram here (Figure 1) proposes seven broad categories within the discipline, and binds them in their interdependence and interrelationships. Every category can be found to relate to every other category in some way. Though inherently reductive, this conceptual grounding diagram provides a way to illuminate content issues within the profession, architectural education, and form itself.

Figure 1.

The organization of categories around the grounding diagram is not completely random. Categories are placed immediately next to other categories with which they share a close affinity in context and content. From this placement larger groupings tend to occur, involving the distinction "object/subject-object relation." The categories "materiality," "system/technique," and "aesthetics" could be said to be more in the "realm of the object," while "place," "inhabitation," "exchange," and "criticism" could be said to be more in the "realm of subject-object relations."

Though these comparisons appear to be clear through the abstraction of the diagram, it is not intended that the ambiguity of the interrelationships between categories be denied. It is more useful and appropriate to note the *tendencies* for these categories to be find themselves within the larger groupings.

THE OBJECT, SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONS, AND BEGINNING DESIGN

The definitions for these two groupings—"realm of the object" and "realm of subject-object relations"—are relatively straightforward and dependent upon their differences through comparison. The "realm of the object" is where the content of categories is bounded more within objects themselves, through both the method and manifestation of form, and exterior to humankind. The "realm of subject-object relations" is where the content of categories is more evident within the conscious act of subject-object interrelationship; where form, human intention, and social structures mix in varying degrees for varying purposes.

The historic focus of beginning design studies has been aimed within the realm of the object. This generalization may initially seem to be a superficial reading of the breadth of possibilities within an architectural curriculum, but it is perhaps best borne out by seeing what every curriculum expects at its end—a professional understanding of how architecture is both a manifestation and method of subject- object interaction. This understanding is demonstrated in the usual "capstone project" or "thesis" of a professional education, and it is the presumed complexity of this content which creates its kind of logarithmic trajectory in most curriculums; little subject-object complexity in the beginning, increas-

ingly more at the end. Studio education in architecture typically becomes more interested in the difficulties of subject-object relations after it has been grounded in more formal and/or material considerations, the logic being that students can then manipulate objects within an ever widening set of social, economic, and cultural issues.

TRAJECTORIES OF CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

How does the logic of this normative architectural pedagogy compare to contemporary trends in the discipline and its relationship to society? To the extent that the grounding diagram of architectural issues has value, it appears that we may be able to use its structure to assess these questions. For this to be possible, we first assume the familiar position that architecture, in all its complexity, is an inherently "positive" act (flowing from past to present to future) and thus is most significantly realized when embedded in conditions of action; of analysis, judgment, and creation. This "positive" characteristic necessarily premiates situations which ask transformative questions, and it is these situations we must look for.

It may be possible to assert that—on the whole—the issues on the top half of the grounding diagram are generally more static than those on the bottom half; that the issues within the "realm of subject-object relations" are under more question today than those within the "realm of the object." Though such a proof is beyond demonstration, we can illuminate some examples which manifest contemporary trends. Considering each of the issues within the realm of subject-object relations, it would appear that:

- "*place*"—the disassociative effects of globalism and communication technologies upon normative notions of place will tend to increase rather than decrease.

- "*inhabitation*"—the success of human development and its burgeoning ability to satisfy both wants and needs will tend to increase rather than decrease.

- "*exchange*"—the advance of liberal democracy through capitalist systems of exchange and individualism will tend to increase rather than decrease.

- "*criticism*"—the atomization of social identity and devolution of group history will tend to increase rather than decrease.

Among the many other examples to consider, these trajectories are, on the whole, manifesting increasing change and instability. More and more thematic questions within and about architecture are bound to these issues as contemporary life moves into the next millennium.

Opposed to this change is a second set of trajectories, the more static issues within the realm of the object. Considering each of these, it would also appear that:

- "*materiality*"—the contemporary implementation of technologies and materials within built form are, at this time, of an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary nature.

- "*system/technique*"—the basic systems of design process and the techniques within building science continue to be, on the whole, reactionary rather than progressive.

- "*aesthetics*"—the authority of the design professions to provide publicly accepted aesthetic logic is diminishing rather than expanding.

Again, among the many other examples to cite, the general trend within these issues is, on the whole, static rather than catalytic.

THE FABRICATED VERSUS THE REAL

What do we make of these general trends? Among the trajectories offered above, it is quite obvious that the immediacy and potential of the ideas in the first group (realm of subject-object relations) is much larger than the actuality of the second group (realm of the object). But the unrealized possibilities of the second group—"revolutionary," "progressive," "expanding"—give a claim which approximates the transformative reality of the first group. That is to say, even though the first group is embedded in significant transformative capability, the second group can appear that way by fabricated intention.

This is a major assertion, and a uniquely contemporary problem. *It could be argued that to base architecture today upon the study of objects is to be based upon fabricated—and unrealizable—intentions within the realm of objects.*

To see this assertion in action in the studio is not rational, it is emotional. It is the sadness in the student when she asks when she'll get a studio project with a "client." It is the uncomfortable ache of watching a young African-American student play with a culturally meaningless palette of sticks and cubes. It is the palpable frustration in a team of students trying to design but lacking the skills to communicate and compromise. These examples stand for the way in which focusing upon the realm of objects often defeats any possibility of subject-object integration, and draws the life away from the "positivist" essence of architecture in the world.

Both architectural education and the profession make claims for the terms "revolutionary," "progressive," "expanding," but not in the set of relationships where today that kind of potential is realizable—the realm of subject-object relations.

Why it is that we are heirs to this problem is not the point of this study, but we should be reminded that the inertia of design practice and education has long been a force preoccupied with the object. From the aesthetic ideologies that produced the profession of architecture during the Renaissance, to the development of object-centered pedagogies within Beaux Arts and Bauhaus education, to the effective division of disciplines manifest in the modern University—all of these things have encouraged the continued

disciplinary emphasis upon understanding form as a separate concern removed from other content, other issues.

Seen in this longer history, it becomes natural to assess the conceptual ground which bounds this renewed significance of subject-object relations. The present argument is not the first to suggest such concern, in fact this question goes back to the ancient Greeks, to the fundamental differences in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. There are also threads of positivist, Marxist, and post-structuralist thinking here within the argument. But rather than building a theoretical lineage, it may be more useful to consider the kind of contemporary developments in practice and education which provide a more immediate reasoning to realign architecture in subject-object relations:

Contemporary developments facing the architectural profession:

- push toward interdisciplinary "team-based" problem solving

- broadening toward "life-cycle" kinds of client problem management

- skills of integrative thinking becoming more helpful in contemporary community problems

- possibilities in burgeoning information and knowledge management

Contemporary developments facing architectural education:

- desire for more rigorous liberal-arts preparation (as suggested by the Boyer Report)[1]

- renewed emphasis on interactive and collaborative learning

- shift from "faculty-centered" to "learning-centered" institutions[2]

- interdisciplinary emphasis mandated by universities

- increases in service learning, community-based outreach and education

- growing importance of "design-build" learning environments

BEGINNINGS OUTSIDE THE REALM OF OBJECTS

How do we start to think about a pedagogy of the beginning design studio outside the realm of objects? In the same manner that most object-centered instruction tangentially engages subject-object relations, this new curriculum might tangentially engage the object through rigorous investigations into subject-object relations.

On the face of it, this may appear to simply replace one questionable structure with its opposite. But there is something here which

is not a simple inversion. In light of the potential that subject-object relations are the significant transformative force in contemporary form making, it seems more natural to "find" objects within the larger realm of subject-object relations. That is, this new construct would find objects within the larger subject-object set rather than trying to marry conceptual object-making skills—developed independently—with an external condition of subject-object relations.

In this new construct, the object—architecture—allies itself with "attestation" rather than "transcendence." It sees objects as they are within the larger realm within which they operate; never separately beyond that realm as in previous paradigms. If the old construct could be called the "transcendent object," the new condition would be the "situated object."

PEDAGOGY OF THE SITUATED OBJECT

What follows is a first attempt to define the parameters of a pedagogy for architectural education which arises from the "situated object," the "realm of subject-object relations." Within these parameters are a number of specific methodologies that could be used to explore content, and a reinvigorated set of content issues which flesh out the "subject-object relations" on the lower half of our original grounding diagram. Together, these methodologies and the new content hope to represent possibilities without being expressly formulaic.

To begin, it should be acknowledged that many educational methodologies could be useful to situated object study; the three proposed here attempt to broaden the field by being representative of strongly differing conceptual attitudes—from purely philosophical constructs to rigorous object creation. They are what will be called a "philosophical" methodology, a "situated study" methodology, and an "indexical" methodology.

"Philosophical" methodology—to illuminate the elemental and causal relationships between subjects and objects. To probe subject-object relations through a philosophical methodology is acutely appropriate, since it is so fundamental to the philosophical project itself, and the battle between subject and object been so central to the arguments of contemporary theorists. Mark Wigley makes this clear:

> "Philosophical discourse is able to construct itself only inasmuch as our culture maintains a certain account of the architectural object. In other words, one can put theory in place only by employing a precise set of assumptions about the condition of objects . . . . We would [then] understand philosophy as a certain effect of architecture. That is to say, in the production of form, there is a side-effect known as philosophy which operates as a constrained discourse about certain limited qualities of form, a repressive discourse made possible by enigmatic qualities of form it cannot thematize."[3]

• The "subject-object problem"—The relationship between humankind and the objective world was a philosophical construct first problematized by the ancient Greeks, but has come down to us through every subsequent Western philosophical development. The Greek thinkers stumbled onto a paradox; that "the individual is a physical object and an integral part of his/her surroundings, while also a subjective being standing outside his/her surroundings, observing and acting upon nature from which he/she is detached."[4]

Though not often adequately addressed within our discipline, the centrality of the subject-object problem to the making and manifestation of architecture is certainly obvious. Theorist Mark Gelernter expresses this feeling well:

> "Although one intuitively feels that designing involves both sides of the equation, the logic of the [subject-object] duality makes it virtually impossible to link the two together. It makes the individual who knows, the individual who takes in information from the outside, an object in a larger system and a recipient of objective, transpersonal material; while it makes the individual who creates, the individual who generates ideas from within, an autonomous and subjective being who transcends the existing and even the shared. Given the logic of the duality, a shift in attention from the processes of knowledge to the processes of creation necessarily entails a change in the underlying conception of the individual and his or her relationship to the external world. The two processes cannot be related together within the logic of the system because they assume opposing world views."[5]

Within our current discussion, what is compelling about this paradox is that it grounds the ambiguity of architecture's making and manifestation in a construct of age-old thinking; thinking which has yet to satisfactorily "solve" the subject-object problem, and whose work continues under various theoretical banners today. The explication of this problem—often overshadowed in architecture by repressive conceptual structures and narrow aesthetic concerns—looks to be a significant intellectual resource. These philosophical positions offer much toward addressing the integration of subject-object concerns in architecture.

"Situated-study" methodology—To study objects within their subject-object relationships. The situated or "case" study method is defined (in disciplines outside of design) as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.[6]

Though the case study format sounds familiar to most architectural educators (many of whom use real-world studies, programs, sites, clients, etc.), the reality of a high quality case-study and the manner of its exploration in the classroom is much more "complete" construction than we are generally familiar with. At its best, the case study needs to be "whole;" there are no short-cuts or edited issues, since it is the complexity of the problem which makes the exploration of the situated study so powerful. There are three potential ways to mold this methodology:

• Situated study as "issue grounding"—This construct works only to define the parameter of architectural issues through the exploration of case studies; specific examples of environmental form seen in their complete context of social, economic, physical, and conceptual issues. Students would use the examination as a definition of architectural issues and their relationships, not in ways which create analysis, interpretation, or new propositions. Clarifying each study only to illuminate the facts of its context allows comparative learning between studies. This kind of construct is quite elemental, and best seen at the earliest stages of design instruction. In their simplicity, these studies would be quite sympathetic to multi-media and other interactive instructional technologies, which would allow students to create their own "paths" through the given case study information.

• Situated study as "report"—This is a further development from the "issue grounding" above, pushing the exploration of the case study into full-fledged analysis. Of course, in the world of subject-object relations, we need to reinvigorate our object-centered architectural view of analysis to incorporate methods from other disciplines; sociology, economics, political science, history, etc. This entails a complete analytical mapping of the situation in terms of its subject-object relationships, where object analysis is a very discrete—and often minor—part.

• Situated study as "proposal"—This form is a synthetic inversion of the classical case study. Instead of studying the depth of a knowable real-world construct, this study would create the full complexity of a subject-object situation which has yet to exist, but comes from trajectories already in place. This work imagines subject-object relationships by demonstrating an understanding of how these relationships operate, and is thus a more sophisticated method than either the "grounding" or "analytical" types of situated study. Among other techniques, this study method could be assisted by many of the recent advances in computer modeling of complex, interactive structures.

"Indexical" methodology—To create objects as "maps" or "indices" of their subject-object relationships. This method incorporates the making of objects into the study of subject-object relations. However, the significant difference here compared to traditional object-making is that the object is thought of as a kind of "bi-product" from another conceptual procedure; it works only as a "map" or "index" of that other thinking process. The other thinking here, of course, is intended to illuminate subject-object relations.

The conceptual basis for this methodology is found within theories of post-structuralism, specifically deconstruction. From this theoretical work comes the notion that under all things lies a fundamental condition of differentiation, what Jacques Derrida famously called "différence." This idea of différence binds things through relationships first and foremost, as Derrida says:

"The world is a texture of traces which exist autonomously as 'things' only as they refer to or relate to each other . . . No entity has a unique being . . . apart from the web of relations and forces in which it is situated."[7]

The indexical methodology attempts to illuminate this fundamental condition of "relations" by processes of making which contain within them the marks of the relations which bind the object. Among others, there are initially two ways of developing this methodology:[8]

- "Principle of Complementation"—This process would investigate the creation of objects which are manifestations of diametrically opposed categories; sets such as "form–content," "utility–poetry," "originality–imitation," etc. The composition of such sets are known as "binary oppositions," one of the operative components of post-structuralist theory. The definition of such binary oppositions within a given condition is an intensely analytical and creative process, and as such a substantive demonstration of critical thinking. It is the collision of terms and the inescapable necessity for compromise which makes the problem of complementation fundamentally architectural.

- "Principle of Combination"—Another process linked to theoretical deconstruction, this method would work to create objects which bind categories, defeat hierarchies of embedded values, and confound systems of classification, especially the normative architectural systems like functional and formal typologies. This kind of thinking is demonstrated in architecture by a number of contemporary practitioners, among them Peter Eisenman. [9]

Though often criticized for a certain kind of willful avant-gardism, this process of combination is neither congenitally stylistic nor inherently nihilistic. By intentionally creating new things out of the fusing of old oppositions, much can be learned by the resultant "betweenness," by the newly created "eccentric third term." As Manfredo Tafuri points out, this process is about "breaking the relationships of the existing order in order to recover them at a higher and different level."[10] Objects created through such a thinking process would not necessarily be "practical" or "rational" in the traditional sense of making, but could manifest critical positions which exhibit a greater fidelity toward their elemental constituency, the content of their relationships.

CONTENT OF THE SITUATED OBJECT

If the range of potential situated object methodologies is broad, the content of instruction within these methodologies is broader still. Though it is nearly impossible to formulate a definitive listing of situated object content for the architectural studio, it is easier to see issues within the realm of subject-object relations which are typically ignored or glossed over in the traditional curriculum. Inasmuch as the familiar object-based instruction finds it difficult to deal with these issues, they may represent good points of departure.

- Content within "place"—One of the largest gulfs between the discipline of architecture and society at large is the forgotten semiological foundations—the language and symbolism—of place. This is one of the few conceptual areas in which beginning design students can adequately participate, since they (like every other person) have spent a lifetime navigating this human system. As the first citizens of the radically new forms of community birthed by our communications revolution, today's generation of beginning design students can also contribute toward the new ways in which form and place will relate in the future.

- Content within "inhabitation"—As the world economy develops its way out of the basest needs on Abraham Maslow's famous list, the burgeoning issue of consumption—of needs versus wants—will reprioritize architectural issues in ways almost unimaginable. At the moment, the discipline is still reticent to face the questions of consumerism and the evolution in human uses of space, preferring instead to cling to historic values and intentions in architecture in a highly reactionary way. Every beginning design student who still imagines a future with "their own name attached to their own building" is an heir to this faulty logic. We have to see that object-centered educational pedagogies are continuing this ignorance within the profession, and encouraging the growing marginalization of architecture in the larger public realm.

- Content within "exchange"—The significant issues within "exchange" are many, perhaps owing to the term's fundamental subject-object grounding. Political explorations, understanding and applying ethical considerations, knowledge about capitalist theory and process—these among many other exchange issues are topics increasingly central to professional practice and manifestly powerful in the creation of architectural form. But perhaps the most underrated and undeveloped topic in beginning design education is the ground for all others in the field of exchange; human interaction, group dynamics, management, and interpersonal communication. Though the scholarship and procedural development in these areas is highly developed in disciplines like business, sociology, education, etc., very rarely does that expertise find its way into the architectural curriculum in any rigorous way. A beginning student's first group work experience is more likely than not to be without any active instruction at all on how to do such a thing. Like much in architectural education, we expect experience to be the best teacher. In light of the body of work in other disciplines, our collective disinterest in interpersonal communication instruction is inept at best and injurious at worst.

- Content within "criticism"—In this subject-object relations content, architectural education has probably been more successful, at least in terms of the broad awareness of these issues advanced through courses in history, design method, and theory. But certainly more work can be done

in more synthetic and meaningful ways at the level of beginning design. Some issues within subject-object philosophies—especially as manifest in contemporary viewpoints like feminist theory and postmodern theory—are actually quite accessible to most beginning students, since a number of major tenets in these ideas have likely trickled down into their own lives and educations. Given opportunities to engage these experiences in the studio, subject-object relations find fertile and familiar ground for development.

CONCLUSIONS

In architectural education, shifting from object-centered instruction to one of subject-object relations is a potentially powerful contemporary pedagogy, and fully realizable at all levels of the curriculum—especially in beginning design.

Though there may be ample reason to find fault in object-based pedagogy on the pure basis of instructional theory, it is actually the shifting ground within the academy and its relationship to society which raises the potential benefits of subject-object instruction more forcefully. As we witness higher education broadening out into the world, as studio projects become "public" effort, as students work more collaboratively rather than individually, as the complexity of designing, building, and community are brought into the classroom, the efficacy of normative architectural pedagogy—beginning object studies leading toward the complexity of subject-object relations—becomes highly circumspect. It appears instead that fully engaging the wealth of possibility in subject-object relations—even in all of its ambiguity and complexity—is really the only path toward the reintegration of architecture within its larger human context.

NOTES

[1] See especially "A Connected Curriculum," Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang in *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Princeton, NJ, 1996).

[2] An excellent introduction to these ideas is Robert Barr and John Tagg's "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education" in *Change*, Nov./Dec. 1995 (The American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.).

[3] Mark Wigley, "The Architectural Displacement of Philosophy" in *Form, Being. Absence: Architecture and Philosophy* (Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY), pp. 6, 8, 95.

[4] Mark Gelernter, *Sources of architectural form: A critical history of Western design theory* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995), p. 27.

[5] Gelernter, pp. 28–29.

[6] Robert K. Lin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1984), p. 23.

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 1972 (tr. Bass, A., The Harvester Press, London, 1982), pp. 3ff., 14.

[8] These three concepts are indebted entirely to David Smith Capon's chapter on "General and Composite Theories" in *Architectural Theory Volume Two: Le Corbusier's Legacy* (John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1999).

[9] Peter Eisenman, "Blue Line Text" in A. Papadakis, et. al., *Deconstruction* (Academy Editions, London, 1989), p. 151.

[10] Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1976), p. 53.