

BEGINNING DESIGN TEACHING: AN INTRODUCTION

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“Make the first year and the terminal year great in any curriculum, and the rest will take care of itself.”

— anonymous architectural educator

We properly talk about “*Technics*”, “*Praxis*”, “*Civics*”, “*Environment*”, “*Media*”, and “*Historiography*”, but what remains to this day is the design studio, in all but a handful of schools, being the hub of the wheel in our architectural education offerings. Our architectural design culture — begun and developed and supported in the academy, and promoted by critics and design publications and awards programs and other facets of the media-culture — is initiated in beginning design studios. We all remember them, fondly or otherwise. They are like a baptism, the ritual invitation to a new life.

The first paper included here thoroughly looks at ways to strategize for the sheer survivability of first year studios within the academy, while the three which follow all, from varying perspectives, attempt to place that teaching in the physicality of the “real” world — in the “place” and community of rural northern Louisiana, in the Renaissance villas and their garden landscapes, in the occupation, and resulting perception, of a hypothetical “wandering inte-

rior”. However, if there is a bit of nostalgia in these three approaches, one may ask why . . .

We remember them, our beginning design studios, as being offered in a day and time, in a culture and in an environment, in which the world was, or at least seemed, “one” — when time and space were (*much* more) knowable. Of course, from Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and quantum physics and that entire revolutionary array of abstractions about the truth of the natural world, a revolutionary movement in architecture sprang forth, Modernism. But then this revolution quickly centered around the use of technology on physical material for practical advantages; i.e. its focus remained on physical reality.

But now that revolutionary tide has been exponentially expanded, with the Age of Information, the Web, with globalization, with the increasingly practicable erasure of the boundaries of space and time.

As explained by Michael Ventura (who uses the word “avalanche” to describe this falling-apart state) in his enlightening book, a series of conversations with James Hillman, entitled “*We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy, and the World’s Getting Worse*”, “human beings once woke with the sun and usually went to sleep not long after dark”. This went on for perhaps three million years; for the past mere one hundred years, the most basic human experience-of-life has been drastically altered. “We’ve barely had time to blink twice . . . We’ve dispensed with what the human nervous system knew as time, and . . . to be lost in time is to be lost in space”. This signals the end of a world — “the world in which waking and dream are rigidly separate”; we now live “. . . in the time-space of the dream . . . [with its] instantaneous changes, its unpredictable metamorphoses, random violence, archetypal sex; its constant cascade of supercharged imagery; its threatening sense of multiple meaning”. For several million years, “. . . this dreamscape surrounded us only in our sleep or *in arts* [my emphasis] . . . Now, in our electronic environment, the dreamworld greets us when we open our eyes”. More than one hundred years ago, and for almost all time going back before history “. . . individual daily life was more or less ordered, however unjust or distasteful, and cacophonous cross-purposes were left to be slept through in dreams. But now we live in a technologically hallucinogenic culture that behaves with the sud-

den dynamics of the dream, *that duplicates the conditions of dreaming*. Technology projects the subconscious into countless *things*. The world is not something clearly “out there”; its and our boundaries now bleed into one another. “What distinguishes the current era is that each individual life is a daily progression through a concrete but fluctuating landscape of the psyche’s projections”. As can be seen perhaps clearest in my current homeland of Las Vegas,

“the surrealism, simultaneity, sexuality, and instantaneous change that occur in our dreams also occur all around us . . . And as Freud was the first to point out, ‘In the subconscious there is no time’, and without time there can be no space. Without time and space, the traditional filters, channels, and boundaries of human consciousness dissolve . . . It was easy, or so it seems now, to love the world of rigid time and space. The world was a world; it held still long enough to be a world and gave us time to learn to love it. But loving this utter state of flux, where time has been shattered and space has been both elongated and compressed beyond rational dimensions — we want to love it . . . but we do not know how, nobody does . . . Individually, this contemporary environment seems to have been thrust upon us . . . but we’ve made this world. The very eagerness of the world’s embrace of this hallucinogenic technology by the most different sorts of people is evidence of the deepest of longings. For the human psyche is one of the great forces of nature, and what is perhaps most frightening about this space-time technology is that it exposes us to this force within us as nothing else ever has. We are standing in the storm of our own being. We are standing in a world created not by God (except indirectly), but by our psyches . . . It may be our natural habitat. We have willy-nilly broken through all the old rigidities, all the limits we thought were nature itself, and we can never go back.”

We have banished ourselves from our (second) Garden of Eden. Ventura concludes that “this is the new nature. Dream has become reality.”

Perhaps the best illustration for this phenomenon is the description, by William Mitchell in his book “*City of Bits*”, of a rather typical information technology worker in London, viewing the sunset through his grimy window, while simultaneously looking at his computer screen, which displays a “live-feed” view of a window in an empty office, through which the sunrise “over the ochre Palo

Alto hills” can be viewed. This “media space”, which can “weld two distant office buildings together by adding continuously open, two-way, electronic windows on both ends”, effectively creates a “second horizon”, along with the increasingly less compelling or at least *competing* “view to the natural horizon”. Today, our students live in two worlds; eighteen-year-olds have known no other condition. To have the knowledge and the wisdom, and simply the desire, to “teach beginning design” to students as to how to go about proposing the transformation of the physical world (unless they are ultimately moving into a media-business or to Hollywood after graduation) for the betterment of the human being, the society, and the world-at-large, is a challenging and important task. In particular, the way we define the parameters of these three preceding objects-of-“betterment” is crucial as to what solutions their work may propose.

So, today, how do we teach beginning design students the desirable transformation of *space*, to create desirable human experiences over *time*, the *skill of which is to be their expertise*? Clearly, the computer is not just an innocuous “tool”: it is a prime engine of the new reality. Thomas Friedman, in his important book “*The Lexus and the Olive Tree*”, suggests that architecture is, or should be, an “Anti-Internet business”, an enterprise which cannot be done over the Internet. How do we use the power and scope of the Information Revolution in the development of proposals and solutions for physical design based on what that Revolution, ironically, is quickly destroying, or at least obscuring and making trivial?

“Then indecision brings its own delays,

And days are lost lamenting o’er lost days.

Are you in earnest? Seize this very minute:

What you can do, or dream you can, begin it:

Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”

— (advice for first year design students and instructors: Johann Wolfgang Goethe, from “Faust”, 1808)