

A Sponsored Studio

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Abstract

The paper I have prepared is about a sponsored studio, specifically a sponsored studio I ran in the Fall semester of 2017. While not the same as the competition-based studio, the sponsored studio shares many similarities. The incentive factor being first among them, whether it is one or a combination of, monetary compensation, notoriety, or the opportunity to compete and compare oneself with one's peers across possibly an international spectrum, these are incentives shared by the competition and sponsored studio format alike. The paper I have written examines the incentive factors, the educational merits, as well as issues like corporate influence, pro and con, in architectural education, through the sponsored studio. Both the paper and the studio happen in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, a place whose image and reputation conjure simultaneous notions of the desert, and corporate luxury and virility, and the writing looks to examine the endemic contextual issues; cultural, geographic, and economic as they relate to the understanding of this studio. Ultimately, there is the students and their work, the problems they faced, the solutions they achieved, and hopefully a better understanding of the design problem above and beyond the formal, to an initial understanding of the problems associated with the business of architecture.

Introduction:

This paper sets out to address the sponsored studio and its growing presence in university

architectural education, having instructed such a studio in the Fall of 2017. Both the positive attributes as well as the negative will be addressed, in hopes of better understanding its potential. By definition the sponsored studio is an architectural design studio, or course, which is sponsored by an external professional entity, or business, in the example I am going to discuss here, a large Dubai real estate developer. Sponsorship as it pertained to our studio involved the design engagement with a high-rise development in Dubai, currently under construction, and the possibility of a constructed realization of two, student(s) designed pedestrian bridges as part of the project in the heart of Dubai. Sponsorship support included access to the developers, architects, and construction management, both as critics, and affording the opportunity to see the behind the scenes activities both pertaining to business, design and construction. Additionally, there was a generous stipend/compensation offered, that could afford the studio the opportunity to do more involved research, travel possibilities, and bringing into the studio external experts and consultants. For design and presentation, the money offered the potential for fabrication, 3d modeling, prototyping etc. as well as high quality 2d rendering, all issues that are typically outside a student's budget. Needless to say, as attractive as these incentives appear, there are pedagogical and professional ethical issues that needed to be considered, and which I will address, but to begin with I want to examine the role and position of the sponsored studio in the architectural curriculum, and specifically its role and position in the development of the United Arab Emirates. The amazing speed with which Dubai developed is part of its global ethos. It is a metropolis, that has developed out of the desert

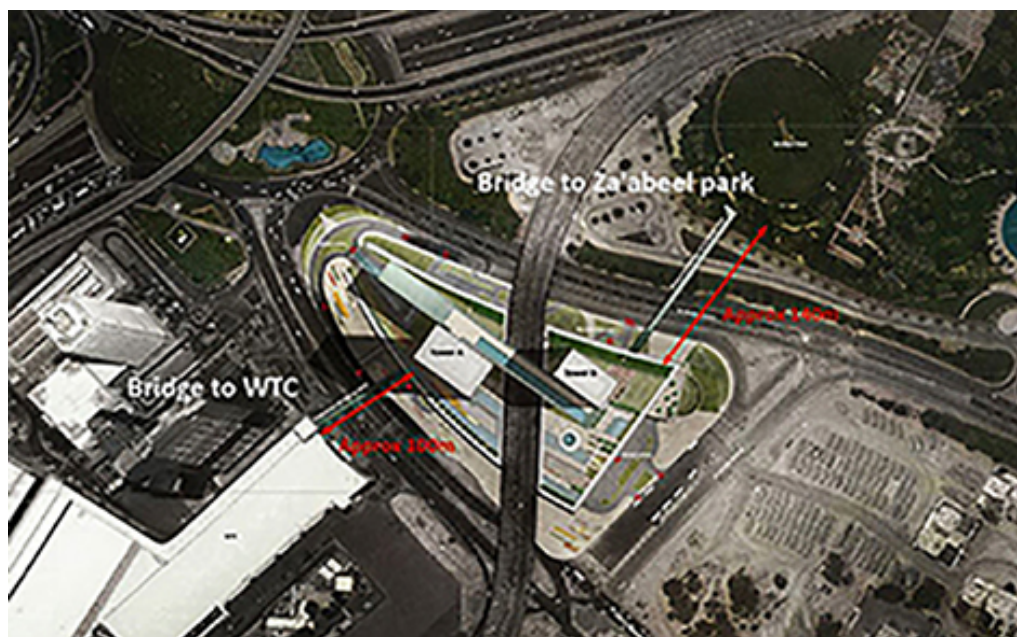


Figure 1. Zabeel One Site Plan+ Bridge Connections

with inconceivable speed. 50 years ago, it had been part of, a nomadic tradition that with the aid of, arguably the regions greatest natural resource, the camel, allowed the culture to be itinerant and adapt to the cycles and turbulence of season and climate. Additionally, the region had a more sedentary coastal presence predicated on the harvesting of pearls from the Arabian Gulf. With global pressures on the pearl industry and the extraction of oil, the way the landscape was viewed and used from, nomadic and tactical, accepting of contingencies, to one where the urban and strategic, focused and long term, and hermetic. As part of the strategic, above and beyond the bricks and mortar of building the city, comes the role of education in setting a course to the future. Emiratization is a government initiative to build and sustain the Emirati workforce in both the public and private sectors, at the same time being conscious of the fact that in terms of population ratio, Emirati to expatriates, the expatriates vastly outnumber the Emiratis. In strategic plans, such as Abu Dhabi's Vision 2030, the means of actively aligning higher education with the professional workforce are suggested, and while the sponsored studio is not specifically referenced, it is nevertheless easy to see how such an opportunity, directly connecting student with professional nicely segues into the overall strategy.

Sponsorship:

Our sponsor was deliberate in their intention, they wanted the studio to design for constructed inclusion into one of their projects. The developer wanted the studio to participate in a high-rise project they were starting construction on, the site is adjacent to the Dubai World Trade Center. The Trade Center Building which is featured on the 100-dirham currency bill, was completed in 1978, and is considered the first in what was to follow very quickly, a long line of Dubai skyscrapers making the site literally the nexus of modern Dubai. The opportunity to work on an actual building project, with the possibility, and expressed desire from the developer, that a student(s) design be singularly or collectively realized was compelling, if not outright exciting. Schedule became the first problem that needed to be addressed in the collaboration. The construction schedule for high rise towers, and their endemic financial concerns, relative to both the academic/curricular calendar, and the individual student's abilities. The problem for schedule was that the some of the students were required to take the comprehensive studio in the Spring semester, thus making the prospect of them continuing with the project impractical. It was agreed that the studio would

be run for a single semester, and that contingent on the results the school and developer would figure out logistics of a second semester at a later date. It was also agreed that the studio rather than providing at the end of the semester a single design, for the purpose of continued development and eventual construction, as a fulfillment of the obligation for services, would instead provide a selected group of visualizations, allowing the developer to weigh for themselves a variety of possibilities. Business issues surrounding the idea of sponsorship also became of pedagogical interest here, and while I know on reflection I could have done more, I did my best to get the students to understand what and how the sponsorship money was being used for. By the potential for the project to be realized, and even the service of providing the client with potential visualizations, the condition arguably becomes less a sponsorship, and more a business transaction, a problem not dissimilar to what is happening in American college sports, a problem with ethical questions that effect both academic and professional institutions. Had our school been a vocational institution, where education better approximates the apprenticeship system, where students are more actively engaged with learning practice and trade so as to better seamlessly fit into the prescribed profession. Ours is an academic institution, and at its pedagogical center is the mission of instilling within students the ability to think critically. At the core of critical thinking is the importance of risk and risk taking, and as risk is essential in the production of craft, it is also imperative to the craft of thinking.

Studio:

The studio was comprised of fourth- and fifth-year architecture students, the curriculum is a 5-year NAAB accredited program, students were given the opportunity and even encouraged to work in teams of two. Working in teams, above and beyond the obvious advantage to the instructor focusing on half the students and concepts, thereby allowing a longer and more focused engagement with the students and their ideas. For the students too working in teams allows them the opportunity to go considerably deeper into both conceptual ideas and tectonic discovery, when the shared aspirations are working at their best, students discover with each other, their particular

strengths and ability to contribute individually and collectively, and when it is working very well they discover the ability to trade places, thus offering the considerable benefit of new insight. The advantages stated; the majority of student's choice to work individually, especially with the fourth versus the fifth-year students. The reasons for this are many and varied, but an important consideration is the that the fifth-year students had in the previous semester completed the comprehensive studio with its rigorous requirements schedule and required teamwork, gave the fifth-year students an understanding and even appreciation the fourth-year students had not yet experienced. The fifth year students had an advantage in another way as well as the maturity gained from being 1 year ahead, they also had the experience of the comprehensive, whereby in addition to rigor and schedule, they were considerably more adept at understanding the building design holistically from the confluence of architecture, MEP, civil, and structural, and the importance of specificity and detailing, not only as design tools but as communication/ presentation tools as well. The fourth-year students were at a distinct disadvantage here, and the fact that in general they were uncomfortable working in teams only compounded the issue.



Figure 2. Rendering by Developer

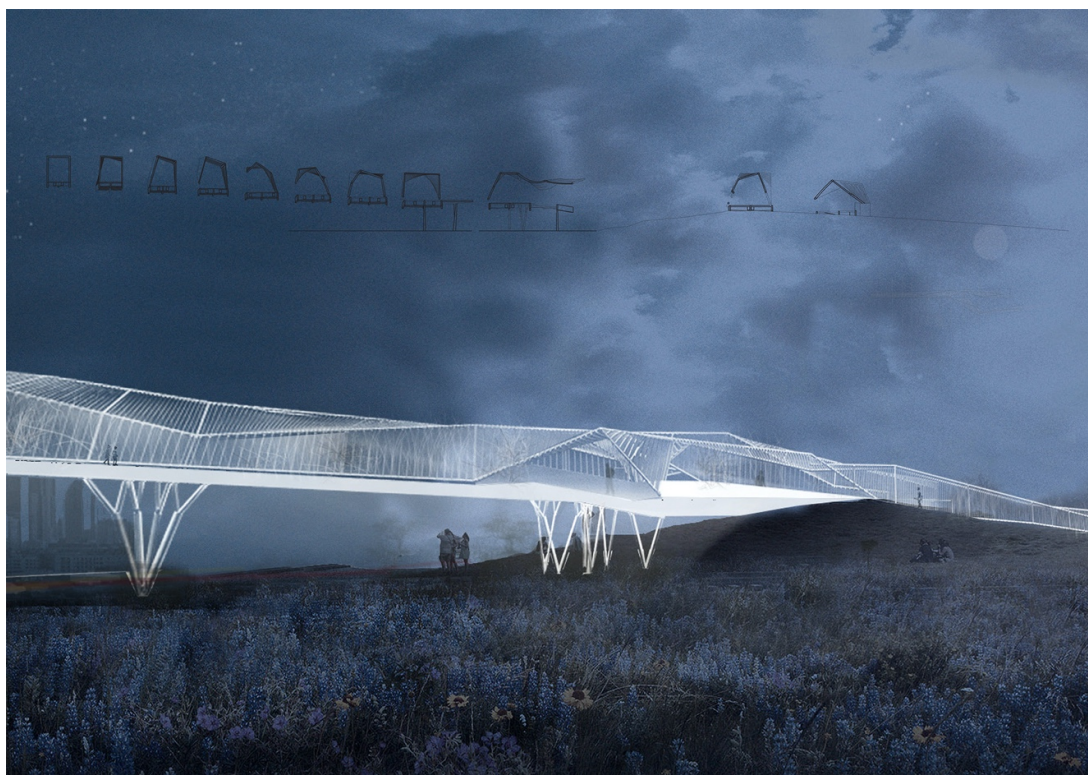


Figure 3. Student Rendering + Sections

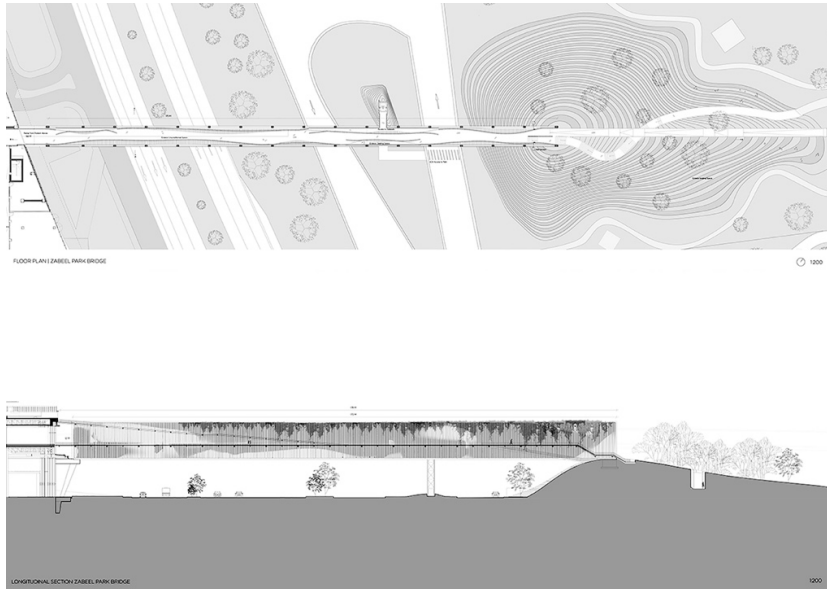


Figure 4. Student Plan + Sections

The Project:

The project presently under construction is called One Zabeel, it is designed by a large and recognized Japanese architectural firm. The program of One Zabeel weaves together a base dedicated to underground parking, retail at street level, and two towers, one which supports a luxury hotel, and offices, the other is dedicated to high end residential units. The two towers are connected 100 meters above the street by the “Linx”, a horizontal concourse structure that situates restaurants and amenities with panoramic views of the city. Additionally, building on the city’s reputation for engineering feats, by becoming the “world’s longest cantilever.” As designed One Zabeel sits on an island of land surrounded by 6 lanes of traffic on one side and 6 lanes of traffic on the other. Like the connective quality of the “linx”, the project brief called on the students to develop designs that would connect One Zabeel to broader context of the city. Specifically, two pedestrian bridges, the first on the south side of One Zabeel was to connect the hotel/ office tower with the World Trade Center, Exhibition Halls. The required span of the bridge was approximately 100 meters. The bridge whose primary function was to link the hotel and offices with the trade center was also required to engage the sidewalk of 2nd Za’abeel road, as a means of allowing transit commuters access to the trade center. The second of the bridges, on the north side of One Zabeel, had an approximate required span of 140 meters. The purpose of this bridge was to link the residential tower with Zabeel Park, one of Dubai’s most popular city parks. Students were also required to be mindful of traffic engineering issues, such as height considerations, underground utilities, and the placement of any vertical supports. As part of the requirements students were asked to design a program that considered the circulatory functions of the two bridges, but was up to them to define.

The Program

Asking students to engage in the design of program is always challenging. There is an obvious comfort in the program being assigned, and in the case of this program, in part because it was sequential, with the highly liminal state of the bridge, suspended between two ends, a

complexity and a potential, that while uncomfortable with, the students ultimately became appreciative of as they looked at intervening. They were asked to consider the relative circulatory functions of their proposed program/design. Issues particular to the bridge that connected the hotel/office tower to the world trade center, the 2nd Zaabeel Road Bridge, included what were the possible confluences of commuter and hotel traffic, and what effect would interventions have. The residential tower connection to Zabeel park, at the Al Majalis Bridge was to be as interesting, if not more so, because of its integration into the programs of the park, including tourism, leisure, and weekend markets, and of course there was the landscape/ garden component, which offered the students much in terms of design potential. The developer stipulated that while the 2nd Zaabeel Road Bridge, needed to be hermetically sealed, the Al Majalis Bridge however allowed for the possibility that the bridge could be open air. Many of the students actively engaged the idea of the garden as a means of pulling the “semi-public park”, (Zaabeel Park is a walled pay to enter park) both programmatically, by using programs such as recreation/ gym facilities, or farmers market kiosks, to translate by virtue of the bridge between the park and the residential tower. The design of the park connection became of further interest as it suggested one of the paradoxical conditions in metropolitan Dubai, namely the almost complete absence of public place.

Structure

Almost by definition the word bridge contains an implicit sense of structure. Structure became the starting point, and in the end an essential measure of the aesthetic integrity. Material choices needed to be made based on efficiency and sensitivity, columns could be used, but as the developer made clear, their foundations could have major complications with regard to traffic and utility engineering. Because of the sponsorship and stipend provided, students were given the unique opportunity of consulting on a one on one basis with an regarded structural engineer, brought over from the United States, for 4 days in the middle of the semester. The structural engineer offered both lectures, and the opportunity to work with the students on an individual basis throughout his stay. Students were given the opportunity to

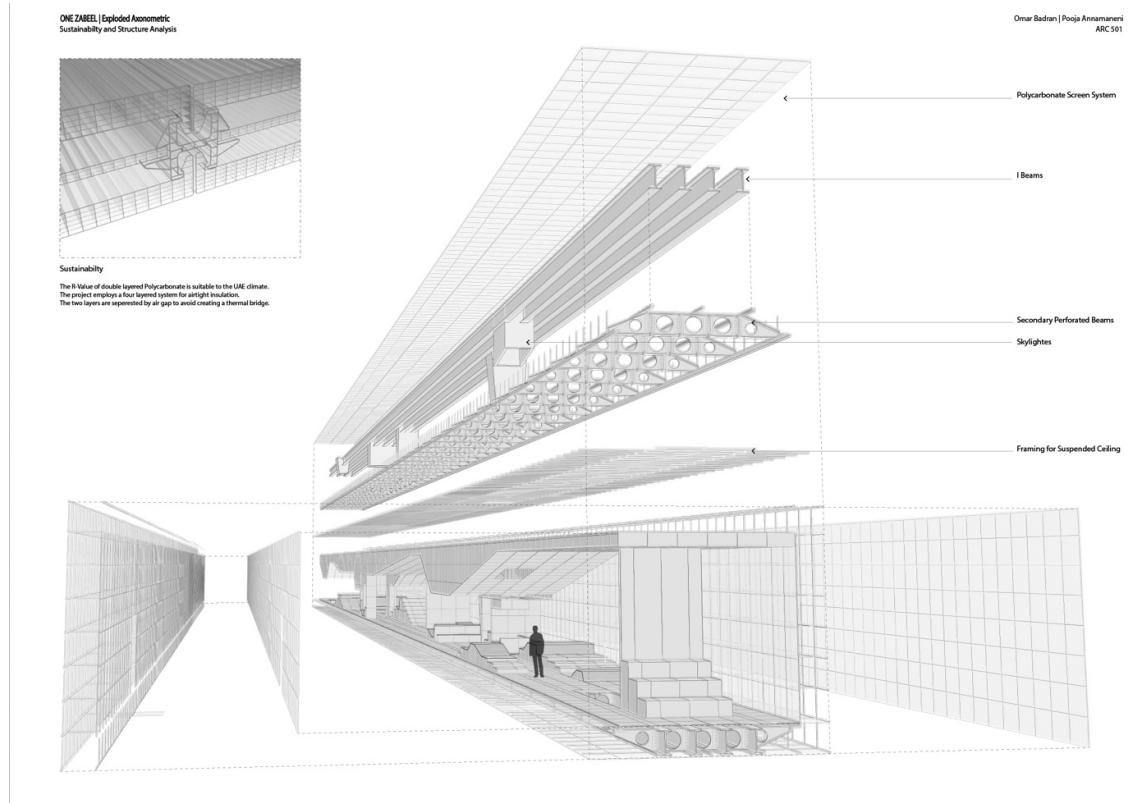


Figure 5. Student Rendering

establish a dialogue, in which the dialectic of the conceptual and the analytical set the way for new design traction.

Just as it is in the professional world the dialogue was not always transparent, and students lack of experience did not make compromise any easier, but in the end, there was an appreciation if not an understanding, of the required malleability of an idea, as it conflated with other expertise.

Conclusion.

The sponsored architectural studio is a unique opportunity for students within the curriculum to explore and engage sources of knowledge and expression that go beyond the hypothetical, and interact in an arena that is specific to their design as a built reality. These forces include the affirmation and deflation of the ego, that goes with the typical student testing of belief, but they also include a multitude of new contingencies, negative and positive criticisms that accompany the political; codes and regulations, the financial; budgetary, client requirements; functionality, engineering needs, and there is the capricious, the arbitrary, or purely subjective whim.

In the final analysis I have ambivalence toward the sponsored studio, on the one hand it is a tremendous opportunity for all involved, having the financial input to pursue resources not typically available, the experience of interacting directly with the developer, to see behind the scenes, and the incentive, of possible recognition and realization of built work for the student, to name some of positives. On the other hand, there are complex issues of compensation, what in fact is fair compensation for student rendered services, should the act of compensation even be a part of a curriculum, how can this compensation be reconciled with the business of architecture, what is ethical to the profession as a whole. As part of compensation the issues surrounding student incentive also became foregrounded, to what extent are the incentives mitigating the student's ability to think critically, and to what extent are they assimilated into something comfortable, that in turn obscures their ability to address the uncomfortable.

There was and will always be, a tension that exists between rectifying the needs and ambitions of the client or sponsor with the needs and ambitions of education it is in the end though, the student, whether academic or

professional who has the most to gain. It is the appreciation that beyond purely the formal, there exist design problems with gradients of simplicity to complexity, transparency to opacity. The role of the sponsored studio in the architectural curriculum is one of these problems, and from it there is a lot to learn.