

Architectural Beginnings

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How can beginning design studios effectively navigate the intricate socio-ecological complexities of our world? Challenging traditional introductory design studios, which often favor abstract exercises, this paper proposes a novel teaching strategy that merges design fundamentals with social issues from the beginning. Inspired by Gooden’s critical race theory (2016) and Carello and Thompson’s trauma-informed pedagogies (2022), this innovative approach surpasses the Bauhaus method, paving a fresh path and fostering new perspectives and practices in architectural design education.

Introduction to Design, the beginning studio in the University of Pennsylvania’s Undergraduate Architecture program, emphasizes storytelling, collaboration, critical thinking, and design projections. The course encourages dialogue about social, cultural, and environmental contexts. Utilizing Latour’s object-oriented ontology (1993), it guides students towards context-driven design and form-finding, as illustrated in the inaugural project, a memorial for the victims of the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia.

The studio course applies Mario Gooden’s Dark Space (2016) photomontage method, interweaving social issues and historical research into design representations. This approach stimulates discussions about systemic racism, spatial justice, and the role of architecture in societal healing. It merges theory, software, lectures, and design fundamentals, highlighting architecture as a means for social storytelling.

Advocating for a transformation in traditional first-year studio education, this paper calls for an empathetic dialogical design process that actively engages with global issues. The proposed approach aims to shape and form architects into proactive designers capable of tackling complex societal challenges through their designs. Showcasing student work invites a reevaluation of first-year design studios and encourages a pedagogical shift from abstract lessons toward tangible social issues.

REIMAGINING INTRODUCTORY DESIGN STUDIOS

Architecture can become the physical medium through which our stories of race, culture, and identity are told.

—Mario Gooden, *Dark Space* (2010)

Navigating the complex terrain of an introductory design studio involves grappling with pivotal questions: ‘How can we guide students in their initial design explorations?’ and ‘When should we integrate social issues into our studio curriculum?’ Traditionally, design studios, originating from the Bauhaus Foundation Course, begin with abstract formal exercises, deferring the confrontation of architectural complexities and social justice matters to later studios. This paper challenges such deferral and advocates for an immediate introduction of socio-cultural inquiries as essential foundational elements for budding architects, thereby revolutionizing the fundamentals of architectural education.

Introduction to Design (ARCH1010) serves as the beginning studio in the non-accredited undergraduate Architecture program at the University of Pennsylvania and exemplifies this pedagogical shift. Rooted in the liberal arts tradition, the course fosters an interdisciplinary platform and attracts students from diverse undergraduate majors, including Architecture, Design, Business, Engineering, and Visual Studies. This broad mix of academic backgrounds fuels an exciting interdisciplinary design experience, promoting vibrant exchange within the studio space. The course is structured to engage these diverse experiences, encompassing aspects of architecture, design, urban planning, and product design. It aims to equip students with fundamental skills to harness their creativity for positive societal change, regardless of the professional direction they choose.¹

Inspired by Carello and Thompson’s trauma-informed principles, the design studio adopts a pioneering pedagogical stance.² By applying these principles to the studio course, we foster a safe, supportive learning environment, promote student empowerment, encourage cultural sensitivity, and cultivate resilience. For students to confidently approach their first design project, we provide clear guidelines for discussing complex socio-cultural issues. Key to this pedagogical transition is a shift in focus from



Figure 1. *MOVE photo-essay* Image credit (left to right - top to bottom) Jiayi Lou, Alex Wenig, Roisin Keenan, Theresa (Tessa) Kong, Ysaach Romac Habon, Halle Kincaid, Jung Woo (Andrew) Hong, Arielle Bennett.

the traumatic event alone to narratives of survival and resilience, with students actively engaging in both design and research.

Crucially, our trauma-informed design studio pedagogy involves facilitating in-depth discussions about the cultural and societal implications of the events that students with tasks for combining research and design. As a practical application, students embark on their first project - designing a memorial for the victims of the 1985 Philadelphia MOVE bombing, a task requiring both creativity and empathy. This unique first studio project allowed the students to reflect on a tragic chapter in Philadelphia's history, requiring them to engage deeply with concepts of respect, memory, and restorative justice within their immediate community of West Philadelphia.

The MOVE bombing, a heartrending chapter in Philadelphia's history, led to the destruction of an entire city block and the loss of 11 lives. Beckman's critical review sheds light on the city's attempt to erase the memory of this trauma by reconstructing the block without consulting the victims' families. It also brings to focus the portrayal of Black lives in the media in 1985 and in light of contemporary representations, emphasizes the urgent need to commemorate such catastrophic events.³ This act of disregard magnifies the plea for appropriate recognition and remembrance. Recent controversies, especially the University of Pennsylvania's mishandling of a MOVE bombing victim's remains, add complexity to this project.⁴ These circumstances imbue our studio with immediate relevance, compelling students to deeply contemplate respect, memory, and restorative justice within their local community of West Philadelphia.

In the course's inaugural project, students navigated the intricate relationship between spatial justice and historical injustices involving the MOVE organization. Beginning with collective research on MOVE and culminating in distinctive architectural responses, students' perceptions of architecture as a tool for

social justice were expanded. This blend of collaborative and individual tasks, coupled with their exploration of sociocultural contexts and architectural ethics, went beyond basic design principles and laid a solid foundation for their future in-depth explorations within the course.

BEYOND BAUHAUS: RETHINKING ABSTRACT STUDIO FOUNDATIONS

Unlike traditional Bauhaus Foundation courses emphasizing abstract formal explorations, our introductory design studio underscores the value of group work and contextual storytelling as essential tools to address social issues through design. Penn's Introduction to Design pedagogical approach transitions from the classic Bauhaus design studio model⁵ to a contemporary, context-sensitive methodology. This transition has its roots in Itten's essay, "The Foundation Course at the Bauhaus," which established a tradition of nurturing students' subjective artistic expressions through abstract formal exercises.⁶ Starting with abstract lessons indeed has its benefits: it builds a robust foundation in design principles and nurtures creativity, versatility, and an interdisciplinary mindset in beginning students. However, today's pressing social and environmental challenges necessitate a shift towards a more socially oriented design approach.

Our studio method, in alignment with the interdisciplinary approach, advocated in Kepes' influential book 'Education of Vision' (1965), integrates art, design, and social issues into teaching methodologies.⁷ The studio drew from critical readings such as Johanna Dickson's *Move: Sites of Trauma* (2002) and Karen Beckman's *Black Media Matters: Remembering the Bombing of Osage Avenue* (2015). These resources have expanded students' cultural dialogues and deepened their understanding of complex social issues, marking a shift from the traditional Bauhaus design foundation studio on the subjective abstract model to a context-sensitive pedagogy to address today's complex challenges.

Societal constructs refer to shared ideas or concepts that have been “constructed” or developed over time within a society. They are not innate or naturally occurring phenomena. Still, rather they emerge and evolve based on cultural norms, beliefs, values, practices, and shared understandings that have evolved within a society over time, which is crucial to our design studio pedagogy. Within the MOVE studio’s framework, societal constructs serve as critical tools for examining the social and political factors contributing to the MOVE bombing and its aftermath. This involves understanding constructs such as race, class, and power and their role in influencing the event and its subsequent management. Furthermore, these constructs provide insight into the contextual aspects of the event, offering a deeper understanding of societal attitudes towards Black communities, law enforcement dynamics, and the role of government authority during that period.

Incorporating societal constructs into the design studio enables students to evaluate the extensive societal influences on architecture and urban planning. It also motivates students to consider how their design projects can challenge or reconfigure these constructs. For example, students may explore how memorial designs can counteract the erasure of marginalized histories or effectively reflect and honor the experiences of the MOVE community. Consequently, societal constructs form an essential component of the design process, facilitating the creation of design solutions that are contextually aware and socially responsive. The course promotes dynamic discussions and active participation, nurturing the exploration of diverse viewpoints in harmony with the ethos of liberal arts institutions. It emphasizes the significant—albeit often overlooked—role of design thinking in promoting social justice. Equipping students to directly address intricate social issues, underlining the transformative potential of socially conscious design.

PHOTO NARRATIVES: BETWEEN DIALOGUE AND DESIGN

Drawing on Mario Gooden’s perspectives, students generated unique photomontages as part of their group research on the MOVE incident (Figure 1). These visual essays critically deconstructed the roles of city governance, law enforcement, and media in framing narratives about the MOVE bombing. This process equipped each student to articulate their understanding, laying the groundwork for conceptual memorial designs and keyword actions that guided their architectural programming narratives. In addition, a firsthand visit to the MOVE site provided a tangible understanding of the space and fostered engagement with community members who remain deeply affected by the incident.

Gooden’s photomontage approach advocates for critical engagement with intricate issues such as the MOVE bombing and its mishandled aftermath. Gooden’s scholarly work, exploring the interplay between societal constructs, biases, and design influences, provided students with a critical lens for dissecting

the MOVE incident’s complexities.⁸ The students’ photo essays presented a stark juxtaposition and counter-narrative to the erasure of MOVE and its victims. In the context of the mishandling of the MOVE bombing victim remains, photomontages can capture various layers of the controversy, encompassing the historical event, the long-term community impact, and broader societal implications and reactions.

The students’ photo essays, informed by Gooden’s theories, encapsulated the trauma’s past, present, and future aspects, underlining the stark contrast between the 1985 bombing of American citizens and the principles of the 1776 Declaration of Independence signed nearby. This process underscores how architecture and design can challenge and reinterpret societal constructs and historical narratives.

Leveraging photo essays as a design medium, students were encouraged to critically analyze and express social constructs—such as governance, law enforcement, and media narratives—associated with the MOVE bombing. This method stimulated the development of memorial concepts, keyword actions, and architectural programming. The resulting photo essays demonstrated their comprehension and served as toolkits for design expression. The students refined their design and storytelling abilities by mastering Photoshop techniques like layering, cutting, clipping, transparency, overlays, and framing. These skills empowered them to craft narratives around keywords. This amalgamation of group work and photographic narrative construction significantly enhanced the students’ methodological growth, deepening their understanding of architecture’s societal implications. Notably, some students from the University of Pennsylvania used their projects to scrutinize the university’s controversial handling of a MOVE victim’s remains, prompting critical reflections on architecture’s role in remedying historical injustices.

In addition, photo essays serve as important design conversations illuminating the lesser-known stories from MOVE. Such discussions were a driving force for the students’ studio projects and written design concepts. The entire process led to a deeper understanding within the studio about architecture’s transformative potential when confronting societal constructs and historical narratives.

DIGITAL DESCRIPTIONS: PAIRING SOFTWARE WITH HISTORICAL INSIGHT

This course integrates software training with a nuanced understanding of memorial histories and typologies. It leverages three significant memorial case studies — Gordon Matta-Clark’s ‘Conical Intersect,’ Mary Miss’s 9/11 Sidewalk Memorial, and Mies van der Rohe’s Monument to the Revolution — as design models. Students, through practical digital software tutorials, grasp geometric descriptions. These case studies form critical anchors for design strategies and establish the basis for building cut, sidewalk, and corner memorials typologies.

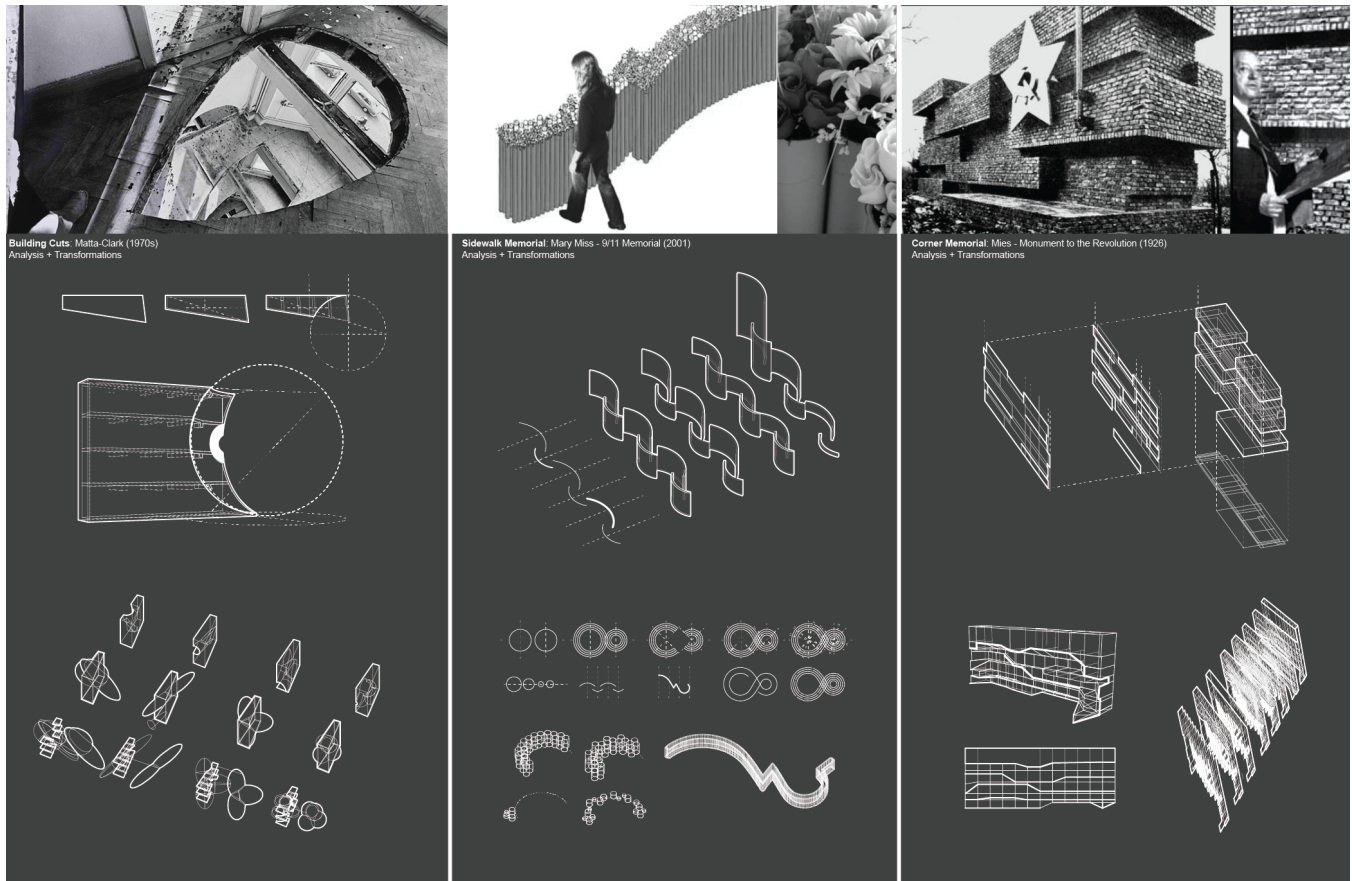


Figure 2. Digital Descriptions and Geometric Transformations: Software tutorials by way of historical precedents (left to right) Matta-Clark conical analysis by Jiayi Lou and Arielle Bennett; Mary Miss analysis by Tessa Kong; Mies Revolution Monument analysis by Roisin Keenan and Julia Cooke

The course employs structured digital software tutorials, enhancing the students' pedagogical journey. Carefully crafted, these tutorials intertwine technical skill development with historical and theoretical insights, weaving them seamlessly into the students' design processes. This approach revives the discourse of history and theory, blending it with mastery of digital tools in a style reminiscent of Bauhaus pedagogy. As a result, each project embeds historical and theoretical elements, giving students a deeper understanding of revered artists and architects' design philosophies. Students can then incorporate these philosophies into their creations.

These digital tutorials center around the analysis and reinterpretation of historical memorial case studies, each corresponding to one of three distinct memorial typologies. They provide students with essential 2D and 3D modeling skills and representational techniques for describing, projecting, and fabricating three-dimensional forms. Each case study plays a dual role: it serves as a practical exercise in geometric description facilitated by software commands. Also, it offers a valuable lesson in infusing design strategies into memorial creations. For instance, 'Conical Intersect,' embodying Matta-Clark's building cuts, provides an exercise in Boolean-difference geometry, offering a framework for engaging with specific building conditions. Mary Miss's temporary 9/11 memorial in New York City teaches lessons in

manipulating sweeps and blending curves, giving students strategies for engaging with border and edge conditions. In contrast, Mies's Monument to the Revolution, which consists of horizontal brick planes derived from the Nazi protesters' execution site, explores planar surfaces and extrusions (Figure 2).

With these memorial precedents as their basis, students experiment with design principles. They create a range of form possibilities and introduce the foundations of algorithmic and scripting design by manipulating degrees and structural modifications. This methodical approach provides an analogy for designing memorials that engage with various conditions at the MOVE project site. The initial assignment encourages students to transform descriptive observations into generative designs, enhancing their understanding of the interplay between history, theory, and design.

STORYTELLING IN DESIGN: MEMORIAL PROJECT IN FIRST-YEAR STUDIO

Memorial as Community Center: At the core of the memorial design is a community center that uses architectural storytelling to weave narratives. Each townhouse carries symbolic division, reflecting stories from the past. By confronting the past, remembering, and seeking healing, a

memorial gives form to the history of MOVE and reveals what was once concealed.

—Arielle Bennett, student narrative, ARCH 1010 (2022)

Showcasing our students' remarkable creativity and depth of thought in this introduction design studio, this section highlights three distinct projects—photo essays, narratives, and design proposals. Each project is a testament to our studio's unique approach, drawing inspiration from Bruno Latour's philosophies (1993) and Johanna Dickson's incisive MOVE-centric research (2002). This blend of ideas and perspectives catalyzes a new vision of memorials as design propositions introducing social issues to foundational students. Memorial design urges us to re-conceptualize these structures as integrated parts of the urban ecological tapestry, bearing witness to and acknowledging the scars etched by the harrowing tragedy of the MOVE bombing.

Dickson's insights from *MOVE: Sites of Trauma* underpin students' critical exploration of racial, historical, and design contexts, enriching their understanding of memorial design beyond the physical constraints of urban conditions to include encapsulated narratives.⁹ Bruno Latour's critique of the modern dichotomy between nature and society and his 'flat ontology' concept further fortifies the studio's theoretical foundation. Latour's philosophy disrupts traditional hierarchies, viewing humans, non-humans, objects, and ideas as interconnected elements within a network.¹⁰ This perspective becomes instrumental during the design process of the MOVE bombing memorial, prompting students to see the site not merely as a physical structure but as a dynamic entity intertwined with the city's broader socio-political, cultural, and ecological fabric. The innovative perspective serves as a departure point for students to transform their memorial designs from static memorabilia into active, significant components of the urban condition.

By highlighting the interconnectedness of entities, this approach facilitated an understanding of the trauma's far-reaching impacts beyond the immediate community and into the larger urban environment. Furthermore, Latour's dissolution of the nature-society binary¹¹ inspired students to consider the memorial's natural elements—from topography to vegetation—as silent witnesses to the trauma, integral to the memorial's narrative and providing spaces for healing and contemplation. Thus, Latour's theoretical underpinning fostered a more nuanced understanding of memorial architecture in urban trauma sites, shaping designs that engage with the complexities of these sites while promoting community healing and understanding.

The essence of our approach is to transform the memorial from a dormant monument into a vibrant participant in the city's public sphere, interacting with humans and non-humans alike. The students' designs shoulder the historical, emotional, and political burdens that shape public memory and perception of the commemorated event. They navigate an intricate web of

relationships, enabling an expanded narrative design scope and a nuanced understanding of the impacts of diverse memorial typologies on spatial interaction and experience.

Upon completing their photo essays and written narratives, the students were free to select their sites and develop their own programs. They could subtly integrate their memorials into the community fabric or transform them into sustainable ecological artifacts. Additionally, they had to consider a variety of factors, from physiological and psychological needs to environmental and climate change considerations. They also considered the rhythms of day and night, seasonal cycles, and the essential promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusivity. The students had three memorial location options: corner memorials, building cuts, and sidewalk memorials.

Exposure: A bold MOVE calls to action, embodied in a towering billboard. Angled for depth, each letter becomes a habitation, offering rest beneath its radiant shelter—constructivist in spirit, with perforations allowing for shared visions. A living green facade backdrop pays silent homage to the neighboring townhouses. A glowing civic space honoring memories lost, etched in light—an impermanent monument, its luminosity signifying resilience and remembrance.

—Roisin Keenan, student narrative, ARCH 1010 (2022)

The potential of corner memorials, much like Mies's Revolution Memorial, transforming peripheral site conditions into significant memory spaces, particularly intervened at edge conditions, remodeled existing corners, and connected public alleys within the MOVE city block (Figure 3). This exploration prompted them to delve into two primary form-making methods: subtractive and additive. Further, they strategized how their memorial designs could offer shelter, cultivate gardening spaces, and actively respond to climate change.

Arms and Flames: Arms rise, and flames flicker, striving to uncover the shrouded past. The circular cut, both a violation and unifier, envelops neighboring townhouses into a shared space of memory and movement. Nestled at its core in the basement, a hearth serves as a gathering place for sharing stories, cooking meals, and fellowship. A rooftop garden beckons with the promise of a skyward ascent—a testament to resilience, learning, and growth sparked by MOVE.

—Andrew Hong, student narrative, ARCH 1010 (2022)

The building-cut memorial provides an example of how we can reimagine traditional memorial spaces by repurposing existing buildings. By carving out portions from existing townhouses, students created a new base for the MOVE organization and advocated for the return of one or more townhouses to the MOVE community. This memorial form speaks to MOVE's community philosophies and challenges the divisive walls that echo

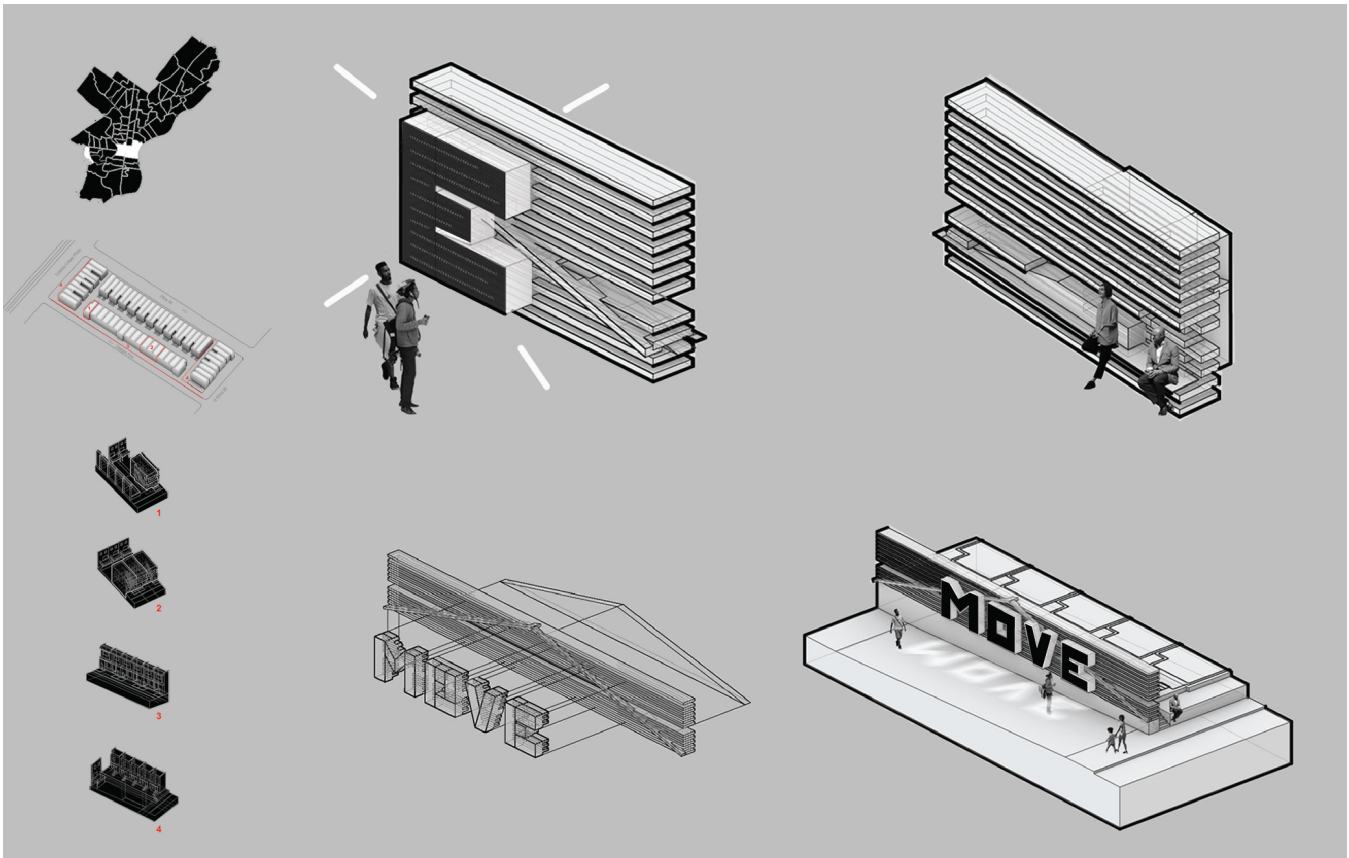


Figure 3. Corner Memorial, Roisin Keenan

Philadelphia's current zoning practices. Hence, it assumes multiple roles—from a space that honors victims and addresses community needs to a hub that serves as a shelter and a community gathering hall.

Understanding the complex relationship between the MOVE organization and housing policies is crucial. John Africa, the leader of MOVE, advocated for a back-to-nature ethos and communal living—contrasting starkly with Philadelphia's townhouse configuration and zoning laws. Andrew's design proposal acknowledges these challenges and respects MOVE's ethos, shaping the memorial space as a community center (Figure 4).

Embers on Osage: Eleven steps descend into silence, guided by an ember's glow for remembrance. Along the path, the sidewalk widens, strewn with floral tributes. A silent testament stands at John Africa's threshold, whispering stories of lives moved, echoing from the embers on Osage.

—Tessa Kong, student narrative, ARCH 1010 (2022)

The sidewalk memorial, drawing inspiration from Mary Miss's transformative work with her 9/11 Sidewalk Memorial, provides students with a unique opportunity to engage directly with the urban fabric. This approach subtly weaves the memorial

narrative into the daily routines of city dwellers and pedestrians. As a typology, it permits a discreet tribute that respects existing townhouses, integrates remembrance into the city's day-to-day fabric, and gently reminds pedestrians of the MOVE event. This method provides room for delicate and bold interventions, ranging from street expansion through repurposing parking spaces to reimagining townhouses' front steps, aligning with MOVE's philosophy visually and symbolically (Figure 5).

By exploring these diverse memorial typologies and leveraging Beckman's and Latour's theoretical insights, students can design spaces that honor the victims of the MOVE event while fostering dialogue, reflection, and a commitment to social and ecological justice. This exploration prepares students to intertwine architectural design with social and historical contexts effectively, readying them to address complex design challenges and make informed, empathetic contributions to our built environment. This exploration is more than just an academic exercise. It is a powerful tool for shaping the designers of tomorrow, equipping them to create spaces that honor our past, engage our present, and anticipate a future.

REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE DESIGN STUDIOS

Reflecting on our inaugural design studio raised numerous questions, prompting a thorough reevaluation of our pedagogical approach. This section examines these inquiries, shedding light on our strategies for intertwining design with research, handling

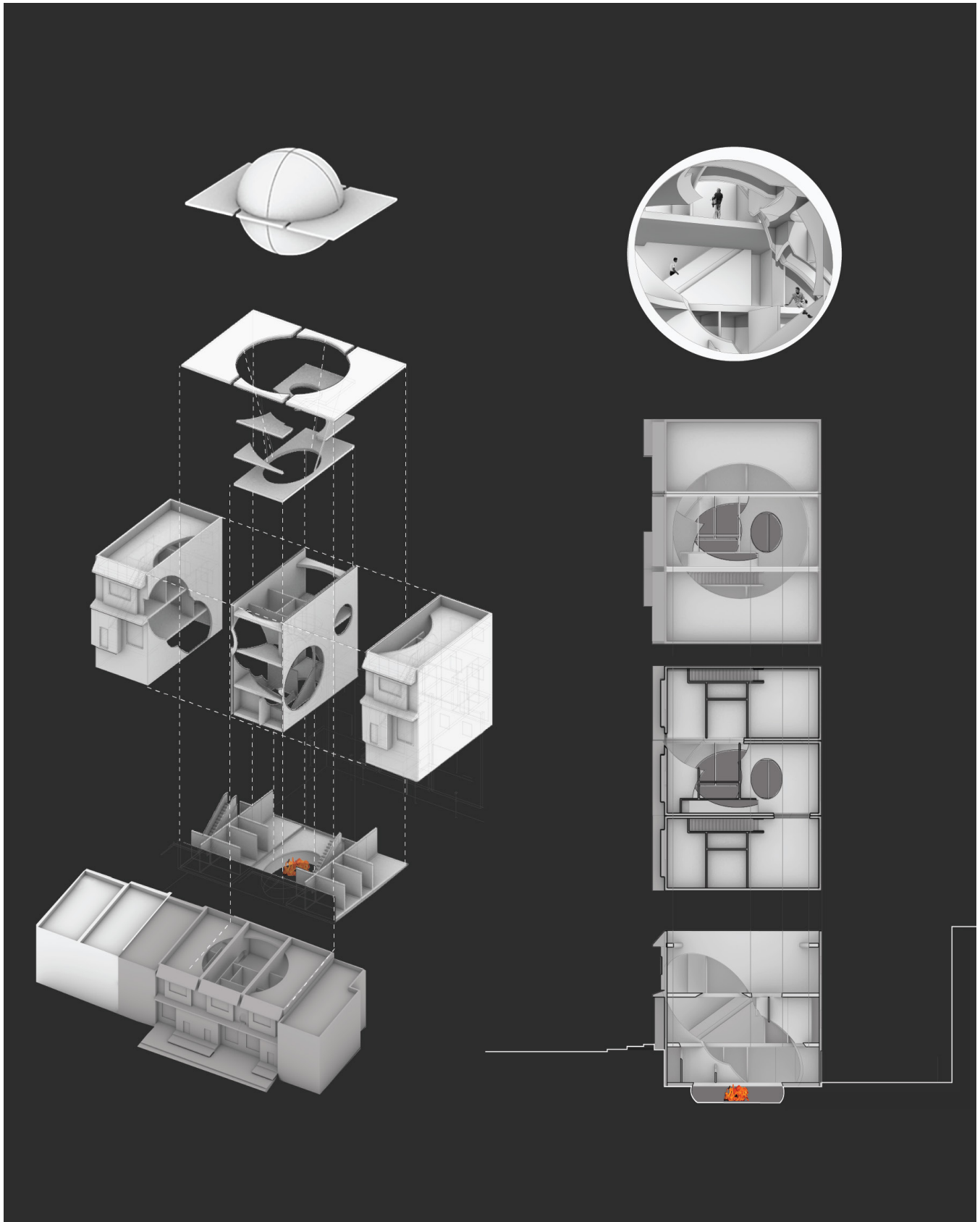


Figure 4. Building Cut Memorial, Andrew Hong

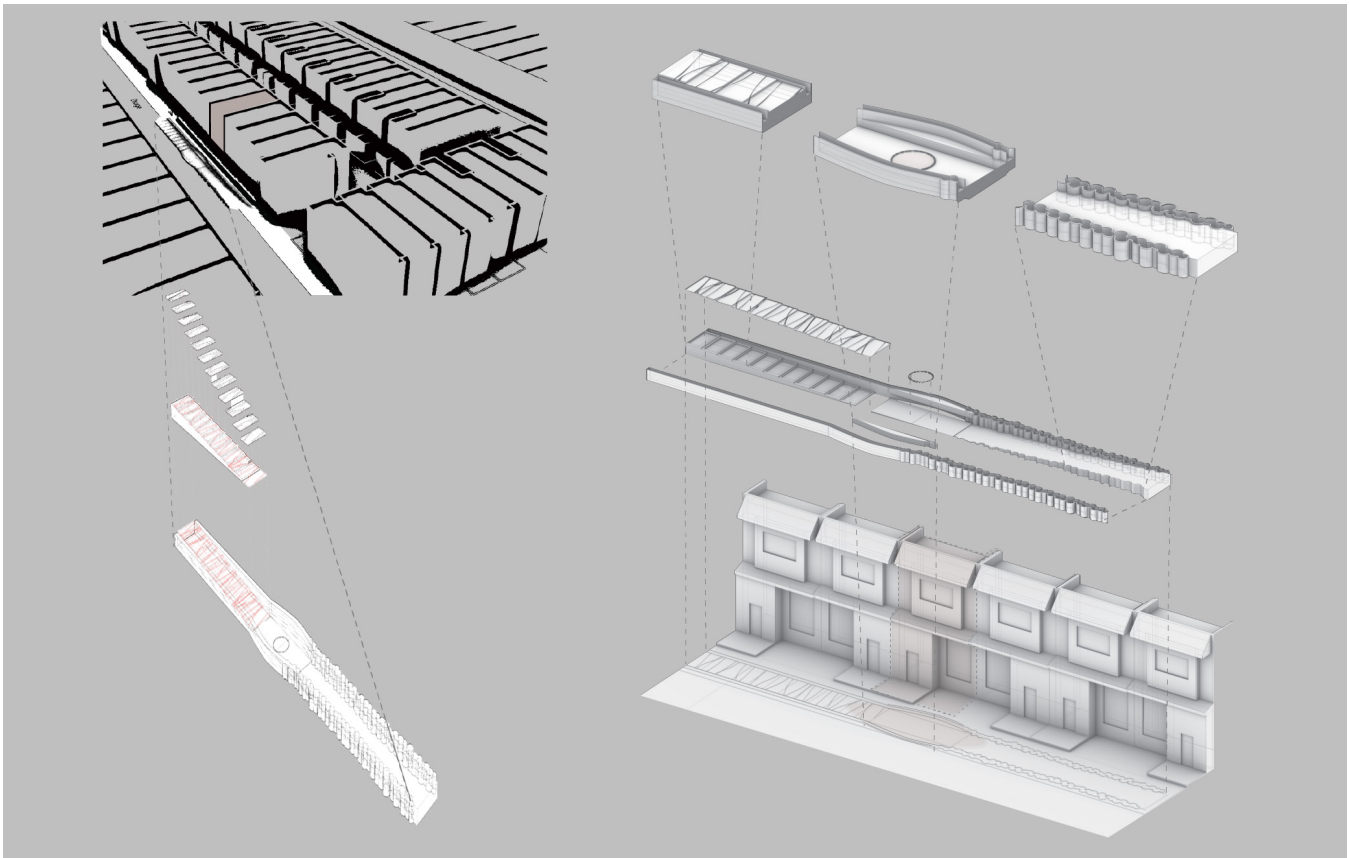


Figure 5. Sidewalk Memorial, Tessa Kong

traumatic design projects, and striking a balance between flexibility and structure in our deliverables.

Approaching traumatic design projects within a beginner's studio requires tact and careful consideration. Despite their inherent complexities, we believe such topics are essential to a comprehensive architectural education and should be introduced early. By cultivating a nurturing environment and employing trauma-informed pedagogies, we stimulate exploration of challenging themes while fostering critical thinking, empathy, and a deep understanding of architecture's societal implications.

Our teaching methodology perceives design and research as dynamic, interdependent processes. The phrase we used in the studio is that 'analysis is design in reverse,' suggesting that new facets can surface at any point in the studio process and spur further research. The iterative nature of the students' research informs and shapes their design processes throughout the semester. This becomes particularly critical in projects like the MOVE bombing memorial, where comprehensive research is vital for crafting a respectful and accurate representation.

Finding the right equilibrium between flexibility and structure is key to our approach. Flexibility allows for open discussions and nurtures creativity, as demonstrated by our open-ended photo

essay assignment. However, we maintain structure through technical digital software exercises, drawing on Bauhaus principles. We complement these exercises with open-ended memorial projects, promoting creative exploration while imparting vital technical skills. Thus, our approach reaches beyond technical skills, offering a comprehensive learning experience encompassing a broader architectural education scope.

ARCHITECTURAL BEGINNINGS: REINVENTING FOUNDATIONAL STUDIOS

This paper advocates a crucial shift from traditional Bauhaus-inspired foundational studios towards more relevant and socially conscious empathetic design fundamentals. This transformation goes beyond simply replacing abstract design lessons with socially pertinent exercises; it actively nurtures a design thinking mindset grounded in social justice, fueled by pressing social issues, and prioritizes meaningful student engagement.

Amid the post-pandemic educational landscape, Penn's *Introduction to Design* course prioritizes each student's needs. Each lesson encourages reflection and iterative design, emphasizing the process over the product to nurture empathy in design choices. We've implemented a hybrid learning environment, decreased the frequency of studio meetings, and divided students into smaller, more manageable groups. This strategy supports collaborative design principles, enhances flexibility, and fosters mental wellness. Our updated schedule incorporates individual

critiques during Tuesday pinup sessions, while Thursdays are dedicated to lectures, tutorials, and workshops, with optional office hours providing additional support. Additionally, we've shifted our methodology to focus more on process models that guide student design programs and offer a practical contrast to digital work. A fundamental shift towards a process and group-oriented design, rather than emphasizing the final product, bolsters student confidence and stimulates self-critical motivation with fruitful discussions.

Integration of social justice into architectural design education must go beyond mere symbolism. It's crucial to consistently weave social justice considerations into the pedagogical process, empowering students to champion diversity, equity, and inclusivity.¹² Future design projects for introduction studies should be deeply connected to the narratives and experiences of those affected by significant societal events, like the MOVE bombing.

In the forthcoming year, our studio plans to concentrate on the significant social issues of demolition safety and building collapses in Philadelphia. Potential studio discussions could delve into architects' ethical duties during demolition, the societal implications of building collapses, and the early incorporation of sustainability measures like waste reduction and recycling of construction materials. A studio project centered around this issue provides another holistic approach, preparing beginning designers to handle career challenges while upholding their commitment to socially aware design projects.

"Architectural Beginnings" signifies the foundational phase of architectural education. It pertains explicitly to introductory courses in architecture and design where core curricula integrate social justice principles. This innovative approach aspires to foster a new generation of architects — individuals equipped and ready to navigate post-pandemic challenges while actively advocating for social justice. This studio design model aims to enrich the learning journey and shape the broader architectural landscape, advocating for a socially conscious and empathetic architecture practice. It serves as a call to action for foundational instructors to rethink, redefine, and reimagine the beginnings of design studio education for the cosmopolitan architect.

ENDNOTES

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