InTensions

Negotiated Place in the Design Studio

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Abstract
Concepts of *space* and *place* are fairly straightforward, but the ways in which they are negotiated through inhabitation prove somewhat more difficult. The design studio provides a unique educational environment to examine in more detail the negotiation of place both within and outside the studio walls. Highly social, densely interactive, full of conflicting goals, needs, means and methods - a healthy studio contains many of the essential ingredients necessary to help us learn about the potentials of negotiated place.

The design studio: abstract Cartesian space becomes negotiated, inhabited place.
See the full size image here:
http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/images/robertdorgan1lrg.jpg

Negotiating Place

Place is not a difficult concept. The ways in which place are negotiated,

however, are much more difficult.

[2]   *Space,* in its common conception, is abstract, uninhabited, void of activity, and easily quantified in terms of its physical properties: size, shape, arrangement, proportion, orientation, material, color, light, acoustics, etc. Whether defined by its spatial properties or its formal properties, space is never defined by the events it witnesses.

[3]   *Place,* on the other hand, is not abstract at all. Place is space inhabited, occupied, used, territorialized, negotiated. Bernard Tschumi notes that place is necessarily messy, disjunctive, as the events that define a place and distinguish place from space often do not coincide with the proposed uses for which the space was designed. We eat in the bedroom, read in the bathroom, have sex in the kitchen, regardless of the intentions of those who created these spaces.

[4]   Place is always political. Space, however, is non-denominational, allowing place to become democratic, fascist, libertarian, feudal, collaborative, cooperative, contested, competitive... depending upon how it is occupied.

[5]   Georges Bataille used the metaphors of the *pyramid* and the *labyrinth*

to elaborate on the ways in which experience impacts our conceptions of space and place (Hollier 57). If you close your eyes, you can easily imagine a pyramid: square in plan, four sides, meeting at a single point at the top. But close your eyes and try to imagine a labyrinth. This task is much more difficult. You may be able to imagine a maze-like series of passages, but for a labyrinth to truly function - that is, for it to create a tension between orientation and disorientation, between goal and goal denied, ending in orientation at its resolution - the labyrinth needs to be experienced, inhabited. (Further, solving a maze dissolves its magic. Upon the second tracing of a maze's path, we realize it no longer retains its intrigue, mystery, entanglement and escape, or sense of accomplishment.)

[6]   We can broadly imagine *types* of experience, but not actual experience provided by a specific inhabitation of a specific space. In short, we cannot imagine place. Place must be negotiated first-hand, in real time.

The Studio

Quantity has a quality all its own.
-V. I. Lenin

[8]   The design studio provides a wonderful self-reflexive laboratory from which to propose and produce possible places. It is a platform from which to examine these concepts unfolding around us: our own studio-place. The

studio is a highly social environment, a wonderful microcosm of the world in which we design. Sir John Summerson once described design as "the collision of intention with circumstance," (Summerson 103). A healthy studio provides both the setting of circumstance and the impetus for intention. Studios are also highly urban, in that definition of urban as "a density of interaction." In these terms urban is not equated with cities, per se, but rather with those clusters of exchanges which make our best cities dynamic urban environments. In these terms, a coffee shop can be urban; a small-town Main Street can be urban; a classroom can be urban. A colleague in Italy used to say that you knew you were in an urban area if at any moment a football (soccer) game might break out. A healthy studio is densely interactive.

[9]   The studio is also highly political in two senses. One might define the political as those series of negotiations necessary to function in a highly social and densely interactive environment. In this sense, a healthy studio is political, providing an environment to negotiate a succession of collisions: collisions between space and place, between the abstract and the experienced, between intention and circumstance, between the density of day-to-day interactions and machinations of studio production.

[10] Another useful definition of politics states that "politics renders

contexts legible" (Dorgan, "Toward" 13-7), and as an educational place, the studio works not just to produce possible solutions for societal problems, but also to define these problems and the contexts in which they operate. Historically, studios tend to concern themselves with the figural (in the figure/ground dialectic). They concern the singularity of solution, rather than the multiplicity of circumstance. Some studios, however, have begun to concern themselves with the grounding contexts in which figural solutions sit. They posit that when we *place* objects into the field, when we *place* figures into the ground, what we really do is transform the ground. In Summerson's terms, our intentions transform the circumstances within which subsequent intentions will act producing a sort of architectural Heisenberg Principle in which the object of study is transformed by the study itself.

[11] A series of design studio projects which attempt to render contexts legible and explore the negotiations of place are documented below. We begin with relatively small steps, starting from simple premises, slowly building in density and complexity, as we move from assessing the world around us to acting upon it.

London

A landscape does not exist in its own right,
since its appearance changes at any moment.

- Claude Monet (Barnes 36)

[13] Nuances of place occur even without occupation or inhabitation. Weather, light, the arrangement of objects left by previous inhabitants, all color a space place-like as they transform the abstract into something more specific. Systematically recording these transformations helps illuminate the subtleties and place-like characteristics of a space.

[14] The following photographs (a sampling from the hundreds of photographs in this series) were taken over a two-year period, out of the same attic apartment window in the Finsbury Park neighborhood of North London [all photos are by the author]. The images were taken with Kodachrome and Ektachrome slide film, which is important to mention only because this photographic series came about quite by accident, and before digital photography. At the end of every roll of film, it is not uncommon to find one or two unexposed shots. So at the end of a day of shooting photographs in and around London, returning to an attic apartment, a few extra unexposed frames were often found at the end of the roll. As most anyone on a tight budget will attest, it is difficult to send in for processing a roll of film which has not been fully utilized. So, a dilemma arises: wait until the next photo excursion to shoot the last couple frames, or take a couple pictures out the window and send the film in for developing now. Opting for the latter, a small stack of 'extra' slides began to emerge at the periphery of

a growing London slide collection, all of the same space (the street as seen from the attic window), but all depicting a very different place. After a few months, as the peripheral pile grew in size, numerous differences in this space became increasingly apparent, and a new quest began, and with it, a new appreciation for place developed.

Recording place in London
See the image gallery here:
http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/robertdorgan.php#gallery1

Las Vegas

What happens in Las Vegas
stays in Las Vegas
- promotional slogan

[16] Las Vegas is a very difficult place to photograph. Even good postcards of Las Vegas are difficult to find. A 225-square-mile valley in the Upper Mohave desert bounded by federal lands on all sides, 2 million residents, 3 million tourists every month, one very determined and intentional street (The Strip), post-automotive, post-industrial, post-modern, post-urban… As a place, the slogan "What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas" suggests inhabitation, experience, and is central to defining and

understanding Las Vegas. Built around the service industries and the hospitality of their 40 million annual guests, the city slogan suggests that not only does the space of Las Vegas remain after your visit, but the experience remains as well. Other places have begun to operate on this model as well. As we transition further into a service society, brand identities once dominated by spatial slogans (eg. the Land of 10,000 Lakes, the Venice of the North) and adjectival monikers (eg. the Windy City, the Granite State, the Big Apple) are slowly becoming eschewed in favor of activity-driven place-based slogans (eg. Virginia: Where Lovers Meet, The NBA: Where Amazing Happens, Cleveland Rocks!). If we tend to design and record objects and space, how then to record environments crafted around experience and place?

[17] The following photographs were taken in April of 2005 by 125 students in an Introduction to Architecture course at UNLV. Using Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's text *Learning From Las Vegas* as our field guide, we collectively identified several conditions thatwhich define the city (the significance of the A&P parking lot, the Heroic & the Ugly, the Everyday & the Ordinary, Signs & Symbols). We then went out in search of these conditions at work in Las Vegas. Eight thousand photographs were taken in one month and culled down to 1,000 the following month for a traveling exhibition. Again, we are attempting to capture the complexities

and contradictions which define a place, not merely produce an image of the city which confirms or reconfirms pre-existing stereotypes: a landscape full of pyramids and pirate ships, Eiffel Towers and Empire State buildings.

[18] Our study of place in Las Vegas became more robust through the eyes of 125 different photographers, each with their own empirical understanding of the city. Each student inhabits space and negotiates place differently than the next. Each has different preconceived models and mental maps against which their experiences are weighed. In Tschumi's terms, the *pleasure* of architecture (epistemologically speaking) emerges when the experience of a place coincides with our preconceived notions of a space. Similarly, an epistemological *violence* occurs when our experience contests preconceptions. Collectively, our understanding of Las Vegas builds upon the multiple exchanges of pleasure and violence our various habits and inhabitations of the city reveal.

Experiencing place in Las Vegas
See the image gallery here:
http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/robertdorgan.php#gallery2

Blacksburg

Character gives us qualities,
but it is in actions – what we do –
that we are happy or the reverse.
- (Aristotle 349-50)

[20] Okay, so we can record and uncover the qualitative complexities of place, but what we really want to do is act upon these places - to transform these places, to transform the world we live in to make it a better place (or sometimes, sadly, the reverse).

[21] This next exercise starts with a simple premise: "architecture places forms in the landscape...". Finish that sentence anyway you like: "...to make the world a better place," "...to serve the needs of my clients," "...to provide shelter," "...to honor the past," "...to inspire others by showing them things they've never seen before." However you finish the sentence, it starts with the same premise. Place here, as a verb (and an action verb at that), provides an interesting linguistic turn. We act upon a space in order to create place. Our premise argues that our pre-occupation with form and space has obscured attention away from placement, and has diverted focus away from the consequences of that placement.

[22] In order to test the efficacy of our premise, we constructed a simple exercise to place a simple form in the landscape. To further shift attention away from form, we chose the simplest, most banal, most ubiquitous form

we could find: the white folding chair. As students "placed this form in the landscape" to finish their own architectural sentences anyway they liked, the placements were recorded (mostly by photograph) and shared with others. As our placements matured, our study grew to some 4,000 places generated through locating the simple form of the white folding chair in the Blue Ridge landscape in and around Blacksburg, Virginia.

[23] Over the course of this study, we began to notice the same form could be called upon to create many different conditions. We began to see that our placements could call attention to the vastness of the landscape, or to the claustrophobic conditions of a confined space. We could 'render legible' our relation to the sky, or to the ground, to the people that used the chair, and to those who ignored it completely. We could call attention to the properties of the form itself - shiny, dented, scratched, lightweight, foldable - through its adjacency to other forms. We could create social settings and contemplative places. We could find humor in our work, and seriousness in our purpose, all by placing our form in different ways.

Placing white folding chairs in Blacksburg
See the full image gallery here:
http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/robertdorgan.php#gallery3

Studio Projects

Conflict is the gadfly of thought.
It stirs us to observation and memory.
It instigates to invention.
It shocks us out of sheeplike passivity,
and sets us at noting and contriving.
- (Dewey 300)

[25] Architectural design studios often try to create projects which replicate conditions found outside the classroom. These projects typically take the form of proposing a pre-defined program or set of activities be placed onto a particular parcel of land. The problems are framed in such a way that the task for each student becomes one of creating a figural, formal solution - an architectural fiction - that occupies the parcel, while hopefully addressing the particulars of the program. Student proposals are then compared and critiqued side by side on the relative merits of their offerings.

[26] Unfortunately, very few architectural projects today resemble the scholastic model of one building, one site, one architect, or one work of architecture. A recent survey from the American Institute of Architects found

three-quarters of all architects' fees pertain to renovation and remodeling work. Historically, the architect's reach stretched much further than the property edges of a particular parcel of land: they designed and built cities, roads, military fortifications, aqueducts and irrigation systems, landscapes, interiors, furniture, fixtures, fashion, fine art, graphic design, as well as buildings. If one of our goals inside the studio is to replicate conditions found outside the classroom, it is being realized that perhaps we need new models of design inquiry to better address those conditions.

[27] Our design studios in Las Vegas are now working to create a series of exercises that help us as designers to negotiate place: to aggressively and collectively design the ground, focusing on designing neighborhoods, districts, communities and clusters of activities, on multiple parcels, where contextual circumstances are constantly in flux. Individual habits and conventional tropes are up-ended: property lines, transportation options, party walls, public space, civic contributions, architectural authorship and metrics for success are all 'in play' and open for architectural redefinition.

[28] We typically create a large working model of the area in question, and continually update this three-dimensional assemblage, day and night, to reflect the latest architectural ideas generated by the faculty and students. Context changes constantly in these environments, as every time one re-

enters the studio the collective project has evolved from the previous experience of the growing body of work. Just as our portrait of Las Vegas was enriched through the input of 125 different photographers, each with their own way of inhabiting and experiencing the city, so too are our studio projects enriched by the input of multiple architectural voices. We all see the city through different eyes, we all draw the city with different hands, we all imagine the city in different minds, and we all act upon the city with different craft. Our educational environment benefits tremendously when neighboring voices pursue those sometimes convergent, sometimes divergent, issues of structure, skin, site, sustainability, color, material, program, public space, in different projects in different parts of the growing whole, allowing us to simultaneously retain focus on our own intentions, while remaining mindful of those other pursuits being negotiated around us.

[29] An onlooker once described these exercises as *urban chess,* where pieces are free to uproot and relocate, to renovate and remodel, to reposition and reprogram, as needed to support the larger goals of the collective. Just as the environment we inhabit is constantly in flux, so too are our models. Our landscapes consist simultaneously of projects both finished and still under construction, parcels vacant and full, designs old and new, materials rough and refined, reflecting different needs and desires, largely all under some form of renovation and remodeling. If this describes the

world we inhabit and negotiate everyday, then this should also describe the educational environment we construct as well.

[30] Furthermore, the world is more messy than chess. First, we have more players. Then, imagine a game where not only are the pieces mobile, but the board itself morphs and moves as well. Finally, imagine the rules governing possible movements are also in play. Tschumi describes "the game of architecture" as "an intricate play with rules that you may break or accept," where "the more numerous and sophisticated the restraints, the greater the pleasure" (Tschumi 88; see also Dorgan, "(Re)Framing" 3). Whereas Tschumi describes the ropes and rules of architecture as "knots that cannot be untied," we prefer to remember that these same rules have been designed and constructed by those around us, and as such these can be redesigned, remodeled, renovated, and reconstructed by us. Everyday we rewrite the rules that govern our experience: we overthrow governments, amend our constitutions, revise our belief systems, enjoy little epiphanies, and occasionally just change our minds. We are not passive players in this game of life, but the architects charged with imagining its different possible futures. The studio is where we begin to shape that imagination.

Negotiating place in the design studio
See the full image gallery here:
http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/robertdorgan.php#gallery4

Postscript: Fire Escapes and Jay-walkable Streets

[31] Form-givers and space-makers often argue that design is primarily aesthetic: it may operate in and around economic, political, social and cultural fields, but design's contribution to these fields is marginal, or at least secondary, to its aesthetic contribution to the world we inhabit. Further, how space is inhabited is out of the space-maker's control. As such, as the argument goes, designers should continue to focus on those areas under their control, and leave the messy parts to others better qualified to address the mess. What these aesthetes fail to recognize is that their form-giving and space-making allow for possible inhabitations, and to a much greater degree than we tend to acknowledge, shape the type and nature of activities that may *take place* in these environments.

[32] Take the fire escape as an example. From a performance specification, the fire escape is clearly defined by its name: namely to provide a means of

escape in case of fire. To our great relief, most fire escapes will never witness an escape from a fire during their lifetimes, yet these structures remain a part of our landscape even when not called into action. Here is where the design particulars of a fire escape come into play. Many of us are familiar with the steel skeletal fire escapes clinging to the sides of load-bearing masonry buildings in the older parts of North American cities. We've also seen these fire escapes host a range of other events: drying laundry, parking a bicycle, growing a garden, opening a bottle of wine and spreading out a cheap-date picnic basket, peeking into somebody's window, climbing onto the roof to watch fireworks, or sleeping on a hot summer night - all activities well outside the original design brief. Even when they are not being used, these structures continue to contribute to the aesthetic character of our urban environments. Now consider the more recent and more common designs for fire escapes: encased in concrete, no windows or openings of any kind, no occupiable space, no contribution to the surrounding landscape. Form follows function (as defined by building code), but contributes little else in allowing the space to become place.

[33] If our designs are to have a greater contribution to the social and political issues of the day, we need to better articulate how our designs allow for socio-political inhabitation, and how the negotiation of place contributes to active discourses in those disciplines outside our own.

[34] Here, jay-walking provides a good example. I would argue that any definition of a good street must include an acknowledgement of its *jay-walkability* - that is, how easy or how hard it is to traverse on foot perpendicular to vehicular traffic. We can map any street in terms of where it is easy to jay-walk and where it is hard to jay-walk. Often a single street presents several jay-walkable pockets, interspersed between easier and harder stretches of negotiation. Streets that have been given over to the automobile are too dangerous to jay-walk; streets that have been given over to the pedestrian are too dangerous to drive through. These are not good streets. A good street is that place where the density of interaction between drivers and pedestrians is most prevalent: where you can jay-walk, but you might get hit by a car, and where you can drive, but you might hit a pedestrian.

[35] From a public safety perspective this approach to the design of our streets may sound irresponsible, even a bit perverse, but let's think about this situation from a different point of view. What we have in this scenario are two different groups (drivers / pedestrians), each with different means (vehicles / feet), different abilities (40 mph / 4 mph), different safeguards (3,000 pound suit of armor / 3 lbs of clothing), and different goals (move along the street / move across the street). In a jay-walkable street, each

group must become aware of *the other.* In terms of social strategies for dealing with the other, we know of (at least) two distinct options: integration and segregation. Often in the design of our streetscapes, our short-sighted concerns for public safety generate a segregation of two segments of the population which, in other scenarios, in other discourses, would be considered socially and politically unhealthy.

[36] If we, as designers, can more effectively communicate how the design of a street, or a fire escape, or a building, or a landscape - its size, shape, scale, signage, density of activity, etc - can contribute in positive ways to creating a more healthy public place by creating more opportunities for social exchange, for negotiation, for generating social capital, we will have a better chance of contributing to those larger dialogues which have the potential to bring us together and improve our collective circumstance.

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