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The Consuming Process

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Part One: An Apology for Slowness

The production of architecture has changed dramatically over the course of the last decade or so; this is a fact we, as educators, are all well aware of. Change has occurred in the areas of theory and representation, and certainly in the area of pedagogy, in ways both subtle and dramatic. My own experience as an instructor in design education began at the end of the eighties, and since that time I have witnessed an ever-tightening frequency in the normal courses of change. A common issue that has become more and more crucial since that time is the issue of time, or more accurately duration, vis-à-vis it's consideration as a component of useful pedagogy. Those of us who have received their own education before the introduction of computers into the equation often recall the rapidity with which beginning design assignments were given, worked upon, and evaluated. Current conditions in design education exacerbate such conditions.

"Slowness" is generally considered a disease. It is a condition to be superceded; it cannot engender success. It is a cultural imperative and a moral taboo. Condemnation of slowness—as distinguished from laziness or sloth—is not at all new to American culture. In 1870, Mark Twain chided, "I have seen slower people than I am—and more deliberate...But they were dead."

Consider the pathological implications in the following scholarly abstract taken from the annals of psychiatry:

Compulsive Slowness: A Curious Manifestation of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), by Dr. M. Gallo, Psy.D:

"It has been noted that some individuals...experience a problem with excessive slowness. By compulsive slowness we refer to a symptom that is marked by completing many tasks in an exceedingly slow, methodical and fastidious manner. For example, a person...may write a letter so slowly, concentrating carefully on each stroke of the pen, that it requires extraordinary time to complete. Compulsive slowness can also be seen in speech, reading, listening to words or sounds...Moreover, one can become conditioned to 'think' slowly, dragging out every cognition or thought for a prolonged period.

Slowness is thus a pathology; it is a condition to be abhorred and avoided. I intend to suggest a positive seeking of it, suggesting that it is an obvious condition in response to forces that would suggest otherwise.

Through an exposition of several projects given to first-year design students, this presentation will discuss the need for the imposition of the time-consuming project upon the Beginning Design Student. The vast majority of students arrive for the study of Design as participants in a "flash culture," in which experiences and involvement are kept brief and perfunctory at best. Usually lacking a broad-ranging literacy, most students expect a quick and constantly changing range of experiences in both their academic and (too often) personal lives. The provision for the Time Consuming Process—that which is impossible to fulfill quickly—serves to prepare the Design student for entry into the realm of Architecture—a "patient study."

This presentation is not intended in any way to suggest an anti-technological stance. I am not now, nor have I ever been a Luddite. While I do not personally instruct with the computer in the studio, I always encourage its use and exploration, just as I would any other tool. Nor do I possess some of the more annoying attributes of the nostalgic—I seek not to return to the past—but neither do I seek to destroy its lessons.

It is often stated that the design process begins when the student endeavors to learn to 'see.' But seeing must involve more than mere "looking." Reflecting, criticizing and recording are all crucial to a successful attempt to "see." The value of the temporal, and the inability to rush any design process, and among the most crucial aspects a Beginning Design student must learn. Critical feedback, iteration, and a sense of the desirability of dialogue with peers—recognizing the collective and collaborative aspects to the productive life of an architect—must be instilled from the start if an understanding of the true principles of the design process are to be advanced.

Projects involving long-term focus from the start—atypical in most Beginning Design curricula—privilege a series of areas upon which the student can focus. Materiality becomes an issue if the project involves the exploration and preparation of specific media, such as plaster, wood and metal. A sense of material empathy is only achievable with the use of actual material specimens, rather than the common mode of representation through analogous materiality. The use of tools as extension of the hand and eye serves to illustrate the "disconnect" to be overcome throughout the process. Reverence for the material, and coming to grips with its demands and limitations, has value beyond mere satisfactory completion of a task. Laborious tasks such as rendering textures, confronting details and recording ordinary conditions remove the tendency to generalize and gloss-over. Long-term focus gives the su-
dent a sense of the need to remain involved, and that the thing that is intensively and carefully pursued will provide the most rewards.

The craft theorist David Pye proclaimed, "The best possible design is seldom the one which is quickest to make, or anything like it; and, even where it is, the best quality of workmanship can usually be achieved only by the workman spending an apparently inordinate amount of time on the job."

Momently forgiving the gender-specific condition suggested by Pye, the quality of workmanship — indeed, the condition of quality itself, comes into question without appropriate "marination." The philosopher John Locke suggested that all knowledge, and as a consequence, wisdom, was attained through sensation and appropriate reflection.

Returning to the issue of technologies, I feel it is appropriate to here suggest the inappropriateness of the use of electronic media in the earliest design courses. At least not yet. Despite the efficiency of digital exploration and representation in the design process, the dismissal of such temptations can only change a student's outlook on the design process. Most students come to the beginning design studio with technological experiences far more advanced than most of us will ever endeavor to employ. And they will use that talent soon in constructing their rendition of the cultural landscape. But to confound that tendency forces the student to reflect upon the process. And in so doing, the beginning design student may reliably attain the wisdom afforded by the Locke-ian pursuit.

**Part Two: Projects**

The following section presents a number of projects given during the summer term at the University of Arkansas School of Architecture's Summer Option First-Year Design Studio. Projects that were team-taught are so noted. Similar to baccalaureate programs in other schools of architecture, the summer program meets for twelve weeks, Monday through Friday, for seven hours each day. The intention is to model the entire first year of design education during the summer through an exceptionally intense focus upon architectural tasks. Ironically, the very premise of the studio is antithetical to the idea of slowness. Its main constituency consists of those seeking to accelerate their design education and to enter the subsequent school year at a more advanced level than they would have had they enrolled in the design studio during the conventional school year. By necessity, then, the summer experience demands certain sacrifices — students are enjoined from taking on summer jobs or other distractions that would interfere with the term, however necessary. The summer curriculum takes on a reduced scope in order to work at all with the demanding calendar, and all projects are calculated to develop craft as a normal consequence of completion.

Dividing the summer term into two six-week periods, the focus during the first half is upon aspects more analogous to architecture — components and materiality. The plaster block project occurs during this first six-week term. Students are first encouraged to develop a system of pattern through drawings. The pattern is often based upon observation of selected plant materials and their subsequent conventionalization, depending on the particular assignment. With approval from their critics, students are instructed to cast at least two blocks, plus more for practice. Though urged to fashion their own tools from simple metal stock, most students chose to purchase factory-made clay working tools for their precision. One year; students were asked to design a fragment of a cornice, and to carve the cornice incorporating a corner condition. What distinguishes this sort of project from most studio projects, of course, is the fact that the course of production of the representation informs design decision-making far more than usual. Indeed, what is crucial about this project, beyond the mere slowness of the production, is the production itself, and the satisfaction that occurs through fabrication. There is an ironic aspect of Bauhaus sensibility incorporated into such projects; that, despite the production of an "outmoded" and "pre-modern" component — a cornice — handcraft and the judgement calls that are requisite to that process are embodied.

Production time for this project can be extensive — perhaps excessive during such a brief summer term. But it can be demonstrated that ethic is more important than expertise in such instances, and that an analogous treatment of architecture (with certain strictures) can lead into its study just as successfully as can more explicit curricula. Working with plaster is an intensive process, and subject to variations in humidity, length of curing time, and the skill and patience of the caster / carver. Extensive time is required to plan and cut the surface, painstakingly extracting all areas that would reveal the carver's intentions. There is no rushing the carving process, just as there is no rushing the initial curing process of the blocks themselves. Patience and a high degree of hopeful expectation cannot be "micro-waved" into place.

For another rendition of the project, the assignment was to carve the plaster object, and then in a second phase to design and craft a protective carapace for it. The requirements for the plaster object were somewhat different in this rendition: subject matter for the plaster object derived not directly from sketches of plant material but from a more broadly interpreted set of graphic work. With some regret about the results of this first phase of work, the production of the container for the object proved far more successful. At the outset of the project, a number of questions were posed concerning the materiality of the thing, such as: What is the container to be constructed? Should the container completely conceal your object, or should your object be revealed some? Should the surfaces of the container — inside as well as out — be manipulated in any way? Students were given no due date at the outset of the project — a troubling proposition for them, to be sure. They were told that a due date would be determined later, and that they would be given enough time in which to work intensively. The students were asked to remember that "high craft" would be...
one crucial manner by which their success on the project would be measured. An open-ended period of time was seen as crucial to the development of a critical stance on the part of the student. And they persisted in asking, “when is this due?” for the duration of the project.

David Pye stated that “time is a dimension of all workmanship.” Most of us know that students will often tailor their efforts to the time given. While there may be accusations that such an open-ended way of working misleads students into developing poor time organization skills, most of them arrive at architecture school with a “final examination” mentality. We send the students mixed signals by restricting time spent so early. We want them to devote clear and focused time upon their projects, but seldom do they find out what is possible in a design process so temporally defined as to cause the student to plan their efforts based upon an abstractly considered period of time. That they should do so is entirely understandable, given their operation within typical cultural structures as determined by their previous training and education.

One concern of this critic is that such a process fosters a particular sort of craft ethic in the student — a sort of handicraft that precludes the exploration of those aspects of making that exclude a direct connection to the hand. I console myself with the reminder that such craft may be appropriate for this stage of a student’s education. Moreover, I have never found that particular fear to bear itself out in fact. The process of “recording” is one manner in which I have attempted to confront this concern. The recording, or drawing process is acknowledged as a superior method of developing not just further drawing skills, but also of “seeing.” Careful photo-realistic recording demands exquisite focus, but it consequently affords commensurate results. Students are asked to graphically record a particular scene assigned to them. Drawing assignments such as these occur very early in the summer term, and often have constituted the very first assignment of the summer. On most occasions, students have been asked to record conjunctions in ordinary buildings — usually buildings of age, in that they provide interest through materiality and texture in a more seductive manner than recent buildings. But more recently I have asked students to focus upon buildings that possess no outwardly satisfying charms — no rusticated limestone, no surfaces attractively patinated — but to seek out truly ordinary structures that comprise the bulk of the built environment. Usually the students are asked to work in a contiguous manner; they are assigned fragments of buildings based upon some agreed-upon linear dimension both horizontally and vertically. Students must carefully coordinate their fragments with the adjoining student’s fragment, planning not only a dimensionally considered alignment, but also softer characteristics such as darkness of graphite, crispness of line, accuracy of shadow, etcetera. The issue of sentiment is thus exercised as a part of the assignment, allowing the student through the process to begin to appreciate those qualities that are more likely to inform their own palettes as professionals. The process of creating the drawing — slow, careful, coordinated — continues the notion of a slowly produced, carefully considered artifact.

The seductiveness of speed provides the subtext for the plot of Milan Kundera’s novel, “Slowness.” In what is a seemingly exuberant passage, Kundera nonetheless levels a cautionary salvo that must be read and re-read by those too easily lured by it:

“Speed is the form of ecstasy. The technical revolution has bestowed on man. As opposed to a motorcyclist, the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more conscious than ever of himself and his time of life. This all changes when man delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and he gives over to a speed that is non-corporeal, nonmaterial, pure speed: speed itself, ecstasy speed.”

In an education that is so aggressively visual, it is arguably of greater import at the outset to establish the basis of wisdom over knowledge. By slowing the process — by defying those impulses that seem otherwise intractable, by resisting a process made up of a series of all too brief tasks rather than immersion, an education that is truly passionate has a better chance of being instilled in our students.

Notes
1 Mark Twain, “Memoranda,” Galaxy Magazine, December 1870
4 Nearly all students enrolled in the summer program are transfer students, either from another institution or from within the University of Arkansas, having changed their major to architecture.
5 Pye, p.41.