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Nathaniel Coleman
Washington State University

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Listening to the Past: Persuasive Stories and the Beginning Design Student

Nathaniel Coleman
Washington State University

Stories and the Beginning Design Student

Architecture students tell stories about their work. These stories are meant to convey information about design philosophy, design intent, and design concept. Such stories are intended to have something to do with the work students present. Often, though, what is said is accepted as valid simply because it is said. Closer scrutiny of the relationship between what is said and what is presented frequently reveals a wide gap between intention (what is said) and result (what is done). Incongruity between intention and result encourages a loose way of thinking that fosters a separation of thought (theory) from doing (practice). Concurrently, beginning design students are thought of as requiring skill development above all else. Overemphasis on skills, or technique, though, undervalues developing conceptual sophistication. If students are not introduced to design as an ill-defined problem, akin to effective and persuasive argument, their propensity is to produce work that is unfocused, lacking in conceptual sophistication, and ineffectively developed or represented.

Initiation of beginning students into design culture frequently presents architecture as a specialized form of knowledge unrelated to what students learn about the world through their bodies as they grow up in a culture. This attitude not only undervalues lived experience but also sets up conditions under which history (listening to the past for what it can tell us) is relegated to subject matter isolated from design invention. An alternative approach views architecture and experience as linked. History, as cultural memory, confirms this and provides an avenue for exploring such a claim. History can show beginning design students that listening to the past can have relevance for the cultural work they engage in. The past offers insight into how people have oriented themselves through architecture.

Cultural memory as a resource for design invention reveals persuasiveness-making effective arguments (design projects as well as written and spoken project statements)—as a crucial ability for beginning design students. Students will come to see the world and care about it only if faculty members show them why this is worthwhile. Simply telling students to think and experience differently (or to come to this through abstract design exercises) has little long-term effect—as the built environment often confirms. Coercion based on grading may get short-term results but is ultimately of little long-term benefit. Persuasiveness seems to be the key. Persuasion is far subtler, and less suspect, than one might at first imagine. After all, what other tool do faculty have as they attempt to win over the hearts and minds of students to a concern for the constructed realm we inhabit?

How though does my desire that my students engage in thoughtful practice (by enacting the interdependence of theory, practice, and history) tally with my primary obligation to help them become employable? I think that each of us who instruct design students must sort this out for ourselves. But what if Tafuri was correct, and the belief that architects ought to, or can, engage in meaningful cultural work is a kind of false consciousness? Furthermore, what if harboring such a conviction and professing it to students only serves to deceive them into believing that they will be entering a discipline formed by predecessors with whom they share little? As a corrective, Tafuri argued that we would serve our students best if we assisted them in taking their place as technicians in the building industry. If Tafuri is correct, as the process and results of much building appears to confirm, then architecture school ought to become more emphatically vocational and technical in its character and aims, which might explain the desire to quantify something that is fundamentally qualitative. My sense though is that most design school faculty (and their students) would be uncomfortable with such a radically diminished conception of architecture’s potential and cultural role.

If I am correct, how could beginning design more openly reflect the tacitly critical position of most design schools and their faculty? Especially as they resist the requirements of a profession that more and more demands that schools become preparatory training grounds for office workers who are technicians more than architects in any traditional humanistic sense. Persuasiveness resists the reduced cultural role of architecture. It offers a hopeful dimension in the form of possible reform; reform based on the conviction that architecture might still have an ethical function, which at its most basic is its orientating objective (confirmed by work—introduced to us from the past—that prepares the ground for human occupation in all its depth), a conviction beginning design students do not (do?) arrive at school with.

Evaluative Criteria

Grades are based on quantitative data but architecture is qualitative. A crucial problem for any design faculty and the students they teach, especially beginning design students, is how to evaluate the character of something with a criterion
of number. As a result, the habit is to attempt to quantify ability. Some things within the micro-culture of a particular design faculty do seem open to a kind of quantification, but not many. And if the entire design curriculum is subjected to quantification, the result will be students who are technically proficient rather than poetic. Such a scenario is circular in that it returns us to the very problem we set out to address—how to get design students to care about design—in fact, it institutionalizes it.

Since there is no longer a universal ideal of beauty agreeable to even a small group, evaluation of design work must either be wholly subjective, thus arbitrary, or some other more mobile criterion of judgment, or manner of evaluation, is required. But beauty as commonly understood relates to the appeal of finished surfaces to the ocular sense alone. This conception of beauty places its relative presence in the eye of the beholder and reduces its full potential as a criterion of architectural quality. A richer conception of beauty derives from Socrates and was introduced into architectural theory by Alberti. Alberti, after Plato, by way of Socrates, proposes that beauty is a sense of wholeness. Wholeness suggests both completeness and an interrelationship among parts that reveals the very wholeness that beauty suggests. Alberti describes beauty as a correlation among parts such that nothing may be added to a body nor taken away from it but for the worse. Consequently, if beauty is a thicker concept than simply describing attractiveness, it might have something to offer faculty and the beginning design students they instruct.

What I have proposed so far could appear as reactionary, but I think such criticism would be premature. For example, even the work of an architect attempting to dismantle beauty and (or as) wholeness is ultimately subject to beauty for evaluation of his or her effort and results. Simply put, if beauty is, as Alberti suggested, a sense of wholeness, then even the most radical invention is complete—recognizable as a distinct body—when it conveys a sense of inevitability; that is, when nothing may be added to or taken away from it but for the worse. Beauty conceptualized in this way is a much more mobile than fixed concept, allowing for apparently infinite inventive potential. It is also a criterion of judgment that offers a modicum of reason to what at first appears as a realm of subjectivity and arbitrariness, and does so without reducing architecture to a quantified technical exercise. I think it is this sense of beauty that Adorno was suggesting in “Functionalism Today,” when he wrote:

It lies in the nature of artworks to inquire after the essential and necessary in them and to react against all superfluous elements. After the critical tradition declined to offer the arts a canon of right and wrong, the responsibility to take such considerations into account was placed on each individual work; each had to test itself against its own immanent logic, whether of not it was motivated by some external purpose.

Architecture has always had a didactic dimension, housing a pattern of life as it is while offering a ground for that pattern of life as it might be. Stronger works of architecture, those that endure through time by offering a defined ground open to perpetual interpretation, are as much products of a given condition as they are settings for transformed conditions. In this way, architecture always clues inhabitants in on how they might occupy it. In the same way, a design project explains itself to reviewers based on the degree to which it reveals its own immanent logic by being true to it. This requires that studio instructors, as much as possible, free themselves from a predetermained vision of what a student project should be (especially how it should look), and enliven themselves to the unique processes and individual potential of each student. It requires of students that they consider their thinking and the capture of this in the project representations they make as something that either is or is not persuasive, in the sense of complete, in the sense of inevitable, and in the sense of revealing an immanent logic that the whole presentation—written, oral, and drawn, constructed, or plotted—is true to.

Beginning design students, though, enter architecture school in the midst of a paradox. On the one hand they have learned the world with their bodies as they have grown up in a culture; on the other they, at least most of them, are assumed to have no prior knowledge of architecture as a teachable university discipline or as a kind of cultural practice (unlike students of music performance or composition who do have much prior knowledge). As a consequence, much of the education of beginning design students is preoccupied with defamiliarizing the world they grew up, a process effected especially through abstraction. The imagined benefit of this is that even though a person may spend most of their lives in, among, or around constructed environments, they probably have always experienced these in distraction without a specialist's concern. Consequently, the ethical objective of design education—whether stated or not—is to get entering students to care about the invented realm they inhabit, will invent, and one day will transform with their constructions. On the downside, defamiliarization of the world in which students grew up and learned through their bodies has the negative potential of alienating students from their own experiences of, and nascent convictions about, the constructed world.

Alienation from prior experience occurs, in part, by way of over emphasis on technical skill development, and through promotion of architecture as primarily an autonomous discipline. While the idea of competence as predicated on skill development, and the mythologizing of architecture may prepare students for professional practice, it de-emphasizes the degree to which architecture is setting for ongoing patterns of life that students already know about. Since most students grow up in or around urban or suburban sprawl or in and around shopping malls, the assumption of many faculty members is that the general level of student culture is not high enough to assure a level of care for the built environment in line with disciplinary expectations. This, though, appears to short-circuit the educational process from the outset. If students come to care about the built environment according to the preconceptions of the faculty they will have a difficult time developing their own convictions about it.
Even though faculty ought to refrain from imposing too much on their students from above, they can model for their students a high degree of care for the world. If such concern is persuasively modeled, beginning design students will come to care for the world and the projects they invent to transform it. Beyond any marketable skill or technique of design or production students may learn, thoughtfulness offers them a real possibility to practice their discipline in a meaningful, satisfying, and self-sustaining way. While all of this may seem obvious enough, its qualitative nature runs contrary to a quantifying habit. But there may be a way to elaborate criteria that are neutral enough to be broadly applicable even as they assist in a re-collection of carefulness about architecture.

**Heidegger on the Bridge**

So many attempts at re-collection of thoughtfulness about architecture and the world begin with Heidegger (including those by Christian Norberg-Shulz, Joseph Rykwert, Kenneth Frampton, Karsten Harries, and David Leatherbarrow), that it seems reasonable to elaborate on Heidegger in a discussion of how beginning design students might begin to advance persuasive projects (orally, textually, and visually).\(^7\)

In “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Heidegger summarizes his investigation into the nature of building and dwelling by stating that “1. Building is really dwelling; 2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth. 3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings.”\(^8\) The first thing that comes to mind when reading the above is its strangeness. For the most part, we live in distraction, which I think Heidegger must have believed was as much symptom as cause of our estrangement from things, others, the world, and ourselves. And yet, it is through the strangeness of his language that he suggests a pathway back to ourselves by unconcealing our attachment to things. My interest in Heidegger’s summation, though, lies in what it offers in terms of suggesting an attitude toward architecture that faculty could model for beginning design students.

Beginning with Heidegger’s third point, building is how human beings prepare a ground for their stay on the earth, relating as much to the necessity of food production as to preparation of a ground for inhabitation. Kept in mind, this suggests that architecture is always preoccupied with establishing a setting for life. Such a reading is confirmed by Heidegger’s second point that we require a place to inhabit during our short stay here; a place constructed that shelters, which arises from the desire for location, or orientation. Consequently, building, as confirmation of human efforts to be located, is really how dwelling is attempted, in the sense that in making the world a setting is established that houses and sustains life. That is how “building is really dwelling (Heidegger’s first point).” Often the supposed sophistication of the line of reasoning just pursued is thought to be beyond the comprehension of beginning design students. If it is, what is there to do except default to the teaching of measurable skills? Yet preoccupation with measurable skills abstracts architecture by diverting student attention away from world-making purpose toward architecture as either quantifiable technical problems or toward invention of attractive objects unconnected with the human drama they will enclose. Neither does justice either to human desire or to human vulnerability.

By preparing a ground for life, architecture could be said to have a permanent function that is always undergoing transformation, in the sense that a ground for life can never be established once and for all, even though a ground for life is always as much desired as necessary. Students know this because they have grown up in a culture. Wanting to be an architect, especially with no prior knowledge to explain such a strange desire, might actually reveal a preconscious desire to make the world a more suitable place for human inhabitation. Strangely enough, this desire is less cultivated in architecture school than skill development and the overvaluation of novelty are.

As the activity that prepares a place for inhabitation through building, architecture must be more than its technical function or its attractive or novel appearance suggests. Heidegger’s discussion of the bridge suggests a way of thinking about design that permits it its potential richness, even for beginning design students. Heidegger describes the bridge as something multidimensional rather than simply a means of conveyance: in doing so he models a fuller sense of architecture by suggesting criteria for project evaluation that takes into account developing skills as well as evolving conceptual sophistication. For example, beginning design students often represent their designs as if they were located nowhere in particular and could be placed anywhere in an abstract expanse of undefined space. In contradistinction, Heidegger suggests that “the bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream it crosses.”\(^9\) It is human intervention—the bridge—that makes the land comprehensible. In this sense, the bridge, or any work of architecture, is not simply placed (or on) an already fully formed receiving plot of land; rather, the bridge invents the place that receives it.\(^11\) Whether or not students ultimately reject the orienting objective of architecture as its ethical function for some more novel approach, it is reasonable to introduce orientation as a persisting theme of extremely long duration.\(^11\) Extrapolating from this, demonstration of concern for place identification by beginning design students could become one of the criteria for evaluating their developing skill and conceptual sophistication. As with the definition of beauty suggested above, place identification need not be institutionalized, it can remain open and mobile so long as a student’s project demonstrates a persuasive interpretation of the theme.

Heidegger goes on to discuss different kinds of bridges, including “the city bridge,” “the old stone bridge,” or “highway bridge,” each has a specific purpose to fulfill but does so differently from each of the other bridges. By listing three kinds of bridges with three distinct characters that do three different kinds of jobs, Heidegger introduces architectural propriety as part of how humans prepare a ground for life.\(^13\) Appropriateness like beauty or place identification/site invention is not nearly as rigid or reactionary an evaluative criteri-
on as it might first appear. An individual project can elaborate its own interpretation of appropriateness when it reveals its own immanent logic by being true to it.

Each of Heidegger’s bridges is appropriate to its primary function but in so being each speaks a secondary function. For example, Heidegger describes the “highway bridge” as being “tied into the network of long-distance traffic paced and calculated for maximum yield.” And highway bridges are appropriate to this function, demonstrating this by in fact being “paced and calculated for maximum yield,” and looking as though they are. Such a correlation between bridge and its function is much less the product of a positivist “form follows function” relationship than it might at first appear. The highway bridge looks like it is built for speed even when traffic is at a standstill. That it appears ready to receive a high yield of fast paced long distance traffic is as much an expression of artifice (or desire) as it is a product of abstract calculations relative to the actual function of highway bridges. Its very abstractness re-presents an abstract desire for speed and distance, which is necessarily a solvent of place identification—a highway bridge with “old stone arches” would be inappropriate for representing a cosmology based on speed and abstraction. Bridges (as are all human things) are thus conveyors of traffic as much as of meaning (content). Heidegger touches on this when he proposes that bridges—all bridges, though each differently—analyze human pathways through life. He writes:

Now in a high arch, now in a low, the bridge vaults over the glen and the stream—whether mortals keep in mind this vaulting of the bridge’s course or forget that they, always themselves on their way to the last bridge, are actually striving to surmount all that is common and unsound in them.

Heidegger’s effort is to call our attention back to the world of things we inhabit and make. But beginning design students experience the world the same way most people do—in distraction. But things experienced are still resonant. What design education attempts is to call students to an awareness that it is okay to care about the world. Even if such caring is not habitual, having grown up in the world students are predisposed to caring about it, if encouraged to do so. Care for the world becomes possible when its experience in distraction transforms into considered awareness, much as how specificity redeems abstraction through location.

The interdependence of care and specificity suggests that constructed things and their meaning are indivisible. In short it appears that form is content, which challenges habits of thinking that separate form from content, an example of which is the tendency to ascribe unexpected and arbitrary meanings to things that do not strictly belong to them. Heidegger elaborates on this in his discussion of the bridge:

To be sure, people think of the bridge as primarily and really merely a bridge; after that, and occasionally, it might express much else besides; and as such an expression it would then become a symbol, for instance a symbol of those things we mentioned before. But the bridge, if it is a true bridge, is never first of all a mere bridge and then afterward a symbol. And just as little is the bridge in the first place exclusively a symbol, in the sense that it expresses something that strictly speaking does not belong to it.

One of the great struggles for beginning design students is how to elaborate an idea basis for a project, say a bridge, and enrich it with a meaning beyond some beam-like object simply spanning between two points, an extreme abstraction of what bridges do when thought of simply in terms of conveyance. Often, when students attempt to elaborate a meaning for a project it is arbitrary and unexpected; strictly speaking this imagined meaning frequently does not belong to the project. Students ascribe such arbitrary and unexpected meaning to their projects because they are required to do so as an expression of developing conceptual sophistication. The tendency is to imagine that any meaning ascribed to a thing is acceptable because it is empty; reasonably so because form and content are conceived as separate.

Unfortunately, the persuasiveness of the association between supposed meaning and the thing meant to carry (or contain) that meaning is rarely challenged. Such passivity is likely a consequence of street-level radical subjectivity, which dictates that meaning, as much as beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Because the degree to which individuals in a given culture are able to negotiate the world of that culture precisely because meaning is shared rather than private, street-level radical subjectivity is actually unsupportable. Heidegger believed that separating form from content is a characteristic of dualistic thinking in the West, and as such it is as much symptom as cause of estrangement. He writes:

The Consequence, in the course of Western thought, has been that the thing is represented as an unknown X to which perceptible properties are attached. From this point of view, everything that already belongs to the gathering essence of this thing does, of course, appear as something that is afterward read into it. Yet the bridge would never be a mere bridge if it were not a thing.

Apart from the word essence, which might elicit discomfort in an epoch of unstable truth, this last passage gets to the heart of the architectural endeavor. As architects, we fit together things that are already meaningful, not so much as carriers of innate meaning but rather the meaning things carry accrues to them over a long duration in a particular culture. It is a meaning that language sometimes reveals that common use often conceals. For example, “to bridge” suggests much more than simply a platform for conveyance. “To bridge a gap,” “to bridge communities,” or “to bridge differences,” each suggests a kind of gathering, reconciliation, or open passage related to social life, or to life passages for an individual—akin to the gathering of river banks Heidegger describes as analogizing the human predicament of mortality, resolved at the last bridge with death.

Heidegger’s intent in “Building Thinking Dwelling,” was not to offer techniques for design or architectural production, or as he put it, “This thinking about building does not presume to
discover architectural ideas, let alone to give rules for building. Martin Heidegger's disclaimer is an important caution against instrumentalization of his thought or attempts to identify "dwelling" as a criterion of building quality captured once and for all. Thus, using "Building Thinking Dwelling" as a lead in to a project requiring students to build dwelling is not at all what I am getting at here. Rather, Heidegger's meditation on building suggests how estrangement from thinking and a care for the world can be bridged. Only through an emerging awareness of and thoughtfulness about the world architects inhabit and make (never by action, empty productivity, or skill development alone) could the stories beginning design students tell resist becoming unexpected and arbitrary attempts to attach perceptible properties to an unknown X. 

Notes:

1. quanti-ta-tive adj. relating to, concerning, or based on the amount or number of something, capable of being measured or expressed in numerical terms system. Encarta World English Dictionary (London: Microsoft Corporation/Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1999).

2. qual-i-ta-tive adj relating to or based on the quality or character of something, often as opposed to its size or quantity. Encarta World English Dictionary (London: Microsoft Corporation/Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1999).


5. beauty n 1. the combination of qualities that make something pleasing and impressive to look at or touch, or especially to look at 2. personal physical attractiveness, especially with regard to the use of cosmetics and other methods of enhancing it 3. a beautiful woman or girl 4. something very good, attractive, or impressive of its kind 5. an attractive, useful, or satisfying feature. Encarta World English Dictionary (London: Microsoft Corporation/Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1999).


