

Reflections on the Graduate Thesis Studio

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If the purpose of the terminal project is to engage “design as research” (rather than simply produce a well thought out design), we believe the students need to be able to clearly articulate the question their thesis attempts to explore; to critically consider the mode(s) of investigation; to understand how the project, not a product in itself, serves as a vehicle for inquiry; and to consider the impact of the question in the broader context of architecture.

Given this perspective, we offer the following observations and recommendations:

Observations:

The visiting committee was *greatly* impressed overall by:

- the earnestness of the students;
- the diversity (age, ethnicity, gender, etc.) of the student body;
- a work ethic evidenced in the sheer quantity and quality of output;
- the obvious joy of making both for its own sake and as a design tool.
- the strong sense of dedication by the community of students, faculty and professionals.

The thesis projects evidence a strong curricular core that prepared Mater of Architecture students for the more advanced explorations expected in a terminal studio. Overall the student work showed a balanced inquiry combining both formal and conceptual issues in architecture. The strong academic preparation is apparent, too, in the students’ confidence in making their own decisions and directing their own processes of design and development. Finally, the strength of the thesis projects suggests a solid academic preparation for entering the professional environment.

The School’s “culture of making” is exceptionally strong. Clearly, material selection, fabrication and assembly constitutes an architectural language that is indicative of the School’s culture. Although there were many refined drawings and models by hand, this love of making extends into the digital world as well. The inventive use of digital technologies as means of investigation rather than (or in addition to) a means of production is to be applauded. Overall, the School’s work ethic was very strong, collaborative support among students high, and a love of design and problem solving in evidence.

There is a clear enthusiasm for design; the school seems to love “generating stuff (architecture) and see where it goes.” Even in the thesis studio there was a willingness to add new tools and approaches to open the question at hand. The faculty seems receptive of explorations where an individual’s trajectory isn’t constrained by convention or a conservative, goal-oriented notion of how process should be defined.

In many respects, thesis is a place to “test” architecture in some manner. Although accomplished, most projects, with the associated students and faculty advisors, were much more than the affirmation of technical skills and design abilities. The projects began to question and redefine architecture in the context of various arenas; from urban concerns to the sensorial experience of the individual; from architecture-as-social activism to investigation as a form of personal development.

Recommendations:

- Some projects could have benefited from a more informed and critical grounding of the subject. The thesis seminar should be setting the preparatory stage for the terminal project; the objectives and intended outcomes, precedent studies, and strategies culled from these precedents (including a bibliography of works consulted) should be common to all students and documented in the final presentations and rigorously engaged. Consideration might also be given to where the preparation course falls in the curricular sequence; extended breaks are all-too-often opportunities for preparation to become distanced or divorced from investigation.

- In some -- though certainly not a majority of projects -- there was insufficient guidance (or intervention) on the part of the student's committee. The program selection, the sheer size of project, the late adoption of new and challenging tools, or the insinuation of peripheral issues became an impediment to the quality of the design work in these cases; with more engaged direction such stumbling blocks could have been averted. The thesis committee can, and should, bring a level of objective and exacting assessment to the process to ensure the student continues to focus on architectural learning, furthering their knowledge in issues that emerged from their preparatory research, and rigorously questioning and testing those issues on the basis of that knowledge and framework.

Within the context of the above-mentioned observations, these concerns are relatively minor; with some strategic structural modification the program can only continue its strong trajectory.