

**Successes of the Graduate Thesis Program, SACD, The University of South Florida  
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**OBSERVATIONS:**

Overall, the committee found the USF SACD graduate thesis program to be strong, compelling, and successful. The students' enthusiasm for the thesis project was evident across an impressively wide range of projects and presentations. The work was thoughtful, imaginative, and thoroughly investigated, reflecting a remarkable degree of self-motivation and a strong work ethic that is a clear outgrowth of a strong curricular core. Students obviously felt supported in exploring a diversity of ideas and subject matter, including notions/implications of architecture as an exercise of statement, critique, and experimentation within the discipline. The fact that many thesis proposals were quite personal seems to reflect the School's focus on individual development rather than on the imposition of a stylistic or pedagogical imperative. Presentations were well-attended and included fellow thesis students, students from lower division studios, faculty; and family.

There was a concern, however, that rigor and a critically grounded means of inquiry was unevenly evident, and much of the fault seemed to lie with the directing faculty. The line between indulgence and independent inquiry is often a fine one, and there were multiple examples where it was obvious to the critics that the student needed more guidance, having "their feet held to the fire," and/or a reminder that, as a terminal degree in a professional program, the thesis requires some kind of architectural focus. On the other hand, there were a number of projects that began to critique architecture from within the discipline, and we would encourage this type of thinking to drift through future studios.

There was a tangible difference between one semester projects and year-long efforts. Students engaged in the semester-only option often did not reach the sophisticated "conclusions" of those who enjoyed the more extended schedule; shift-points from idea to conclusion (research v application) in particular was fuzzy or rote in many of these cases. On the whole, however, projects were complete in idea and resolution, with a welcomed emphasis on early formal ideations.

**PRESENTATION STYLE:**

*Verbally*, the presenters were confident; many, however, struggled to articulate their project in concise terms. Most focused on the narrative sequence of the project, and reviewers often had to ask the student to clearly state their thesis question. (A disappointing number were unable to do so; please see the comments above.) Few were able to self-reflect on the process, select the relevant parts, and articulate only the key ideas. *Visually*, the students demonstrated enormous skill with physical model-making, embracing a wide array of materials, assembly, and type all exhibiting a concern with, and mastery of, craft. Refreshing and novel examples of process/generative models in particular were noted. Drawings were likewise thoughtfully drawn and beautifully rendered; it was especially refreshing to see drawings used as speculative tools and not solely as post-mortem marketing devices. There was, however, a consistency to the pin-ups that bordered on the prescriptive and frequently didn't serve the delivery of the intent. The reviewers found the practice of printing and mounting each item on foam core (complete with title blocks) curious and visually distracting. Allowing presentations to reflect and support project content should be encouraged.

It was also noted that precedents were rarely included or mentioned, possibly reflecting a pedagogical bias on the part of the School.

#### STUDIO CULTURE AND MAKING:

The students' engagement with studio and design was evident not just in the thesis project but in work observed throughout the School and across all levels. The sheer volume of work produced was wonderfully impressive and reviewers were very pleased to see the pervasive use of analog models as tools for exploring/resolving/expressing. There is, however, a surprisingly uniform, highly tectonic, formal language (bordering on a "look") to the models despite gross differences in project type, scale, level, or, oddly, investigative intent.

#### GOALS AND STRUCTURE FOR THE THESIS PROGRAM:

Many questions arose for the reviewers around the program's goals and structure and several thesis directors themselves seemed unclear of the requirements. An internal document clearly stating the intent and scope of the thesis project (something beyond university-required deliverables) would be useful for both faculty and students in establishing goals and better structuring the process.

Concerns that an abbreviated track will not result in the thorough and thoughtful outcome of the year-long option have been expressed above. Students and faculty alike will have to adapt to using the summer prior to their thesis year as a critical opportunity for research. Maintaining focus and momentum during the break, particularly for those students with jobs, will be difficult. (Scheduled virtual conversations with invested faculty, or a clearly stated list of expectations are two suggestions). A rigorously-considered preparatory course should be instigated to ensure the students move forward effectively in the spring.

The diversity of student body is to be commended, but with two women on this evaluative committee, it is hard for us to over look the fact that the number of women faculty members is not commensurate with the high percentage of female students. (It should also be noted that we recognize that this is problem throughout the profession and isn't unique to USF.) We would encourage the School to make every effort to hire qualified female faculty as opportunity arises, and to continue to invite female critics to participate in reviews throughout the semester.