

Common Buildings, Common Places: Between Expediency and the Avant Garde

Fifth-Year Studio, 2004 - 2005
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Introduction

In the shadows of buildings like the Getty Museum and Disney Hall lies the work-a-day world most of us inhabit. And between such celebrated monuments and their polar opposites – schlocky commercial strips and residential subdivisions – is the world where most architects work. This is a multi-faceted landscape: the Main Street of a small Central Valley city, the side streets of downtown Los Angeles, or an under-developed lot in a funky Oakland neighborhood.

Wherever it is, most of our built environment looks like Kansas, not the Emerald City. So, if we want to create architecture (even with a small capital "A") in the places where we live, work, and play, which models do we use? Whom do we emulate? If we can't do it like Zaha or Frank, should we give up?

And what of the urban landscape? New York City is about to embark on the construction of a fabulous set of spires for the World Trade Center site, but how do you fix the Foothill Boulevards of the world? Is the Grand Gesture the only model for creating urban settings of quality and dignity? If we don't get to do Libeskind jobs on our cities, should we all go home?

“Main Street is Almost All Right”

Several years ago, the architect Robert Venturi criticized the Modern Movement, complaining that its precepts required every building to be "heroic and original." At the same time, he made fun of establishment architects' collective preoccupation with European cities, reminding us that Americans don't live in such places and are uncomfortable in them.

Venturi suggested that architects look at things the way they really are. Instead of just looking abroad, he said, architects should seek inspiration in the "ugly and ordinary" buildings and landscapes of the American vernacular. His two most important books, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966) and Learning From Las Vegas (1972), were thoughtful and witty treatises that took pluralistic views of both architecture and urbanism, ones that respected historical allusion and precedent, semiotics, context, and especially, popular culture. Venturi seemed to be saying, “When all you've got is lemons, make lemonade.”

Venturi's vision heralded a fundamental shift away from Modernism. Twenty-five years later, tastes have changed, of course, and his once vogueish buildings now look somewhat cartoonish. The longer-lasting lesson of his work, however, may not be in any particular building, but in his ideas. One of his more famous quotes, “Main Street is almost all

right,” suggests the essence of his sensibility: Architects have to confront real landscapes, not just ideal ones. He was saying, too, I think, that we can still create the most remarkable things – art, even – in the most limiting of circumstances.

Most firms today, large and small, engage the fundamentals of architecture and urbanism in precisely such circumstances: an “ordinary” site, an “ordinary” program, an “ordinary” client. Yet, many of them find significance within these contexts: emphasizing issues in relatively modest works that might range from livability (creating a “nice place to live”) to sustainable growth (making “green” buildings), or from technological sophistication (making buildings that function efficiently) to tectonic expression (using materials and details meaningfully).

The purpose of this studio is not to make “ugly and ordinary buildings.” Quite the opposite: the purpose is to look at ordinary building types and landscapes, and see if we can’t make remarkable art, architecture, and urbanism within them. Is it possible to dignify the buildings we use everyday – the branch library, the infill apartment building, or the supermarket? And most importantly, is it possible to take the context in which such architecture resides – the more unglamorous parts of our suburbs, towns, and cities – and transform them into places of quality?

Course Objectives

This studio has two broad but essential objectives. The first is to consider questions in architectural and urban design for everyday environments as described above. At one level, this is a means of providing you with the opportunity to resolve practical problems – of form, program, or tectonics – in creative ways. But the theme of “common buildings, common places” is also an opportunity for you to reflect on architecture’s relevance and role in modern society. What constitutes appropriate architecture? Is there such a thing as an architecture of modesty? Is it any good? Are there limits to what an architect can do?

The readings in the seminar, the nature of the project you choose, and your approach to it are all part of a wide-ranging exploration, but one that ultimately should coalesce in a specific design. By this, I mean that you should devise an architectural solution to the problem you propose. And I should say here, that if you are looking to do highly conceptual or abstract work, then this is probably not the right studio for you.

This brings us to the course’s second objective, which is to show your competency in the integration of architectural principles, practices, theories, and systems. It should also indicate a solid grounding in a range of issues, including technical ones, that you have acquired over the last four years.

These pragmatics aside, the senior project is an opportunity to synthesize your thinking about architecture and to consider your own future role in it, whether this is within the profession itself or in some allied field. Authors talk of “finding their voice” in their writing. Your project is a chance to develop your own voice in architecture.

The “Topic within the Topic”

More than being just a solution to a limited architectural problem or a response to stimuli, your senior project should also be an argument for something or a critique of something. You should be expressing a point of view through the design. Why are you doing what you’re doing?

I have two thoughts about this. First, you need not have a “big idea” coming in. The purpose of the senior project is exploratory by nature: you are allowed (and expected) to “grow” into your project, developing the particular theme or argument as you do work on the design. You should certainly have questions – an area of interest, say, at least – but your project’s thesis may well change over time as you work on it.

Secondly, the “big idea” should be one that translates into building. Architecture is often used as a metaphor for metaphysical or philosophical explorations, which can be quite thought-provoking, but such are beyond the scope of this studio. Our purpose is to examine the built world we inhabit.

All that said, you should enter Fall Quarter with a general commitment to the building type and context in which you wish to work. You should also consider the particular aspect of architecture that you might wish to emphasize during the year. The following list includes suggestions for various topics within the general topic that you might pursue in the course. These are intended to provoke your thinking – in keeping with the comments above – and are by no means exclusive.

Context. You might examine the context in which your building resides. You might develop a vision for the future of the broader area around your site – a holistic proposal, a series of separate interventions, or a set of design guidelines – with your building as a focus. You might also use your building as a prototype of how buildings in general should “behave” in the specific context.

Typology. You could look at the building type, analyzing the structure (in the broadest sense) in relationship to overall use and program. How has the current type evolved over time? How does the type work now? What are its advantages? Its limitations? Does it need to change or can we live with it the way it is?

Program. Developing a building program for the senior project does not necessarily require that you reinvent the wheel; you might derive this kind of information from your research of case studies and site visits to existing facilities, making minor adjustments in scope and size to suit your own purposes. Borrowing a program allows you to focus on issues relating to the site, circulation, form, massing, tectonics, structure, and building systems as quickly as possible.

However, the standard program might also be a springboard for critical innovation. The questions regarding type could also apply here: What are the advantages of the standard program? What are its limitations? How might you improve it?

Systems. Producing a design that synthesizes all the various building components – ECS, structure, and “skin” primary among them – in a comprehensive and integrated fashion constitutes a legitimate and worthwhile endeavor for a senior project. Here again, the technical systems might be the focus of a re-examination, benefiting from a “green” perspective, say, or other kinds of research and innovations, great and small.

Final Products

The bulk of the work for the year should be directed towards the design of a building, the type and context in keeping with the general focus of the studio.

The building should be developed comprehensively, with the final design depicted in the standard graphic mode of architectural practice, that is, through coordinated plans, elevations, building and wall sections, axonometrics, and perspectives. You are encouraged to develop physical and/or digital models, both as design tools and for use in presentation. Moreover, you are expected to develop the project in some depth, that is, beyond schematic design.

You should also write about the design. A professional-quality report would include specific background information about your building, such as its site, type, program, other technical aspects, and the results of your research into case studies. Another section of the report, in the form of an essay, could discuss broader, theoretical issues raised in course of your design work. What conclusions have you reached about the building, its type, and context? What conclusions have you reached about the larger themes of the studio? The topic is open-ended, but the essay is an opportunity for you to reflect thoughtfully on your design and architecture in general.

The writing and the design drawings, model representations, and other images should all be contained within a single booklet. While graphic integrity and design are a part of any presentation, the emphasis of your work on the booklet should be on its contents.

About Me

I come from a practice background, having worked on my own and with firms – in San Francisco, New York, and Washington DC – for nearly 25 years. The bulk of this work has been in multi-family housing and community planning. Those are my particular passions. But I’ve also worked on a number of institutional projects, including schools, day-care centers, and embassies, as well as commercial projects, including hotels, office buildings, and mixed-use developments. I’ve taught at Cal Poly – off and on – since 1994.

A student once described my teaching methodology as “not nuts-and-bolts, but not foo-foo either.” I took that as a compliment.