Working with Contradiction

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Abstract

Is it possible to satisfy the pedagogical objectives of a design studio and at the same time meet the particular needs of a community group? Such a question is useful in realizing the inherent conflict that occurs in practice—there exists a contradiction between those personal, 'creative' initiatives we must establish in our work and the sort of response we must make in service to others' needs. This self-investment and expression is inherently valuable and productively informs projects as part of architectural education. Many students tell me that they chose the field of architecture as a way of "leaving their mark" in the world. And, so often, students are recognized in reviews for their original insight and ability to express original form—individual originality. *However*, in practice, the practical needs of the community—the client, require restraint and the ability to be accommodating. This is difficult to model in academic 'paper projects.' The contradictions between self-creation and client-community should be seen as the productive working space between private and public ideals. Both are necessary components of architectural practice. Can a studio provide a place for both self-creation and community-responsibility to take shape?

There are valuable lessons embedded in this sort of 'working space' at mid-level studios. Our program at the University of Kansas incorporates a hands-on design studio course in the curriculum and has made a considerable investment with a recent purchase of a very large warehouse for the production of elements and buildings with a variety of tools available. Over the past few years I have been directly and tangentially involved in community-related projects. The projects described in this paper are collaborative between design studios and community groups that have relatively little or no money to hire professional design services. In this way, the community needs are not artificially constructed for the studio but are actual and specific to a group's particular needs. As a faculty member that teaches at all levels of the curriculum and often at the beginning design levels, I thought it useful to reflect upon what is gained through this sort of working environment and what sorts of design studio experiences serve useful in preparing the beginning design student.

I began this sort of work in Mississippi a few years ago through a community outreach program associated with the School of Architecture at Mississippi State. In Mississippi, students found the socially-divided community especially challenging, while in Kansas, an ecologically-sensitive landscape offered opportunity for student development.

Fig. 1. park elements constructed on a corner site

A Mississippi Project

In Mississippi, I taught with another faculty member, Nils Gore, where we worked with a third-year undergraduate architectural design studio that became involved in designing and constructing a small park in a local town. In initiating the work, we brought the idea of "doubletake" to the discussion: the phenomenon we experience when we notice something, but have to look twice, for an extended period of time to really understand what we are seeing. This idea grew out of our observations of the town during initial visits: what appears at first glance to be a neglected town is, on second look, a town made up of some rather unique buildings and spaces. The initial immersion into the community was not always easy or pleasant for the students as several students felt their interaction with community members as hostile—some questioned why we were there, why we were taking photos? During discussions back at school regarding the discoveries the students were making, it was revealed that many students were not certain we should be there; that many felt very uncomfortable in our 'intrusion' into the town. At that point, with help we organized a diverse group of citizens—young and old, black and white, newcomers and long-term residents—to have a meeting with us to share their feelings about their community. At this meeting, citizens took turns telling their stories. Through genuine exchange, the evening's conversation revealed a noticeable change in the attitudes of the students and the community's willingness to accept us. It was easy to see that some people in Okolona did not appreciate our presence initially, but grew to support us. It was a critical moment in the project.

In discovering artifacts made in the community, things recycled and re-furbished, students discovered creative acts that brought ingenuity to things we take for advantage. *Everything* has potential. Students were challenged and ultimately inspired by those ways that people had improvised and responded to the conditions and materials at hand. *By slowing down and seeing the potential of a place and its people, we make things to fit the circumstances at hand.* Through this process, space was made for experimentation and improvisation, and in that it is possible that we rediscover craft and the potential of found and discarded materials. In getting to know the town, they were able to find *authentic means of engagement* and began to define the elements of the park.

Following this, the students started designing schemes for their vision of the park. Decision-making during the design process was governed by the idea of consensus-building. Collaborative efforts didn't come easy as the normal architectural education places an emphasis on original thought and individual creative acts. Getting all thirty-two students to share and develop ideas was only possible through a series of discussions. All students in the class proposed individual schemes for the park at the beginning of the design phase. In discussing the projects, we identified "large" principles that were embedded in numerous schemes; shading, sitting, performance, edge-making, vegetation, etc. When consensus was reached on the *basic set of principles*, the class divided itself up into teams that focused on finding specific solutions that would meet the expectations set forth in the principles. In each step, we *sought consensus* for the design proposals, and no design proposal was "approved" until consensus was reached. The principles eventually led to the specific elements for the park: a wisteria arbor, a stage, benches, a retaining wall, paving to address a gap between two existing slabs and landscaping. Consensus-seeking prompted lengthy discussions about the relative merits of different proposals, and insured that all participants were on the same page as we proceeded. Following group approval, the teams began building mockups of the elements for a town meeting at mid-term to receive community feedback and approval at a town meeting called for the purpose. Further

investigations into materials and costs were made. Leadership emerged.

Students took on different roles and responsibilities: one developed project management methods, while another negotiated with suppliers; project needs directed the students' energy and focus. A local carpenter took an interest in the project, participated in its construction and in effect taught the students his craft. *Trial and error* occurred in the field. Each student found his or her specific role in the project according to interest and aptitude.

Fig. 2. Wisteria arbor made of common steel re-bar in wrapping fashion.

The "doubletake" was exemplified by using common materials in unorthodox ways: the wisteria arbor is made of common steel re-bar joined together by heating with an acetylene torch and wrapping. The retaining wall is constructed of concrete parking bumpers, stacked in a running bond and held together by bent steel plates; the benches are constructed of 2x4 red cedar slats supported by ordinary concrete blocks and exposed steel framing. The paving is brick, with concrete inserts into which local children placed their handprints.

Construction of the park was done in approximately two months by architecture students and an assortment of community volunteers, who offered support by sharing in the labor, providing potluck meals and encouraging our efforts with appreciation and enthusiasm.

Fig. 3. park in use in 2002

Over time, it was revealed that *the public realm is not a place but rather a process.* It is in the cycle of events, the repetition of numerous conversations, that a public space is made. To build something requires a complex system of people, relationships, techniques and habits. *Rarely is building an isolated act, it is comprised of a web of relationships.* The public realm, especially this community, must come from within those there. These sorts of exercises challenge the traditional practice of architecture--the true public realm is born out of long-term community making and lifelong dwelling. Tangible elements, constructed artifacts—all confirm the dialogue. They are the evidences that make public the intimacies of relationships, relationships that cross community boundaries.

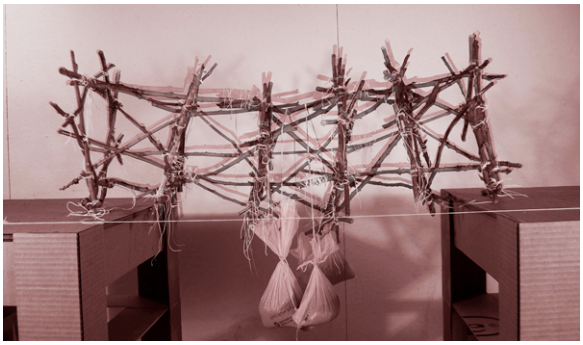
Fig. 4. experiment with forces of gravity

Kansas Projects

The projects developed at the University of Kansas (KU) involved two design studios: first, one at the beginning design level (a second-year studio) and following, two studios at the mid-level (third-year studios). The projects were sponsored by the KU Field Station and Ecological Reserves (KSR)--a division of the Kansas Biological Survey. The first one was a 'paper project' by the second-year level students but approached in a way that attempted to build on the lessons learned in the Mississippi Park Project. The others were hands-on, designed and built in place. The first was a project was situated on the edge of the Rockefeller Prairie north of Lawrence, the overlook serves a public outreach function, inviting the public to enjoy the view over the Kaw River Valley and one that engages the work of KU and visiting scientists as they research plant and animal populations on the prairie. The second project was a fairly straight-forward, orthodox project: a trailhead element--built as a sign-board for the community at the edge of a parking lot and the start of a sidewalk. Its purpose was to serve as a sort of 'threshold' to the landscape and as a place to provide information about the prairie ecosystem.

Learning from the Mississippi park project, I decided to cultivate a productive working space in the 'paper studio' by engaging two approaches to the project with students working in small groups: one involved the making of a couple of hands-on, material-experimental constructions that engaged intangible, natural forces; the second set of exercises included observing and drawing upon the prairie landscape alongside a series of discussions with biologists and ecologists from the institution in the landscape and in the classroom. Applying the 'doubletake' approach, the students were required to gather information and notations that translated details they observed in the subtle conditions of the landforms, plant species and relationships with insects and animals found dwelling there. What was especially useful about this process was that the biologists and ecologists involved in this project were equally interested in the sorts of observations and questions that the students developed—ultimately, it helped them understand our perceptions (and mis-perceptions) and how they could work towards making meaningful outreach installations by the questions that the students asked. The work produced a way of communicating between the scientists and the students and like the Mississippi project, the boundaries on the conversations between the groups were less clear. The final product became larger than an isolated students' response and required a more *complex understanding and a web of relationships*.


Fig. 5. field observations

Learning to look carefully, back and forth between what is seen and what is captured, they translated what they saw to what they project on the page. James Elkins underscores what many of the students experience while drawing, as he says in *How to Use Your Eyes*, "it's about stopping and taking the time to simply look, and keep looking until the details of the world slowly reveal themselves. I especially love the strange feeling I get when I am looking at

something and suddenly I understand—the object has structure, it speaks to me." Students gain a heightened awareness through all of their senses. The beauty of it all is that the students pay so close attention to the space between the surfaces, the quality of light, the potential for cast shadows, setting up relationships between particular surfaces and openings, that establish *authentic means of engagement*—their focus converts to finding the internal order of things. I believe that this studio work helps to set up an attitude about how to take in the world and translate it to the page and in communication with others that they work with. This led to an exercise where they built elements that responded to natural forces in a *trial and error* way. Working in teams, students built consensus around a basic set of principles. Ultimately, the students developed 'paper' projects of proposals they imagined for the landscape, based upon their initial studies and close work with the biology-group. Architectural drawing makes a particular space for working—its nature, its accuracy, as well as its degree of indeterminism can be thought of as a space for decision-making. The best universal ideas remain present, while the weak ideas get dropped.

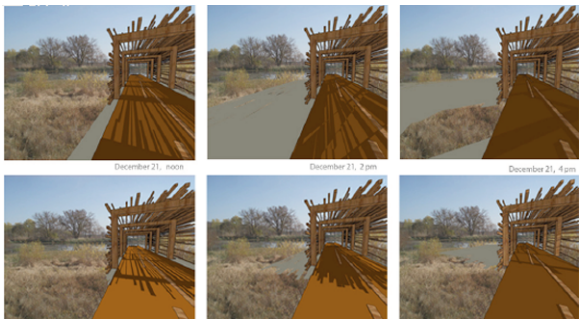

Fig. 6. proposal based upon site studies

Ultimately, another set of students developed two hands-on projects, the first was the trailhead construction project. At one level, this project was a fairly straight-forward, orthodox project, built as a sign-board for the community at the edge of a parking lot and the start of a sidewalk—a fairly easily-understandable problem. However, the working space included the construction skills of the students, and the deliberation among the students. In the design process, a space for making decisions is created by producing representations to communicate ideas to others. Architectural drawing makes a particular space for working—its nature, its accuracy, as well as its degree of indeterminism can be thought of as a space for decision-making. The best universal ideas remain present, while the weak ideas get dropped.

Each student in a group climate must expose ideas, a condition made especially vivid when the students present sketches and models. Then, layer skills of working with wood, welding, casting materials makes the realm of decision making more complex. Such an uncertainty about the future of an idea in the presence of outside forces leads to a working space within which decisions are made with a larger set of concerns than the pursuit of self-expression. The work's authority is no longer that of the individual but relies upon broader concerns, which are internal to the problem, such as the strength of the structure to endure through time and against wind forces, the path of the sun and the pleasure or discomfort that it might offer, the ability to provide information and raise the meaningfulness of the prairie landscape, and the ability to share an idea among twenty people. The working space is an interior condition to the site, the future use of the pavilion and the collective experiences of the studio. Richard Sennett, in his book, *The Uses of Disorder*, says that a "*certain kind of self-sufficient aloneness and singleness is born, paradoxically, at the moment when a man sees he is not going to be able to be the master of all that occurs in his life.*"

The uncertainties of such an exposed working space allows the contradictory aims of self-creation and public responsibility to coexist. A new confidence emerges from the context of uncertainties as a person relies upon her own beliefs and values. In the presence of outside forces the private desire for self-realization can remain private and not take on a false sense of

control. The public exposure of uncertainties disciplines the desire for self-expression, strengthening the student's abilities to make decisions in public.

Fig. 7. Trailhead Project

A similar shared design condition was created in the 'overlook' prairie project. The objective was to design and construct elements in the landscape to be supportive of the programmed activities as well as to play out shared principles and to establish a type of discipline in the making. The shelter is conceived as being able to both shape space and hold imaginative qualities. Such a capacity to hold and perform can be understood as a model of the potential to fill the working space with possibilities. In other words, the working space that is being made is not simply a neutral condition for any possible activity but a room of choices. The capacity to make decisions requires choices and room to perceive the difference between possible choices.

Conclusion

The design studio can be considered as a type of working space, in the sense that the studio environment is a place of exchange requiring and creating room for decisions to be made. The amount of room created for making decisions is directly related to the generosity of the working space and the capability of the students to contribute to the decision-making process. Each student requires a space for private, self-creation in order to productively contribute to the larger discussion. In other words, a space for experimentation and confirmation must be maintained for the student to gain confidence. Simultaneously, students should be faced with outside concerns that challenge the private relationship they have with their work. This combination of such external forces along with sufficient space for individual expression establish the working space of a studio that is responsive to both community needs and the development of a student's confidence. Confidence is basic to a working relationship, to the profession of architecture—confidence can be thought of as a belief that one will act in a right, proper or effective way in a given situation. Rehearsing this in the working space of a studio has the potential to allow students to gain such confidence. If the conditions for making decisions are artificial or purely fictional, the space is abstract and the result may err in being conceptual. On the other hand, if the working space has a degree of outside reality, the work will begin to be more relevant to broader, more public concerns.

Through this process, students' ideas are exposed--this working space allows the students to feel their thoughts fragile. This establishes a place whereby the authority of a student's effort for self-expression is challenged—they must make something, be able to say something that translates their thoughts in a public fashion. The collaboration between studio and actual projects create a working space within which decisions are made in a more public context. The room for making decisions becomes a room inhabited by others and the decisions are made in the presence of others.

Notes

[1] Sennett, Richard. *The Uses of Disorder,* W.W. Norton & Company: New York, NY. 1970.