Transilient Minds
A Historical-Anthropological Approach to First Year Architecture Studio

Thomas Cline & Angela Person
University of Oklahoma (USA)

Abstract

First-year architecture students at the University of Oklahoma arrive as products of a commoditized and Positivist education, driven by a procedural approach to knowledge that is unrelated to the pedagogical intent of our architectural design curriculum. The conflicting purities of students' Positivist cultural and educational backgrounds, and Oklahoma's geographic location within the Bible Belt combine to form a knowledge framework that appears to limit our students' ability to recognize and find value in experience. One result of this framework seems to be that their processes of inquiry are simplified, allowing only positive outcomes. This simplified, yet deeply ingrained, approach to knowledge does not emphasize either critical or hermeneutic exploration: acts of imagination and discovery seem foreign to their previous cultural and educational experiences.

Unaccustomed to intellectually engaging their environments, students confront a rational disconnect when presented with academic situations or questions intended to elicit phenomenal discourse. As products of a knowledge system that encourages only two possible responses—affirmation or negation—incoming first-year students are ill-equipped to approach the non-scientific experimental realm of imagination and discovery. Having learned that valid forms of knowledge are either scientific or faith-based, students dismiss contemplation of identity as either sentimental, thus not worth knowing or poetic, thus having no practical value. This relegation of identity to the realm of the trivial, coupled with students' having ill-established mechanisms for critical and hermeneutic inquiry, has led to a diminished awareness of, and engagement with, their physio-cultural environments. This lack of critical engagement inevitably leads to a lack of awareness (historical, geographical, and cultural) and consequently, prevents the meaningful development of personal identity associated with a particular place. We have chosen to situate our pedagogical framework among principles which encourage the formation of relationships between critical engagement, hermeneutic inquiry, and the vernacular—all as components of an architectural discourse. Without an understanding of this particular methodological approach, there is little critical engagement with an architecture of autochthonous place.

The formation of an architectural discourse grounded in Critical Regionalism allows for the teaching of a dialectic methodology within the first-year studio, encouraging students to intertwine their emerging autochthonous value systems with their existing Positivist backgrounds. This architecturally-based form of Critical Regionalism provides a trans-disciplinary approach that finds its roots in the academic fields of anthropology, cultural geography, and philosophy. This approach, in turn, encourages student work that represents each student's unique understanding of the world he or she inhabits. These worlds, the places of their daily lives, are complex assemblages of ideas, experiences, and associations that do not readily conform to order, to classification, or to the rational output necessitated by their Positivist backgrounds. They discover that the complexity of their lives cannot be solely defined by a procedural approach to knowledge but, rather, should also include interpretation of the 'impure' products of individual experience and perception. Encouraging students to critically explore regional identity, historical narrative, and existential modes of participating in the world is integral to developing architects who can fully engage the discipline.

Introduction

Positivism, in shunning all that was impossible to prove by empirical science, distanced itself from speculation on anything that was considered unknowable, such as the origins of life or the existence of God.[1]

This articulation of Positivism, from Jennifer Hecht's book, *The End of the Soul*, can be seen as analogous to the disjunct between pre-collegiate education in the United States and the pedagogical intent of an

introductory architectural design curriculum. Within this design curriculum, such 'unknowable' or difficult-to-articulate ideas such as personal identity, the notion of autochthonous place, and possibilistic outcomes are often wrestled with. Addressing these ideas, which are considered unknowable, does not fall within the realm of the typical American education. Regardless, addressing these theoretical notions is necessary to establishing a broad and all-encompassing design foundation. Often, first-year architecture students in the United States arrive at university as products of a decidedly Positivist culture; a culture in which education is driven by a procedural approach to knowledge that is informed by the focused methodologies of scientific inquiry.[2] More specifically, at the University of Oklahoma (OU), 66 percent of incoming freshman are from the land-locked and centrally isolated Great Plains state of Oklahoma,[3] while the remainder hail primarily from northern Texas and southern Kansas. The homogeneity of this demographic might imply an awareness of autochthonous place; however, we have found that the conflicting purities of students' Positivist cultural and educational backgrounds and Oklahoma's geographic location within the Bible Belt combine to form a knowledge framework that appears to limit their ability to recognize and find value in experience. One result of this framework seems to be that their processes of inquiry are simplified, allowing only positive outcomes. This simplified, yet deeply ingrained, approach to knowledge does not emphasize either critical or hermeneutic exploration: acts of imagination and discovery seem foreign to their previous cultural and educational experiences.

As products of a knowledge system that encourages only two possible responses—affirmation or negation—incoming first-year students are ill-equipped to approach the non-scientific experimental realm of imagination and discovery. Given the homogeneity of the demographic of OU students, we hypothesize that these two responses are predicated upon scientific or faith-based knowing. In an attempt to counter the strictures of this binary system, we introduce a pedagogical approach to beginning design that encourages both critical thought and hermeneutic forms of knowing. This interpretive means of knowing, coupled with critical awareness, will later serve as the basis for architectural exploration in which students search for, acknowledge, and evaluate multiple avenues of understanding. Our first-year studio curriculum does not address architecture *per se*, but rather the basic precepts of design. This allows us to construct a foundation of design processes, while also introducing students to new ways of knowing which

combine critical and hermeneutic modes of inquiry.

Unaccustomed to these critical and hermeneutic modes of inquiry, first-year architecture students seem to disregard stimuli that might solicit intellectual engagement with their physical and cultural environments. Numerous American educators agree that United States' high schools are currently failing to properly equip students for the rigors of collegiate study.[4] As a result, many first-year students confront a rational disconnect when presented with academic questions intended to elicit phenomenological discourse. Having learned that valid forms of knowledge are either scientific or faith-based, students dismiss contemplation of identity as either sentimental, thus not worth knowing, or poetic, thus having no practical value. This relegation of identity to the realm of the trivial, coupled with students' having ill-established mechanisms for critical and hermeneutic inquiry, has led to a diminished awareness of, and engagement with, their physio-cultural environments. The lack of critical engagement with their environments inevitably leads students to an inability to articulate their personal identities. Without this historical, geographical, and cultural identity, students' interpretations of autochthonous place lack meaning. The idea of autochthonous identity, as a form of architectural place-making, is best described as that which is 'formed or originating in the place where found,'[5] local, or vernacular. We have chosen to situate our pedagogical framework among principles of Critical Regionalism; principles which encourage the formation of relationships between critical engagement, hermeneutic inquiry, and the vernacular—all as components of architectural discourse. For example, in-class discussions of Critical Regionalist values allow us to introduce students to critical and hermeneutic thinking in relation to a phenomenological awareness of place, while reinforcing basic design principles. Without an understanding of this particular methodological approach, there is little critical engagement with an architecture of autochthonous place.

Beginning design at the University of Oklahoma

The beginning design program at OU is structured to support a National Architectural Accrediting Board-sanctioned professional degree program in architecture. This support generally consists of the teaching of meta-architectural design principles such as organizational strategies, formal manipulations, and proportioning systems. In addition, students are expected

to become proficient in manual skills appropriate to architectural studies—for example, mechanical drafting, modelling, craft, and representation. While these skills and principles are traditional to architectural education, we have observed that they do not meet the expectations of beginning design students. More often than not, when students introduce themselves on the first day of class, they convey the idea that they have come to architecture school to design 'beautiful houses' or 'imagematic buildings.' Meanwhile, they expect to begin designing without realizing the necessity for theoretical or methodological rigor. Even further outside the realm of students' expectations are components of our curriculum geared toward critical engagement, hermeneutic thought, and autochthonous awareness; forms of knowing that are outside the realm of their cultural and educational expectations.

In our beginning design studio, these forms of non-Positivist knowing are fostered through a series of projects, across both semesters, whose outcomes are designed to illustrate students' developing understanding of design principles and manual skills, and to introduce understanding of a theoretical basis for design. In the first semester, a series of sixteen week-long exercises begins to expose students to meta-architectural principles and notions of craft and graphic representation. This exposure to principles and skills is coupled with rigorous implementation of critical pedagogy. Dr. Ira Shor, professor of rhetoric at the City University of New York, succinctly defines critical pedagogy as one which introduces:

> Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.[6]

Our pedagogy centres on relating these meanings, causes, contexts, and consequences, through acts of critical engagement. This is accomplished by introducing a proto-Hegelian dialectic methodology. Such a methodology asks that students utilize thesis, antithesis, and synthesis as an approach to addressing each design problem. This methodology is introduced during the course of daily dialectic critique of student work. These critiques usurp the seminar framework common to collegiate coursework in the humanities. For example, each student's work and ideas are discussed within an open forum using Critical Regionalism as the catalyst for discussion. This dialectic methodology becomes particularly important as students enter the second semester of the beginning design sequence, which combines generative making, analysis, and an introduction to architectural precedent. In a studio which has heretofore been based upon meta-architectural design principles, the introduction of an architectural precedent at this time allows students exposure to the architectural form they expect, while reinforcing those design principles introduced at the beginning of the academic year. All throughout this first-year studio sequence, design is explored through dialectic discussions of identity, place, and meaning.

Incoming students' expectations

The homogeneity of OU students' restricted demographic creates a mindset which is more attuned to the idea of a specific, expected response, as opposed to seeking a variety of hermeneutic responses. For example, during desk critiques, students often ask if they are 'doing it the right way,' rather than independently exploring and assessing a range of solutions. When exploring proportioning systems, they do not want to perform exegetical readings of orthographic projections; they want to be shown the relationships, rather than discovering them on their own. Simply put, their previous cultural and educational experiences seem to limit acts of imagination and discovery. This being the case, as a pedagogical instrument, Critical Regionalism binds the hermeneutic and critical forms of knowing to each student's developing awareness of autochthonous identity. Additionally, Critical Regionalism becomes the vehicle for uniting our pedagogical intent with the students' expectations of explicitly 'architectural' architectural education.

We have noted, and Iowa State Professor Gregory Palermo's 2008 study reinforces our findings, that first-year architecture students have an expectation of 'doing' without the requisite expectation of 'learning' or discovering. When Palermo asked his first-year students the question, 'Why do you want to study architecture?'. their responses typically centred on the act of doing architecture, rather than expressing the desire to learn or engage in architectural discourse.[7] We believe that this under-emphasis of engagement is the result of students entering beginning design as products of a homogenous and decidedly Positivist culture. While many students profess individualism, their conceptual frameworks seem to be commoditized, rationally defined, and predisposed to affirmative or negative responses as

predicated by the binary extremes of their pre-existing knowledge systems. These binary extremes are reinforced by the Positivist notions of a procedural methodology which they are indoctrinated with in high school. An excellent example of this is the teaching of a scientific method which has been reduced to a formulaic series of steps whose end goal is only positive outcomes. The 'threat' of failures or the possibilities of exploration are excluded from this linear framework. As a result, students believe that there are only two possible answers: affirmation or negation; whereas, the field of design pedagogy explores 'best possible' scenarios, allowing for multiple avenues of knowing.

Hermeneutic exploration of 'best possible' scenarios, through projects that foster development of manual skills and understanding of basic design principles, does not meet students' expectations of architecture school. Consistently, students express surprise at the abstract nature, time commitment required, and high level of craft associated with each project. Additionally, students have been unaware of the complexity of architectural discourse; generally they anticipate being taught a quantifiable, formulaic process that leads to 'architecture.' Their expectation is that architectural design will cohere to a basic mathematical model—one of formula, not of proof—rather than being an exploratory process that teaches meta-architectural principles. These principles are explored through imaginative processes rigorously evaluated during comprehensive intra- and interpersonal critique. A seminar-based dialectic methodology focuses such critique through evaluation and synthesis of anthropological, geographical, and philosophical meanings, causes, contexts, and consequences.

Pedagogical framework

The formation of an architectural discourse grounded in Critical Regionalism allows for the teaching of a dialectic methodology within the first-year studio, encouraging students to intertwine their emerging autochthonous value systems with their existing Positivist backgrounds. This architecturally-based form of Critical Regionalism provides a trans-disciplinary approach that finds its roots in the academic fields of anthropology, cultural geography, and philosophy. Encouraging students to critically explore regional identity, historical narrative, and existential modes of participating in the world is integral to developing architects who can fully engage the discipline; an engagement beyond basic principles and manual skills.

An introduction to this trans-disciplinary approach toward design methodology is accomplished through a survey of multidisciplinary readings. These readings range from works by architectural historian Kenneth Frampton, philosophers Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricœur, religious studies scholars Bruce Lincoln and Jonathan Z. Smith, and geographers James Duncan and David Ley. At the outset of the second semester of the beginning design sequence, peer-based discussions of these readings — grounded in the Socratic method—-prepare students to participate in the dialogue of architectural education, while working toward the development of individual design methodologies.

In addition to participating in peer-based discussions of readings that support an architectural Critical Regionalism, each student must research and analyze a particular building designed by a contemporary architect whose work is of an historical-anthropological nature. From a moderated group of approximately thirty architects, including Samuel Mockbee, Carlos Jimenez, Elizabeth Chu Richter, and Steven Holl, each student is matched, based upon his or her personal interests, to an architect and representative project which serves as architectural precedent. Each student is asked to carefully document the cultural, political, and geographical circumstances surrounding this architect's work. As a part of this documentation, students must prepare a biography of the architect and a response paper which outlines the design theories and methodologies of the architect—generally, as applied to his or her body of work and, specifically, as applied to the assigned building. The response paper addresses the student's understanding of how the architect's work and theoretical stance reinforce or contradict the ideas of Critical Regionalism. By answering the questions: 'How does the architect's work contribute to or respond to a regional identity?' and 'How does the architect's work respond to cultural influences?', students explore architectural process through the lens provided by the study of Critical Regionalism.

In addition to the response paper, a series of documentary drawings is required for this project which includes relevant floor plans, sections, and elevations of the assigned building. These drawings are reproduced and used to complete comprehensive graphic and written precedent analyses informed by students' previous exposure to design principles. The analysis of these precedents includes traditional analytic components such as circulation, site analysis, unit-to-whole, repetitive-to-unique, geometry, and

hierarchy. Each component of these studies must be carefully and cohesively formatted into an 11 inch by 17 inch precedent analysis and research booklet that includes photographs, sketches, and other diagrams which assist in illustrating the student's thoughts and ideas in regard to his or her analysis. The format of the booklet is constrained in order to encourage compositional rigor. In an effort to reinforce academic rigor within this exploratory framework, all written components cohere with the American Psychological Association citation guidelines and all borrowed images must be cited.

Following this exercise in comprehensive analysis, students are asked to act as Critical Regionalists themselves. Each student must design a transportation kiosk to be located adjacent to the University of Oklahoma's College of Architecture. In preparing to design this kiosk, students conduct research of transportation kiosk typologies and formulate a thesis regarding the tectonic application of these typologies. Following this procedural research, students immerse themselves in and document the autochthonous character of Norman, Oklahoma—its history, geography and people—through a series of exploratory mapping exercises and hermeneutic interviews. The result of this immersive exploration provides the antithesis to the rational understanding of transportation kiosk derived from the first exercise. Finally, students are encouraged to produce a meaningful narrative which bridges the existing transportation kiosk typology, or thesis, with their engagement with the city of Norman, or antithesis, ultimately producing a critically considered kiosk schema, or synthesis.

Pedagogical Intent

Through the introduction of a proto-Hegelian dialectic viewed through the lens of Critical Regionalism, students gain the meaningful ability to interpolate their evolving ideas of the vernacular in concert with their understanding of the universal. They begin to exhibit a critical engagement with their environments; their engagement in the seminar-like project critiques evolves over the course of the academic year, producing more thoroughly considered narratives related to each successive project. Students draw explicit connections among the information collected and displayed within their precedent analysis research booklet, their personal observations as residents of the city of Norman, and the narrative required of a transportation kiosk for this community. Indicative of this engagement, one student prepared an unsolicited two-page manifesto outlining the theoretical framework for his

kiosk project, which provocatively connected his notions of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis throughout his semester's work.

By making an analogy between thesis and the universal, and antithesis and the vernacular, students establish a narrative synthesis which coheres to a nascent Critical Regionalist methodology. This ultimately incorporates both the universal and the vernacular into what Kenneth Frampton calls 'a process of cross-fertilization and reinterpretation [that] is impure by definition.'[8] This *a priori* impurity stands in contrast to the 'purity' expected by an American Positivist education. Ultimately, the primary component of our pedagogical intent is to introduce the idea that there are multiple 'best possible' scenarios—some of which may be 'impure,' and diametrically opposed to the Positivist scenarios to which students are accustomed.

By introducing a trans-disciplinarily informed Critical Regionalism to our pedagogy, we foster the development of students' evolving critical engagement with their emerging autochthonous value systems. This, in turn, encourages student work that represents each student's unique understanding of the world he or she inhabits. These worlds, the places of their daily lives, are complex assemblages of ideas, experiences, and associations that do not readily conform to order, to classification, or to the rational output necessitated by their Positivist backgrounds. They discover that the complexity of their lives cannot be solely defined by a procedural approach to knowledge but, rather, should also include interpretation of the 'impure' products of individual experience and perception. Our pedagogical intent is to insure that our students live their lives, engage the past, respond to the myriad experiences of their particular environments, make judgments, and synthesize the breadth of their experiences and understanding in ways that they can find meaningful to their life-narratives and understandings of architecture.

Conclusion

It is this 'impure' synthesis of experience that calls into question the privilege granted students' Positivist cultural and educational backgrounds. While these backgrounds attempt to create rational and universal order out of the complexity of existence, when employed in the realm of design, they cannot communicate narrative complexity— a complexity which enriches our lives, allowing us to find meaning in experience.

In response to the Positivist exclusion of unquantifiable complexity, the integration of Critical Regionalism into the beginning design curriculum helps students become aware of alternatives to the universal standardization and order requisite to the narrowly focused approach to knowledge afforded them through Positivist inquiry alone. This Critical Regionalist framework permits students to search for multiple solutions based upon their personal experiences and the unique anthropological, geographical, and philosophical circumstances surrounding their individual existence and the particulars of any given design problem. By constructing narratives based upon Critical Regionalist exploration—the exploration of geo-historical context and the employment of imaginative interpretations of said context—students are allowed to operate in a framework that does not belong to the rational world of Positivism. These constructed narratives connect thesis, the universal tenets of a Positivist methodology, with antithesis, each student's vernacular experience and the unique circumstances surrounding each design problem, producing a powerful synthesis of trans-disciplinary associations. This narrative process represents each student's particular identity as a designer, and the synthesis of his or her distinct experiences.

In addition to these experiences, each person is a product of his or her education and environment. Using what one knows and has experienced as the lens through which to generate narrative allows for the articulation of intricate meaning with each new encounter—in the design studio and elsewhere. This formulation of narrative meaning comes as each student allows his or her particular interpretations to manifest themselves in his or her work; work that is individual, complex, and influenced by one's understanding of autochthonous modes of being.

As our students populate their value systems, it is imperative that the beginning design curriculum temper their predilection toward Positivist methodology by emphasizing the search for autochthonous meaning, hermeneutic thought, and critical engagement. Exploring the complexity of history, narrative, and imagination within a Critical Regionalist design methodology does not insinuate that the progressive, the rational, and the technological should not be explored simultaneously. By synthesizing individual narrative with the Positivist universal, students are equipped to address contemporary materials, methods, and physical needs while designing spaces that are inimitably tied to their daily lives. For design to be truly engaging it cannot be sterile:—it

must recognize our humanity, our hopes, and our dreams.

Notes

1 Jennifer Michael Hecht, The end of the soul: Scientific modernity, atheism, and anthropology in France (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 49.
2 Erich Goode, Deviant behavior, Upper Saddle River (N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005)
3 University of Oklahoma Institutional Research and Reporting, 'New Students by Resident Status,' 2008 Factbook <http://www.ou.edu/provost/ir/Factbook_2008/08_Master.htm> (accessed 09 September 2009).
4 Lynn Olson, 'Problems of high schools can't be ignored, Kirst says: Calls for revamping high schools intensify,' Education Week, 24, 20 (26 January 2005): pp. 1, 18-19.
5 'Autochthonous,' Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary < http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autochthonous> (accessed 09 September 2009).
6 Ira Shor, Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 129.
7 Gregory Palermo, 'Ethical expectations: Reflections from beginning architecture students,' 25th National Conference on Beginning Design Students (Baton Rouge, LA, 2009).
8 Kenneth Frampton, 'Prospects for a Critical Regionalism,' Perspecta, 20 (1983): p. 148.

Bibliography

'Autochthonous,' Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autochthonous> (accessed 09 September 2009)

Frampton, Kenneth, 'Prospects for a Critical Regionalism,' Perspecta, 20 (1983).

Goode, Erich, Deviant behavior, (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005)

Hecht, Jennifer Michael, The end of the soul: Scientific modernity, atheism, and anthropology in France, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)

Olson, Lynn, 'Problems of high schools can't be ignored, Kirst says: Calls for revamping high schools intensify,' Education Week, 24, 20 (26 January 2005).

Palermo, Gregory, 'Ethical expectations: Reflections from beginning architecture students,' 25th National Conference on Beginning Design Students, (Baton Rouge, LA, 2009)

Shor, Ira, Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

University of Oklahoma Institutional Research and Reporting, 'New Students by Resident Status,' 2008 Factbook <http://www.ou.edu/provost/ir/Factbook_2008/08_Master.htm> (accessed 09 September 2009).