

**Pedagogical Palimpsests and Cosmic
Landscapes**
/

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Wikipedia contributors, "West Texas"

This essay offers an overview of a recent advanced graduate design studio at the University of South Florida School of Architecture and Community Design. The studio began, as do most collaborative efforts, through conversation and correspondences between the collaborators. An interchange of ideas mapped through phone calls, emails and common aspirations. Rather than a defined project or building typology, the studio was organized around a specific place: Marfa, Texas. Marfa served as a place of work, a physical locale, a sensibility, and a purveyor of things mythical, wonderful and unusual. The essay also addresses pedagogy in terms of the inter-looping nature of an architectural education: the necessary redundancy and lineage across educators and academies.

CONTEXT

The 1984 Wim Wenders film, *Paris, Texas*, is a beautiful, if difficult, tale of loss. The opening sequence is set in the Texas desert. A boundless landscape with an endless sky. Motionless clouds hang as if strung from cables. The tiny figure of Harry Dean Stanton emerges, walking with some purpose through the arid landscape in suit and tie and red baseball cap. The laconic Ry Cooder soundtrack echoes the vast emptiness of the surroundings; though empty only in the sense of settlement. In reality, the landscape is one of great, jagged drama littered with the detritus of habitation: railroad tracks, two-lane highways and lines of telephone poles project a sense of the infinite. Rust and ruin dot the rugged red earth. Abandonment and melancholy align our protagonist with his context. [1]

Paris, Texas was partially filmed in the Trans-Pecos region of “Far West Texas”, a place of unsubtle inversions: arid deserts and dramatic mountainous; vast lands (over 31,000 square miles) and modest populations (27 people per square mile); the lush Big Bend National Park and eastern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert (the largest in North America); and elevations ranging from Guadalupe Peak (8750 ft.) to the Pecos and Rio Grande River Confluence (984 ft.).¹

Presidio County is a triangular shaped territory bordering Mexico by way of the Rio Grande River, flowing from the northwest to the south east. The county seat is Marfa, home to the striking



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Telegram home from Donald Judd traveling to California by way of Texas for military duty in 1946, Judd and Murray, Donald Judd Writings, 424.

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Wikipedia contributors, "Giant (1956 film)"

2 Mainstreet Marfa from the cupola of the Presidio Country Courthouse

3 West Texas landscape

4 Giant film poster

second empire influenced Presidio County Courthouse (1886-87), grounding the town with great flair. Indeed, it seems to pin down all that could otherwise drift away. The night sky hosts (unveils, reveals) a celestial feast. It is no wonder that the renowned McDonald Astronomical Observatory is located near Fort Davis in the Davis Mountains of nearby Jeff Davis County, Texas. [2]

MARFA AND JUDD

“Dear Mom, Van Horn Texas. 1260 Population.
Nice Town Beautiful Country Mountains -
Love Don 1946 Dec 17 PM 5 45.”²

Along the road from art critic to artist—so-called minimalist, a moniker disliked by Judd—and after many years based in New York, Judd returned to West Texas in the early 1970s and purchased a 45,000-acre ranch and several buildings in the town of Marfa. Throughout his life, Marfa served as one of three primary residences for Judd as he migrated between Marfa, New York and the Swiss village of Küssnacht on Lake Lucerne.

Donald Judd and the West Texas landscape by way of Marfa are now inexorably intertwined. Marfa is a kind of bespoke village embedded in the rugged and arid West Texas landscape. Fine dining and high art comfortably reside with burritos, mules and cactus. The modern Marfa clings to both its recent and distant past while grappling with a distinctly eccentric present. In Marfa, place is history. The history of Marfa is ever present by way of its atmosphere: a powerful landscape, rolling and horizontal, boundless until bounded by mountains and coupled with the thin air proffered by its 4800 ft. elevation. [3]

The near distant past of Marfa is rendered through the western epic film *Giant*.³ Released in 1956 and directed by George Stevens, it stars Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean (who died prior to the release of the film). Partially filmed in and around Marfa, the region served as the expansive ranch of protagonist Jordan “Bick” Benedict, Jr. (Hudson). The film’s narrative mediates between a grand multi-generational drama of familial friction and transition, as big oil invades the traditional Texan ranchlands, and, for its day, daringly confronting the region’s pervasive racism as wealthy Anglos condescend toward service class Mexican Americans. [4]

Today, the shadow of *Giant* looms more modestly in Marfa. The El Paisano Hotel, home for the cast and crew for several months, still stands, renovated in 2004 after years of decline and safely secured on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. Judd’s eccentricities have

Correspondences



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Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 20

5 Ruin of Reata

6 Beyonce at fake Prada

made Marfa a town eccentric unto itself. The ruin of Reata, the lonely estate owned by Bick Benedict, stood for many years, a derelict billboard of a one-time pretend mansion. The ruin is now gone. However, in a Marfa appropriate intersection of contemporary art and the Texan landscape, artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset erected a fake Prada store in 2005, some 30 miles northwest of Marfa on US 90. A billboard turned museum by way of the Texas Department of Transportation (originally classified by the Texas DOT as an illegal billboard, the building was reclassified as a museum and remains standing), the Prada store is minimalist art, a critique of consumer culture, and a roadside attraction, in addition to serving as a ground zero for selfies and social media posts. It serves as an outpost, a pre-welcome station for inquisitive visitors and offers a sneak preview of what lies beyond. One might argue the fake Prada holds a distant kinship to (if not an obvious extension of) Judd's solemn cast concrete boxes. Both foreign but oddly at home and welcome in the West Texas landscape. A landscape, it seems, capable of absorbing virtually anything. The pretend Prada proffers a cultural correspondence—one perhaps, of irony and dissidence—between Marfa and the outside urbanized world. [5-6]

THRESHOLDS

The Greek God Janus serves as a catalyst for the Marfa Studio. Janus is two faced. Each face looking in the opposite direction, one facing the past and the other peering into the future. Janus is a threshold and, as are all thresholds, a correspondence between and across two realms. The theme of correspondence provides a didactic structure for the studio work.

MATERIAL CULTURE

In “The Craftsman”, author Richard Sennett speaks of material culture and offers a reading of the value of skilled work where “the desire to do a job well done for its own sake” encourages individuals to “learn about themselves through the things they make”.⁴

The concerns of material culture reside in the design studio. That is, the value imbued in the making of an object or set of related things. Material culture binds the corporeal—the physicality of materiality—with intellectual production and situates the resulting work in a vernacular, place-based logic. We explore the intrinsic connection, correspondence, if you will, between the eye, the mind and the hand. One seeks “to make” as a means of inquisition. Making is considered an intellectual act, a form of thinking.



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Wikipedia contributors, "Palimpsest"

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Bailey, "Time Perspectives, Palimpsests and the Archaeology of Time," 203

The studio serves as a pre-thesis think tank and presumes a thesis of some kind is essential to all projects. Thesis seminar is both a self-driven design studio concluding one's formal academic training and an intellectual trajectory for making architecture. Thesis as a formal project stands at the threshold between concluding an academic career and beginning the journey into practice. A Janusian moment. Thesis is presented as both an end and a beginning. The Marfa Studio seeks to engage ideas and serve to clarify the participant's intellectual trajectory toward thesis and beyond. Studio participants dictate studio discourse and direction. Ambitions and doubts establish the arc of the work. The beginning of the term is spent uncovering the foundations of the student's search and, more importantly, preparing a methodology that is both questioning and generative.

PEDAGOGICAL PALIMPSESTS

The term *palimpsest* originates in ancient Greek as *palimpsestos* with *palin* (again) combined with *psestos* (rubbed smooth or again scraped). This translates as "scraped clean and ready to be used again" and describes the process of erasing and smoothing wax coated writing tablets and repeatedly writing upon the surface. The Romans referred to this process as "washing papyrus", a commonly used surface that was cheaper than the parchment prepared from animal skins. This washing or erasure is more often a product of preserving the afore mentioned and sturdier parchment.⁵ The palimpsest, then, is a ghostly structure with layer upon layer, written and erased, written and erased. A kind of ritual displacement of knowledge, a privileging of one order over another [7].

The Palimpsest is, perhaps, the most direct and intimate of correspondences. The process of erasure and re-writing yields a density of ideas and information, collapsed into one place and awaiting discovery and interpretation. A disjunct correspondence of collisions over time yields a disjunct overlaying of knowledge. This dense map of accidentally intertwined cultures and bodies of knowledge suggests an appropriately speculative pedagogical structure for the Marfa Studio. Archeologist Geoff Bailey outlines a palimpsest typology as follows:

True palimpsests

"True palimpsests are palimpsests in the strict sense of the term in which all traces of earlier activity have been removed except for the most recent."⁶ A true palimpsest is an actual real time recording device. Erasure presents each successive mark as new and complete. Erasure yields an absence whereby history remains a mystery.

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Ibid., 204

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Ibid., 205

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Ibid., 207

Cumulative palimpsests

“A cumulative palimpsest is one in which the successive episodes of deposition, or layers of activity, remain superimposed one upon the other without loss of evidence, but are so re-worked and mixed together that it is difficult or impossible to separate them out into their original constituents.”⁷

This palimpsest is also most commonly referenced within architectural discourse. The overlaid, simultaneous circumstance of coincident histories. This palimpsest is an exquisite entanglement of layers, imprint upon imprint, inviting distillation and interpretation.

Spatial palimpsests

“...spatial palimpsests, a variant of the cumulative palimpsest but distinct from it and defined as a mixture of episodes that are spatially segregated but whose temporal relationships have become blurred and difficult to disentangle. ... the boundary between cumulative and spatial palimpsests is not a sharp one. Both may be characterized by a variety of locations of activity and by different degrees of spatial and temporal integrity. The key difference is rather one of geographical scale.”⁸

Indeed, in the experience of a building we see, feel and encounter the building in radically different ways over time (or even in a relatively short period of time). The time of day and year alters the disposition and character of light entering the spaces, yielding very distinct experiences, impressions and memories.

The very experience of architecture emerges as a multi-palimpsestic condition, altered by time, materiality, season, the weathering of surface, and cosmetic changes to a space. Each experience is influenced by a previous experience, mood, expectation, or pre-conception. The randomness of the immediate environment shapes one's memory: a nearby train, a car horn, a distant jackhammer, and/or a passing conversation collide to form an intertwined heterotopic spatial/aural context. Context sways perception, and perception emerges from an ever-changing palimpsest of experience.

Temporal palimpsests

“A temporal palimpsest is an assemblage of materials and objects that form part of the same deposit but are of different ages and ‘life’ spans. On first description this sounds like a cumulative palimpsest by another name. However, in the cumulative palimpsest, the association of objects of different ages is really an aggregation due to the effect of mixing together what were originally distinct episodes of activity or deposition.”⁹

Think of temporal events such as rain, snowfall, wind acting upon

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Ibid., 208

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Rossi and Eisenman, *The Architecture of the City*, 7

and altering either immediately, temporarily or slowly over time the geography of a place.

Palimpsests of meaning

“A palimpsest of meaning can be defined as the succession of meanings acquired by a particular object, or group of objects, as a result of the different uses, contexts of use and associations to which they have been exposed from the original moment of manufacture to their current resting place...”

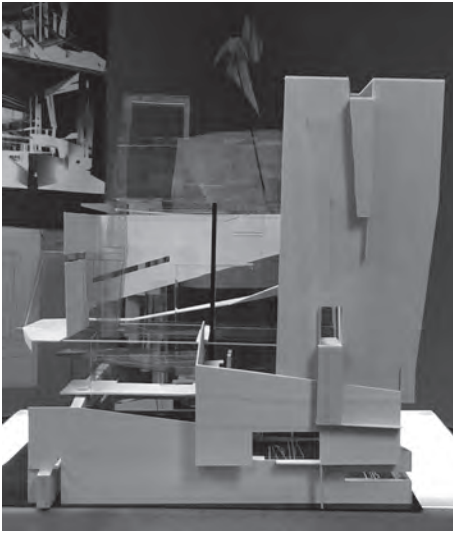
“...whether in the ground, a museum, a textbook, an intellectual discourse, or indeed as objects still in circulation and use. It is distinct from all the other types of palimpsests so far discussed in that it can apply to an individual object, and because it brings us more obviously into the domain of subjective time experience.”¹⁰

In Peter Eisenman’s forward to Aldo Rossi’s *Architecture of the City* he discusses Rossi’s notion of specific place, or locus: “...thus, while the locus is a site which can accommodate a series of events, it also in itself constitutes an event... Buildings may be signs of events that have occurred on a specific site; and this threefold relationship of site, event and sign becomes a characteristic of urban artifacts. Hence, the locus may be said to be the place on which architecture or form can be imprinted. Architecture gives form to the singularity of place, and it is this specific form that the locus persists through many changes, particularly transformation of function...”

This relationship suggests a different limit to history. History exists so long as an object is in use; that is, so long as a form relates to its original function. However, when form and function are severed, and only form remains vital, history shifts into the realm of memory. When history ends, memory begins. ...History becomes to be known through the relationship between a collective memory of events, the singularity of place (locus solus), and the sign of the place as expressed in form.” And Eisenman goes on to say, “...the new time of architecture... is that of memory, which replaces history.”¹¹

The palimpsest of meaning intersects with the palimpsest of history. History pivots to memory and over time we witness a scribing of events upon the place. This is the palimpsestic overlay of events; the creation of memory. The process is a kind of memory machine. And the production of architecture (the process of making architecture) references one’s history, as if frozen in time, and coupled with one’s memory of events, of discourse, of experiences.

Finally, *thesis* is from *late Middle English* (via *late Latin* from *Greek*), literally ‘placing, a proposition’, from the root of *tithenai* ‘to



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Oxford dictionaries, online

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Ibid, online

place.¹² To place; to make a place; a place as thesis. The thesis of the Marfa Studio is to make place, or rather, an essence of place. And surely a sense of place drew Donald Judd to West Texas.

CONTEXTUAL CORRESPONDENCE

Travel to Marfa is something of a pilgrimage and, in this instance, intended to challenge and strip away the familiar surroundings of the students' immediate context. In other words, to experience the near opposite of the known. In this circumstance, the known is the lush, wet, humid landscape of Florida. With 1350 miles of coastline, a fragile karst topographic underlay, and rising sea levels, Florida has both a temporal and ironically primordial character. It is primarily a landscape of canopy, shade and shadows interwoven with highways, a mish-mash of architectural pre and post war development, and various water bodies collectively blanketing urbanized regions in endless sprawl. It is a state defined through tourism, violent storms, the temporal, and the mythical.

Much of Florida is delineated by the liminal line between water and land; the sunrise and sunset of east and west; and the development and demographics of north and south. In many ways it is two states, rural and urban, wealthy and not, new settlers and increasingly rare natives. Its strangeness revels in contradictions and mis-alignments. The east-west disposition of the Interstate 4 corridor bisects the state north to south. It is said the Interstate 4 corridor decides national elections, such is the diversity of opinion, race, ethnicity and culture. The corridor is a place of fantasy and the fantastic, home to mass tourism, amusement parks, miniature worlds, and filmic narratives retold as themed rides. Defunct attractions are modern day ruins as generations of entertainment venues die and are reborn only to die again. It is a state both of youth and exuberance, yet, for the elderly, serves also as God's waiting room.

Our contextual correspondence is one of opposition and contradiction. Context means to weave together, *from the late Middle English (denoting the construction of a text): from Latin contextus, from con- 'together' + texere 'to weave'*.¹³ Context is equally commonplace and elusive; multifarious and particular; concrete and abstract. The familiar juxtaposed by the foreign. [8]

PLACE AND SPACE

In his celebrated writings, Christian Norberg-Schulz speaks at length of *genius loci*, the spirit of place that we consider in the correspondence between these apparent opposing landscapes. Although vastly

Correspondences

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Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 23

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Ibid, 24-32

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Ibid, 42

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Ibid, 42

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Ibid, 45

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Ibid, 45

different in climate, landscape and altitude, Florida and West Texas align through certain rubrics of place, as defined by Norberg-Schulz: "...it is an existential concept which denotes the experience of meanings."¹⁴

His four modes of understanding natural systems offer an existential reading of landscape as idea more so than an object or artifact:¹⁵

Things: The forces of the natural landscape are related to concrete natural elements or things.

The Sun: An abstraction of the cosmic order, as defined by the presence of the sun as form giver and shapeshifter.

Character: The character of place, tied to human presence

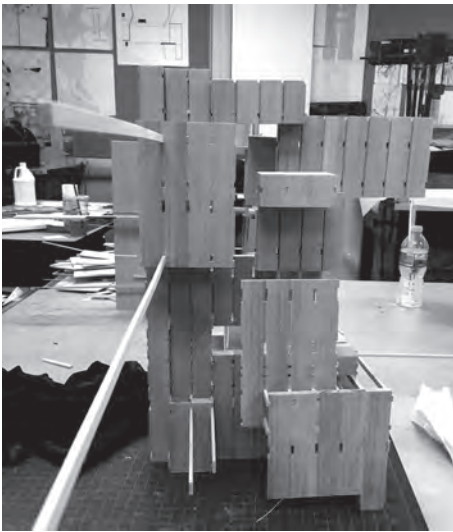
Light: We understand light as a thing, an idea, and a symbol. In religious traditions, light is linked directly to the spirit, Divine presence, and a deep cosmic order.

Norberg-Schulz provides a typology of natural landscapes: Romantic, Cosmic, Classical and Complex. Florida is a romantic landscape: "The sky is hardly experienced as a total hemisphere but is narrowed in between the contours of trees and rocks, and is moreover continuously modified by clouds."¹⁶ The dense canopy of Florida's interior is near primal, filtering light, creating shadow, and providing respite from the relentless sun and humidity. The sky is surely fast moving as Atlantic and Gulf winds crisscross the state yielding a complex and temporal sky pattern. The earth is ever-present: we sense, feel, smell and all but taste the richness of the earth. Interestingly, Norberg-Schulz specifically defines the Nordic Romantic landscape as "chthonic"; of the earth; belonging to or inhabiting the underworld.¹⁷ Florida's underworld quickly shifts from a shallow layer of earth to a water world of aquifers, underground caves, rivers and fragile limestone.

The West Texas landscape is Norberg-Schulz's cosmic landscape: "In the desert the complexities of our concrete-life world are reduced to a few, simple phenomena...In the desert, thus, the earth does not offer man a sufficient existential foothold. It does not contain individual places, but forms a continuous neutral ground."¹⁸ The West Texas sky is defined by the sun and, alternatively, by the moon and stars. It is a place of absolutes, at times formless. Norberg-Schulz further notes its existential character through the Arabic proverb: "The further you go into the desert, the closer you come to God."¹⁹ As with the reciprocity of sun and shadow, Florida's romantic landscape offers counterbalance to the cosmic landscape of West Texas.



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The studio format is tripartite with an *epilogue* that also serves as a *preface*.

- Part 1 From Artifact to Palimpsest
- Part 2 The Provost
- Part 3 Fiat Lux
- Part 4 Epilogue/Preface

THE MARFA STUDIO FORMAT: THE FAMILIAR MADE UNFAMILIAR AND THE SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

Part 1 / From Artifact to Palimpsest

We begin with the familiar and strive to render it unfamiliar. The student is asked to select an artifact of some personal significance. These items included a chess set, cufflinks, photographs and sewing patterns. The artifact was represented and transformed through a series of hand-made drawings. It was redrawn, shifting scales and modes of representation. The nature of the drawing emerges as a multi-layered interpretation of the original artifact. It is a real time palimpsest assembled through scalar shifts, juxtapositions, interpretations and re-interpretations. The resulting document is a densely layered map of territorial overlays resulting in a two-dimensional, yet spatial palimpsest.

Part 2 / The Provost: the Overseer

The resultant diagram is used to construct the Provost, a speculative volumetric construction that serves as a vehicle to determine and experiment with “the architectural edge”. *Bounds* mark the location of space and *edge* defines its character. The Provost is a 24” square cubic volume with only three requirements: one vertical surface must be 2” thick and built with an opaque material; an intersecting vertical surface must be a thin, tectonic assembly partially constructed with Plexiglas. Any sense of *ground* must float within the 24” volume. The intersection of thick and thin, transparent and opaque, tectonic and stereotomic force a didactic correspondence, a material, spatial and experiential dialogue programmed through a minimal, even liminal, condition of occupancy. The scale of one inch equals 1.5 feet yields a 36-foot scalar volumetric cube [10]. The program is simply a place of arrival and exchange; purposely left open-ended to promote a sense of speculation and poetic habitation. The artifact drawing exercise is used as a programing tool to develop a spatial logic within the confines of the Provost. [9-10]

Curricular Correspondence

The University of Texas at Austin, located in the state’s capitol city, lies 429 miles east of Marfa. In the mid 1950’s the School of Architecture at UT saw the convergence of another set of giants, though at the time, no one could foresee the significance of this gathered faculty.

Under the guidance of School Director Harwell Harris, Bernhard Hoesli, Colin Rowe, John Hejduk and Robert Slutzky converged in the Texas hill country and commenced construction of a new architectural pedagogy. Impeccably detailed in Alexander

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Caragonne, *The Texas Rangers*, 5-12

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Ibid, 190-194

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Ibid, 192

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The variations of the nine-square project have been developed at myriad institutions by countless faculty.

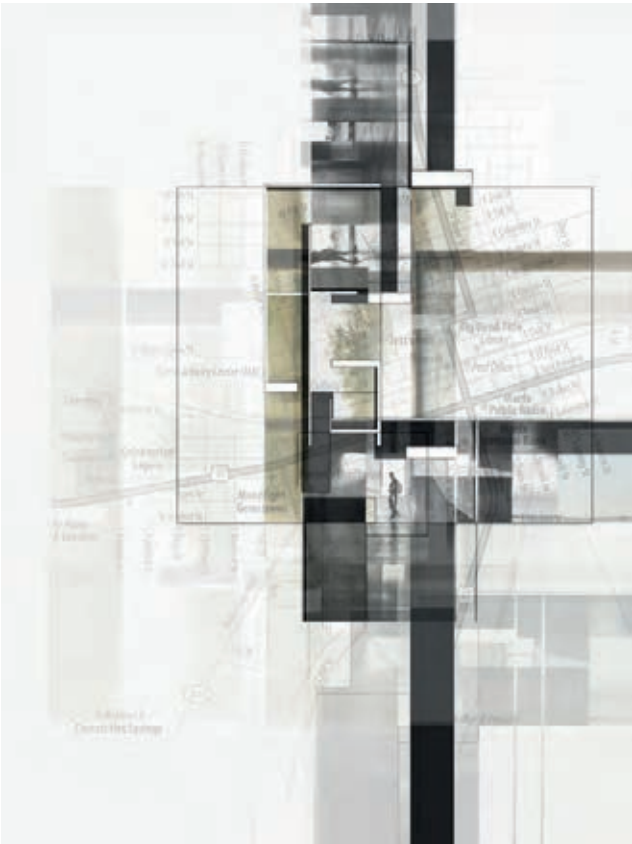
Caragonne's, *The Texas Rangers, Notes from an Architectural Underground*, the curricular map of the architecture school both borrows from and rejects the trappings of both the beaux arts and modernist educational traditions. History and precedent were revalued, context reconsidered and architectural space forged ahead of architectural form. An overlay of the fashionable and influential gestalt psychology privileged visual perception and paved the way for "seeing" architectural space in two and three dimensional constructs.²⁰

The advent of the deeply influential "nine square grid" project established a Cartesian point grid providing formal structure while inviting interpretation of rules and formal order. The nine square exercise privileges plan over section and presents a Miesian inspired space of infinite expanse along the x and y axes. Hejduk eventually interprets this in a more literal column and beam structure. We see this through his five experimental Texas Houses developed during his brief tenure in Austin.²¹ There is we learn, an authentic sense of discovery and invention through pedagogy.

"Hejduk thus began a career in teaching with a pattern that would repeat itself over the years, teaching others not what he "knew" but instead what he was in the process of discovering."²²

This nine square exercise is later extruded to an 18-square grid, thickened to permit an increasingly complex spatial order through a more animated section. Eventually a 27-square grid, essentially a cubic volume, makes the exercise far less two dimensional than the original nine square project. The nine square generated any number of related beginning design exercises: the kit of parts, the cube, the space box, and so forth.²³ The Provost exercise continues this legacy, not as an introductory exercise, but as a project asking the student to "begin again", to revisit fundamental relationships, to invent program as experience, to re-consider tutorials and re-shape strategies of making.

Perhaps the most important feature of the nine-square exercise and its myriad descendants is the clear sense of order that can be quickly acted upon and critiqued. Of course the nine-square references Le Corbusier's free plan and Mies van der Rohe's precise grid based plans and universal space, but it also echoes the powerful symmetry of classical architecture. The addition of a line or, in three dimensions, a plane, quickly modifies the order of the scheme and creates a language of representation and a means of discourse. Alterations and additions induce asymmetry, tension, re-centering, and re-ordering through a more complex tartan grid. The immediacy and accessibility of the nine-square inspired exercises is essential to creating a place to begin making architectural decisions.



Part 3 / Fiat Lux: Light catalogued and cast

Marfa's high altitude and intense sunlight yields a dramatic play of light and shadow. Students are asked to assemble an archival *catalog* of light through carefully composed photographs. Vincenzo Scamozzi's 16th century treatise, *L'Idée dell'Architettura Universale* serves as a point of departure as he outlines six categories of light:²⁴

Intense: from direct sun on a clear day

Lively/perpendicular: as received in courtyards and domes

Horizontal, free: as received frontally or diagonally as in rooms or porticoes

Limited light: obstructed by a place's narrowness, like a street

Secondary light: as it enters from an adjacent directly lit space

Minimal light: reflected

From the project outline:

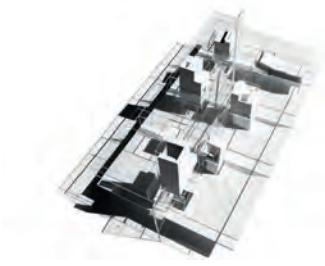
"Each of Scamozzi's light types depends on an encounter with an architectural body or space. In other words, the light is altered as it enters a space by first being interrupted (or gathered) by a roof, wall, or other surface. The verbs are revelatory: light enters, is received, obstructed, reflected... The adjectives, intense, lively, horizontal, limited, secondary, minimal, are likewise informative. Literature and poetry provide us with other descriptives: light can shake, pour, sputter, and flow; it can be caught; it can be false or deceiving, divine, ancient. It can affect the senses: it can blind and burn. Keep in mind we cannot perceive heavenly light independent of its earthly twin, shadow, which gives rise to measure and time."

A palimpsest of light and shadow is digitally constructed using overlaid images to collapse the temporal photographic documentation into a single frame. An accompanying narrative describes the light quality of each image and, in turn, serves as a program for the construction of "light vessels". [11]

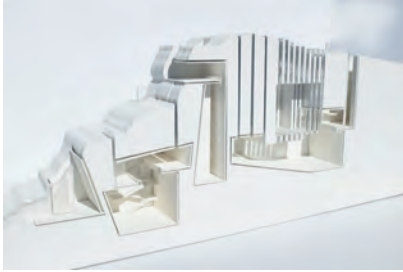
The Vessels / Seriality and Light as Program

Inspired by Donald Judd's Marfa works and guided by the aforementioned light studies, students designed and cast (using plaster or concrete) a series of light vessels. Casting the artifact necessitates an inversion of spatial logic, a dance between solid and void. The casting of artifacts designed to capture the casting of shadows suggests an intellectual correspondence between conception and construction; light and surface; time and space. The vessels emerged as a serial assembly interacting through proximity, juxtaposition and locale, vis-à-vis, the registration of ground as datum. [12]

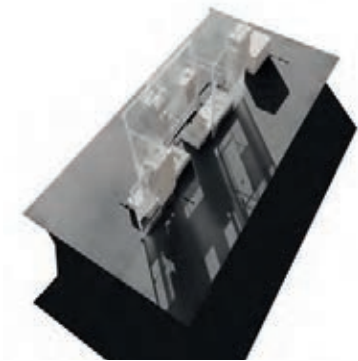
The vessels, through their cast forms, correspond and invert



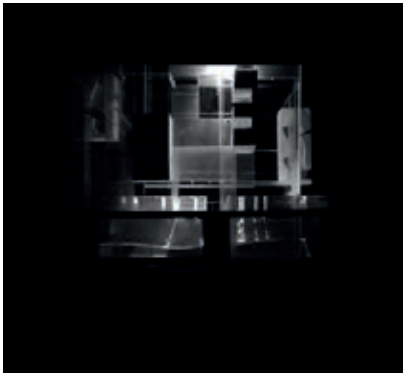
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12d

the Provost project with its roots in the tectonic, Cartesian world. The vessels, each in character a more-or-less cubic volume, revisit the figure/ground interplay of space and form, so appreciated by the Gestalt theorists (*literally from the German Gestalt, 'form, shape'*)²⁵. From some distance, the vessels revisit the nine-square project of the 1950s without the strict formal order and, instead, promote the emergence of space over the superimposition of logic. The ensemble of vessels has a somewhat urban character, marking negative space both between objects and within each artifact. Forms negotiates between one another for presence and relevance.

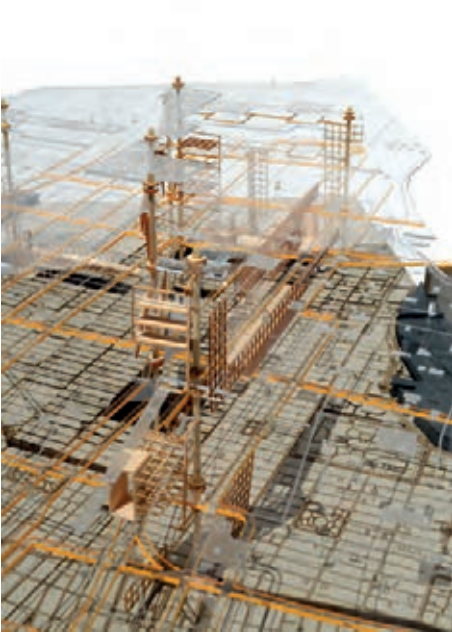
The serial nature of the exercise echoes Judd's aluminum boxes and concrete landscape frames. Seriality supports the inherent repetitive and redundant nature of architectural education. To be made redundant is, in the most literal sense, to be cast off or superfluous. Yet, redundancy is also rhetorical, repetitive, and excessive. Pedagogy is inherently rhetorical, as is true with any language including the language of architecture. We address composition, technique, and expression in order to deliver, convince and argue for an architectural (formal/spatial) proposition. Bricks can, and indeed, must be as rhetorical and convincing as words. Space is expressive, nuanced, figurative and finally, negotiated.

Part 4 / Epilogue/Preface/Toward Thesis

The last portion of the studio is devoted to each participant's thesis-borne *agenda*. While the first three design exercises reveal ideas and strategies, the final project brings these predilections and sensibilities directly to one's research and design work. This project is the Janusean threshold between design studio and thesis proposal; between thesis project and beginning again in the professional realm. Thesis projects (remember, "placing a proposition") in an academic setting are invariably ambitious, optimistic and even naive. Students dwell – as they should – in an ideal circumstance of making, whereby an architectural proposal can address things extraordinary, complex, unfamiliar, personal, and even strange. Within the academy lies the hope of clarity. [13]

Historian Charles Jencks famously timed the death of modernism to the destruction of a single profoundly failed housing project. The demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe project surely marked a dark moment in the optimism of architecture as a social project. But was Jencks correct? The modern project, it seems, is alive and well. Students inherent a world littered with problems, shortages, threats and obstacles. It seems they often wish to create impact and offer concrete responses to often abstract problems; matters that are sometimes not so much solved as theorized.

In the exquisite essay, *Weak Architecture*, Ignasi Solà-Morales



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Solà-Morales, *Differences : Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*, 71

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Ibid, 71

critiques architecture's instrumental monumentality and insistence upon the self-definition of the *monumental as physical permanence* (per Rossi). Solà-Morales calls for another kind of monumental statement, one steeped instead in memory. In his words, "...as a vestige, as the tremulous clangor of the bell that reverberates after it has ceased to ring; as that which is constituted as pure residuum, as recollection".²⁶

Solà-Morales concludes his essay in search of another kind of permanence:

"In contrast, the notion of monument I have sought to put forward here is bound up with the lingering resonance of poetry after it has been heard, with the recollection of architecture after it has been seen. This is the strength of weakness; that strength which art and architecture are capable of producing precisely when they adopt a posture that is not aggressive and dominating, but tangential and weak."²⁷

The architectural thesis as an academic endeavor has fallen out of favor in many institutions. The speculative, open-ended thesis has been displaced by various vehicles including the terminal project, a carefully orchestrated display of competence, the research studio, echoing larger university investigative agendas, or simply a final design studio of no particular focus, except providing a proficient, if modest, conclusion. We see a renewed interest in the architecture of crisis, privileging focused problem solving over broad conceptualization. Resiliency, sustainability, housing, and addiction serve such a taxonomy. The academic thesis project is a labor intensive endeavor, requiring a committed faculty coupled with a curriculum designed to anticipate the leap into thesis through a runway of research and critical thinking opportunities.

As the academic thesis binds statement with problem and proposition with project, the exercise might well learn from the notion of weakness proposed by Solà-Morales. Architecture is an instrument of jurisdiction. We guide movement, stake territory and, dare I say, build walls. The simple act of delineating space necessitates some degree of control. And the control of boundaries, edges, and spaces is inherently political. Hegemony is integral to the act of making. We so often seek an answer when we are actually in search of a question. Studies of architecture might channel deeply personal sensibilities and the desire for answers into architectural proposals that interrogate, doubt and ultimately contribute to a larger social project of porous intellectual boundaries contributing to a multifarious, palimpsestic query of the very discipline itself.

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