The Thesis on the Table: Research, Pedagogy and Identity

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THE STORY OF THE TABLE

In a North American school of architecture on the morning of an end-of-year Thesis review day some time ago, a brief experiment had come to a telling end. In a room set up for a jury, two large male students sat side by side on a stack of wooden components, their arms folded, their expressions impassive. The furniture parts that they guarded – whose disassembly they had undertaken, and the reassembly of which they were there to prevent – had earlier constituted a large, long table, placed perpendicular to a pinup wall. It had been far enough away to allow walking passage back and forth in front of drawings, close enough to display models in good proximity, but too close to accommodate the usual line of jurors' chairs between presenter and audience. Instead, jurors, instructors and students had been sitting, on the days preceding, together around the table, facing each other. The student presenting would stand and present the drawings as necessary, but at other times would return to the table to refer to the model, to present text, and ultimately to engage in extended discussion.

What had characterized the preceding days' Thesis reviews had been an unusual civility. The focus had been on the architectural thesis as research. The no-holds-barred commentary that is familiar – some would say traditional -- in jury responses (often personal in its target, sometimes brutal) had been significantly altered in tone, though the scope of the architectural issues addressed had broadened. This broadening of scope was due in no small part to the greatly increased participation of the presenting student him- or herself in the jury's discussion of their thesis. No longer exposed before the firing squad of the jury, the student sat at the same level as his or her critics, at the head of the table. The table – that quintessential physical product of work, of human artifice, had, as Hannah Arendt herself had predicted, both divided and brought together those around it, and had enabled speech and action.

The two students who had dismantled the table in the early hours of the morning had, it turned out, been instructed to do so by their tutors, two relatively young but ambitious local practitioners, whose thesis sections were to present that day. Their aim, it transpired, was to reinstate the traditional arrangement of furniture and jurors (the line of authoritative backs between audience and student on trial), and the traditional conduct of the jury: the student presents, the jury then criticises. The students' engagement in the discussion of their respective theses, not surprisingly, diminished markedly.

With the table in its original position, the student's newly acquired expertise in the subject of their study had been more explicitly, freely and extensively acknowledged. Hypothesis, the questions asked, methodology, and the testing of outcomes through design could be laid out on the table and examined as ideas, as theory and praxis, as propositions for new knowledge to be added to the discipline. Without the table, something else was taking place, something more familiar, perhaps, but less theorized. Striking for its demonstration of their willingness to adopt thug tactics, and their complicity in their own disempowerment, the action of the two students in dismantling the table foregrounded the temporary transformation it had wrought, and the body of tacit assumptions and practices that can stand between the architectural Thesis and the realization of its full potential as research.

COMPETENCE VERSUS RESEARCH, PRACTITIONERS VERSUS ACADEMICS, PROJECT VERSUS THESIS

The classic confrontation in the debates over the Thesis as the culmination of a professional program in schools of architecture has been between advocates of competence and proponents of research. The former argue that the final project must be a test of competence, a demonstration that all the necessary skills have indeed been acquired, a proof that the potential graduate is ready to enter the profession as it is known. The proponents of research, by contrast, observe that the university has an obligation to contribute new knowledge to the discipline, and that students in other fields, with a duration of study comparable to that of students of architecture, are expected to do so. Advocates of competence argue that students of architecture are not ready for original research, even in their fifth, sixth or seventh year of study: the complexity of our profession requires, they claim, that extended period of training.

Proponents of research are motivated in part by their sensitivity to the culture of research within the academy, historically not always applied to the "black sheep" professional school, but now much more widely a criterion for tenure and promotion. Thus the debate is often, but not always, played out between practitioner-teachers and full-time academics, between the inherited cultures of the M. Arch. and the Ph.D.[1] The proponents of research point out that, in any case, the graduate of the North American school, unlike those in Latin cultures, is not expected to gain licensure on completion of their degree; rather, they proceed through an extended period of apprenticeship. Reconciliation is sought, by the proponents of research, in an earlier test of competence, prior to the final year. Advocates of competence counter that the profession cannot afford to provide internship in the way that other, wealthier professions can; thus the burden of comprehensive training falls on the schools, with the student's final presentation a demonstration to potential employers of practice-readiness. Seeking their own reconciliation, advocates of competence contend that any good project contains a "thesis", even if that thesis only becomes apparent to author and critics at the end. (And it is here that some of the more persistent questions over the acceptability of "creative practice", on the part of faculty, as

research qualifying for tenure, also arise[2]). Henry Cobb, in his often quoted treatise of the 1980s on the maverick role of architecture within the larger academy[3], identified the necessary but precariously difficult feat of conditional engagement: "to shape as well as serve our profession", connecting oneself "intimately and productively to ongoing professional work while still preserving an appropriate critical distance from current practice".

PEDAGOGY AND IDENTITY, *HABITUS* AND POWER

The origins of this perennial dispute, and the obstacles to research, go deeper, however, into the realms of pedagogy and identity. Architecture's long-held but often unacknowledged commitment to reproductive pedagogy lies beneath the contested status of student research. Familiar enough in its practice, reproductive pedagogy entails a culture of emulation. Skills acquisition through the instructor's advice to "do as I do" shades imperceptibly into the acquisition of *habitus* (to use Bourdieu's term) through the professor's tacit expectation that the student "be as I am". Thus the process of *socialization* (as distinct from education or training) into the profession proceeds as a shadow program beneath that of the professional program per se. In its more extreme forms, reproductive pedagogy as a producer of *habitus* entails the emulation not only of skills but of attitudes, opinions, patterns of speech and manners of dress, styles and tools of sketching and writing, even hair styles. And since the demonstration of *habitus* is, as Garry Stevens has demonstrated in *The Favored Circle*[4], the *sine qua non* of acceptance into a fraternity, a brotherhood, reproductive pedagogy functions in this sense as a form of eugenics. I mean this here in the sense of who is allowed to reproduce; in this case, who is allowed to reproduce the characteristics of the dominant members of the field.

The power to recognize *habitus* lies with those already consecrated, Bourdieu observes. For the field of architecture, the review or jury (the invocation, by that term, of a solemn scene of judgement is always telling, but it is a judgement not by peers) is the primary scene of recognition or its withholding. The conferral of recognition is, however, reciprocal: in recognizing the *habitus* of the novitiate, the critic-priest implicitly demands that the consecrated nature of his or her own *habitus* be

acknowledged. That which has been emulated is always doubly revalidated at the same time as the emulation is approved.

Are other disciplines free of the trappings of *habitus*? Is the young ABD philosopher, anthropologist or biochemist free to appear or speak as s/he pleases? It would be naïve to suggest so, and the dissertation committee can be seen to exert a powerful role. But Bourdieu's own special attention to the artistic fields[5] suggests that architecture has a peculiar predisposition to the symbolic value of *habitus*.[6] Confronted with the more conventional research cultures of other disciplines – the cultures of experimental proof and reproducibility of results in the sciences, for instance; or of documentation of sources and (until recently, at least) taboos on plagiarism in the humanities – architecture may be seen to engage in revanchism.[7]

To be counted as research that merits comparison with the output of other fields, one could argue, the architectural thesis must evidence self-consciousness, significance and originality. It should be work that demonstrates an overall understanding of an area of interest, allowing judgement of where new knowledge is called for. A Thesis, then, enters into the significant current debates in its area of exploration, taking an explicit critical position and justifying it. Because of this, an awareness – and more than that, a critical awareness, not that of a mere fan or acolyte -- must be shown of recent thinking in the area of enquiry the student is entering. Explicitness is called for: a stated hypothesis, intended thematic exploration, or set of questions to be answered; a methodology to be pursued. Tests of success are to be determined by the student in collaboration with their advisor. A Thesis identifies in advance the kinds of architectural knowledge it seeks to produce, and chooses modes of investigation appropriate to its topic and to these kinds of knowledge.

In the context of research, a Thesis proposition would entail a generalizable set of ideas not limited to a specific site or program. While the work, pursuing a reciprocal relationship between writing and reflective design, may be based upon a specific site (or sites) and program, it requires an explicit theoretical grounding, a clearly articulated position in relation to current discourse, and a sense of its own broader implications in order to qualify as a

Thesis. The ideas that constitute the Thesis should be understandable as applicable to other sites and programs.

A Thesis does not have as its final outcome the simple affirmation of what is already known in the discipline or profession, nor the emulation of what has already been demonstrated by others (although it may, and very often does, build on, or critique, both). It is exploratory, critical and projective, going beyond competence. It builds on accumulated knowledge and skills to break new ground, and to add new knowledge to the discipline. It seeks to constitute a piece of work that can be considered *authoritative*; something that others, both inside and outside the School, would consult and respect on its chosen topic. More than a mandatory conclusion to an academic program, it lays the groundwork for expertise in the student's future career.

Understood in these terms, the Thesis as research undermines the mechanisms by which architecture has traditionally reproduced itself and its power structures. The pursuit of expertise in the field by the student challenges the unchallengeable: the authority of the consecrated. The distance entailed in the student's critical assessment of their area of exploration, the strengths and weaknesses of recent thinking, inhibits acts of homage and tithing characteristic of reproductive pedagogy. The debater is not a disciple: asked to pledge allegiance through faith, the Doubting Thomas of the research thesis continues to exhibit a disruptive skepticism.[8]

WHOSE THESIS? WHOSE RESEARCH?

The division of architecture faculty into researchers and practitioners observed by James Mayo in 1991, and the divergent professionalization of history, theory and practice noted by Stanford Anderson in an editorial of the same year (*Journal of Architectural Education*, May 1991) engendered reactions and shifts within the academy.[9] The inculcation of research cultures among architecture faculty over the past two decades – accelerated in part, no doubt, by the evident political careerism of some of the newly minted, doctorate-armed theorists in the 1990s – altered the terrain of these long-standing conflicts. It also introduced new zones of contestation, and of reproduction. The Thesis has traditionally entailed a self-chosen topic, an individual inquiry. But the new markets generated by height-

ened university expectations – markets for visibility, grant income, promotion – have instigated a different kind of "research thesis", that in which the "thesis" is that of an instructor and the outcome the product of a studio.[10] While the model of a multi-person research lab, often grant-sponsored and headed by a principal investigator, is a familiar one from the sciences, such an enterprise is generally populated by post-doctoral investigators on fellowships – modestly remunerated, to be sure, but paid nonetheless. Schools of architecture, as Ursula Emery McClure has recently observed[11], have generated their own dubious variation on this model, in which the work of the (tuition-paying) studio members is represented as the research of the faculty member in charge.[12] Perhaps one of the more striking examples of this practice was in evidence at a recent Venice Biennale, where the work of a research studio, attributed to the faculty members in attendance at the receptions, was apparently exhibited not only in the absence of its student members but also of their names. In such circumstances, the thesis student has come to function as indentured labor, receipt of their degree dependent upon their silence.[13]

"Research" in this context takes on a bad odor, the old but familiar odor of exploitation, reinstated from the world of the dismantled table. Standing so visible in front of the arrayed jury, or standing invisible behind the faculty "researchers" who claim credit for their work, the thesis students prove themselves ready to enter a market-world as found: a profession of over-concentrated reputational capital (the phenomenon of the celebrity architect) and a laboring mass whose claims of expertise remain severely undervalued, and as highly susceptible as ever to credit crunches and economic collapses. Not only the explicitness of theory and the cultivated critical distance of the other disciplines, then, are necessary for the architectural thesis to sustain itself as a respectable research enterprise. An activist ethics of pedagogy and research is also crucially necessary if such an enterprise is to contribute to a progressive evolution of the discipline and the profession at large.

ENDNOTES

1. Two essays from the early 1990s, although they do not deal with the Thesis per se, nonetheless foreground the salient aspirations and issues. Donald Watson's "The Research/Design Studio: A Modest Proposal to Improve Education and Practice", *Proceedings of the 81st ACSA Annual Meeting, 1993*, pp. 236-239, advocated the incorporation of research into the professional degree by means of the research/design studio:

> "While the [typical] design studio project may be a theoretical exploration or a schematic design typical of an assignment in practice, neither allows a complete investigation of a theoretical position that can be carried out to concrete examples or cases … . Conventional studios reinforce a superficial habit of ideation, but not of in-depth research, reflection and knowing … . "The research studio is a sequential (multi-term) studio [that investigates] a theme, a theoretical approach, a specific context …." (p. 237).

While Watson envisaged the topic of the studio being handed off from one group of students to another over several semesters, the passages quoted here accurately represent the ambitions of the architectural thesis as research.

James Mayo, however, in "Dilemmas of Architectural Education in the Academic Political Economy" (*Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 44, No. 2, February 1991, pp. 80 – 89), was more skeptical about the capabilities of design faculty to assimilate respectable research protocols. He foresaw a regrettable division of the faculty and the obsolescence of some of its members, brought about by increasing demands from university administrators for the production of reputational capital and grant income for the institution .

> "Many practice-oriented faculty often find themselves not having the financial resources or time to provide what they were educated to do – to establish an excellent practice. At the same time, they are educationally unprepared or intellectually disinclined to do the scholarly work their colleagues in other disciplines have been trained to produce. … Research-oriented faculty represent a new class emerging in schools of architecture. Their credentials and technical skills identify them as a new class, and their academic form of professionalism devalues the educational authority of the old class that is typified by practice-oriented faculty." (pp. 80, 86)

2. As Watson observed,

> "A key distinction of a research/design studio … lies in the requirement of students and faculty to record 'what one has learned', specifically for use by others. This places emphasis upon clear documentation of an investigation and reflection on it, in which case design is an illustrative and exploratory part of the inquiry … ." (pp. 237-8).

3. Henry Cobb, "Architecture and the University," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 173, No. 10, September 1985, pp. 43-51.

4. Both Stevens and Bourdieu observe, of course, that prior social predisposition to *habitus* is highly influential in determining acceptance into the field. *Habitus*,

though, understood as a "naturally natural naturalness" in knowing how to "play the game" that the architecture school presents, is refined and augmented through that aspect of the game that reproductive pedagogy constitutes.

5. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods" in *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 74-111.

6. As Garry Stevens observes,

> "All forms of education transmit knowledge and skills, and all forms of education also inculcate some form of habitus. The two functions are inseparable. … [This process of inculcation] is of least importance in the fields within which the procedures and processes of production and acquisition of knowledge are objectified in instruments, methods and techniques, and it is of greatest importance in the areas in which excellence is held to be almost entirely owing to the natural gifts of individuals, their raw talent. It is clear that in architecture, the procedures and processes of design are not at all objectified – as the dismal failure of the Design Methods movement attests – and that architecture, unlike medicine or engineering or even law, requires not only *knowing* something but *being* something … ." "Struggle in the Studio: A Bourdivin Look at Architectural Pedagogy," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 49, No. 2, November 1995, p. 112.

7. Here I want to suggest that, while in recent times novelty has indeed again been valued within the architectural field, as it has traditionally within the research-based disciplines, it is valued in different ways. The role of novelty is clearly a substantial topic in itself, but it is worth observing the following. In the established process of socialization into the architectural field, there *should not be too much actual novelty* in the exploits of the neophyte: that would disturb the social order of the field. Novelty in the sense of being *au courant* with the taste of the dominating group within the field is, however, recognized as a manifestation of *habitus*. Novelty (perceived or actual) in the *oeuvre* of the dominating figures is, of course, crucial in the present moment in maintaining market share, following the logic of the diminishing-demand curve in providing new formal products and maintaining the visibility of the designer-brand. Novelty in the self-reflective thesis, though, may assert itself as a novelty of analysis, connection or insight – perhaps even into the construction of *habitus* itself – as well as of discovery or invention. (It should also be noted that novelty *sui generis* was itself the subject of opprobrium in the critique of Modernism from the mid-1970s to the mid-80s, and that the status of "pure" novelty tends to exhibit cyclical fortunes in cultural fields). Thus I wish to suggest that architecture is revanchist in seeking to regain or maintain hold on the doxa, to use Bourdieu's term, that arises from the interaction of *habitus* and field.

8. The disruption of the relationship between habitus and field is thus also a disruption of the doxa: "[T]he

doxa refers to the fundamental assumptions and categories that shape intellectual thought in a particular time and place and which are generally not available to conscious awareness of the participants." David Swartz, *Culture and Power: the Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 232.

9. As Mayo had observed at the time, "the use value of full-time faculty who practice architecture is not substantially valued, because university administrators cannot easily convert design practice into reputational capital that promotes an image of quality so that potential donors and grant agents favorably perceive the university". Mayo, op. cit., p. 86. But by the end of the 1990s, the scene had been altered by the resurgence of the celebrity practitioner. Even if the Bilbao Guggenheim was not the sole cause of this shift, it was at least the prime symptom: the notion that architectural design, when the product of a kind of shaman or seer, could have magical social and economic effects gave credence to the interpretation of design research as *transformative act*. This tapped conveniently, if not so coincidentally, into the neoliberal rhetoric of the Bush era: the return of the practitioner as visionary genius promoted the mythology of individual initiative as a revivification of the larger narrative of the American Dream. University administrators had been concurrently recognizing the marketing value of the celebrity hire across many disciplines. Celebrity "professors of the practice" were acquired, at high cost, to ensure the brand visibility of the institution by acting as a kind of corporate spokesperson.

10. Interviewed by Max Hollein for *Architectural Laboratories* (Rotterdam: NAi, 2002), Greg Lynn and Hani Rashid made clear the attraction of the research studio:

> HOLLEIN: I would like us to turn our attention towards the issues of teaching and research taking place within a university context. What is the attraction of academia for architects and where are the direct bridges between profession and pedagogy?
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> LYNN: A lot of it has to do with just how unforgiving the design and construction industry is. For a certain type of architect there is an expectation that you are going to do something cutting edge, new groundbreaking, and original. … this situation has generated the possibility for a more adventurous kind of work professionally, but the inability to come up with the machinery in an office to keep doing something new. This has made the academy and its intellectual, technical and creative resources very important. At a university, with the time, focus , and resources, you can conduct research and innovation and then have it spin off into a commercial practice. …
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> RASHID: I basically structured this [installation] situation here at the Biennale as I always have in all my years of teaching, as a kind of research studio meshed with a micro-office situation. … There is nothing in place that expresses the need for continued

high level research in architectural education and one has to devise a strategy to bypass the typical tenure path. Perhaps we have to locate and develop another forum as a sort of hybrid between the office and the school. Some of us do it subversively within the institutions and get away with it. Greg has to do it in a number of places simultaneously ands that is an interesting method because, sooner or later, you are found out." (pp. 85-88)

The relationship between the Thesis and the research studio came to a conspicuous head in the controversial protest by UCLA architecture and urban design graduate students in 2002-3, widely publicised via the UCLAUD. org web site (no longer in existence):

"… In regards to quality of instruction, I would also like the call into question the department's willingness to disregard required graduation requirements to establish a new curriculum without any desire to meet the obligations and wants of many students. Thesis was for example was eliminated from the curriculum even though it is given as a graduation option for the three current classes. Ms Lavin characteristically without advanced notice eliminated thesis and all classes associated with preparing students for its completion with something called research studio. Thesis is now considered independent study and it now completely up to the student to locate an advisor who will hopefully prepare the student to conduct a thesis. This seems to be clear violation of the graduation requirements offered to the current classes. Worst yet, Ms. Lavin is still allowing students to be recruited with the idea that the department will support them in their pursuit of thesis even though simultaneously the department is no longer offering or endorsing it." Anonymous graduate student, Letter to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan , Vice-Chancellor, Graduate Studies, UCLA, June 20, 2002. Accessed February 7, 2003.

"Support for Thesis - the epitome of architectural education around the world, the most defining educational experience for one's architectural identity, his or her voice – is eroding. The Department Chair told students that it was not worth supporting because she had never seen a good thesis come out of UCLA. Apparently, she does not foster debate which might lead to a good thesis. She does not care to listen. …" Anonymous graduate student, Letter to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan , Vice-Chancellor, Graduate Studies, UCLA, undated. Accessed February 7, 2003.

"… Most recently Dr. Lavin has attempted to accelerate the phase out of the thesis and exit document studio options for third year students in favor of a year long research studio. She required students to make a binding decision regarding their final studio a full year in advance (normally a binding decision is not required until the beginning of Spring quarter of the third year). Dr. Lavin did this at the same time she told students the department would not provide a faculty advisor for thesis research as it had in the past and that exit document optees would be limited to a single studio choice. In each instance Dr. Lavin was careful not to violate the letter of Graduate Division rules. However, the failure to fully and frankly discuss with the students their options violates every other standard of professional and human conduct I can think of except that of naked self-interest. …" Anonymous graduate student, Letter to Dean Daniel Neuman, UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture, June 3, 2002. Accessed February 7, 2003.

11. Ursula Emery McClure. "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 61, No. 1, September 2007, pp. 73-5.

12. Kazys Varnelis, in his essay from the same issue of *JAE*, observed that "A research studio … aspires to systematic research, but of the sort that the avant-garde might undertake, not applied, or, if applied, promising radical results. Based on this, works of architectural research aspire not just to represent the world but to help us look at the world in a fundamentally new way." "Is there Research in the Studio?", p. 13. Varnelis construes the research studio in terms of the aspirations of art under Modernism, and while his objective is evidently to promote a positive and generous reading of the role of the research studio, it also points to the possibility of construing the students' role as that of apprentices.

13. Watson in 1993 had sought to promote the value of the research studio to the faculty member in benign terms:

"*Research/design studios are tied to faculty-directed scholarship, research and 'design as inquiry'.* … Sequential development of an idea or theme would allow considerable growth of a set of ideas and its communication in forms that can be tasted by design and application. Research/design studios thus permit a faculty member's research to be advanced by the teaching experience, rather than seen as an impediment or distraction from it." Watson, op. cit., p. 238.

"*By the teaching experience*" – not by the labor of students. Mayo had been prophetic in acknowledging the costs of sustained creative practice by the practitioner-teacher. While faculty with independent means could subsidize a theoretical, exhibit- or competitions-based practice, the production of design work that could be understood as prototypical, formally radical or technologically novel, breaking with convention in the means of its generation or fabrication, had become – even with digitization – a high-budget, high-labor operation. The research studio, it seems, has come to be understood as offering a ready pool of free labor – not even free, but paying for the "privilege."

As the theater critic John Lahr once observed, celebrities are America's royalty; and it follows that the opportunity to work – even without pay – for royalty should be considered a privilege. The nineteenth-century apprentice's family paid a master to train the young man for a trade or profession; the twenty-first

century student's family appears to be cast, by the celebrity research studio, in the same role. As Emery McClure observes. "When students labor for one's individual agenda, they are working for you. Even if one sees them as apprentices, … they are working for you." Emery McClure notes that the 1937 National Apprenticeship changed the economic relationship between apprentice and master, mandating

> "a progressively increasing schedule of wages to be paid the apprentice consistent with the skill acquired. The entire wage shall be not less than the minimum wage prescribed by the Fair Labor Standards Act, where applicable, unless higher wage is required by other applicable federal law, state law, respective regulations, or by collective bargaining agreement". *The Fitzgerald Act – the National Apprenticeship Act*, 50 Stat. 664; 29 U.S.C. 50, U.S. Department of Labor, http://dol.gov, cited in Emery McClure, op. cit. p. 75.

As Emery McClure goes on: "I conjecture that the abuse of student labor in academic settings leads to the unpaid intern, the underpaid architect, and eventually the devaluation of the profession in general. Like any system of abuse, the abused often becomes an abuser." (Ibid.)