

Thomas Fisher

Professor, School of Architecture
Director, Minnesota Design Center
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN

ACSA Distinguished Professor Supporting Material

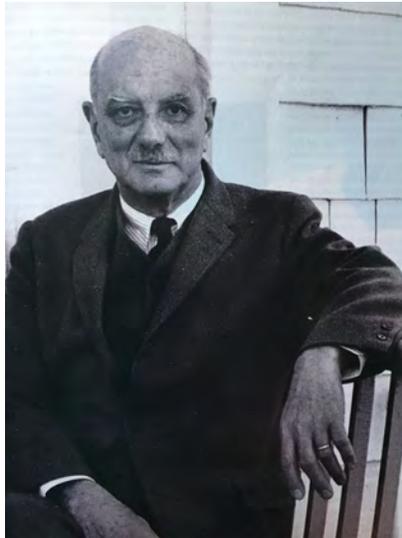


THE INVISIBLE
ELEMENT OF PLACE THE ARCHITECTURE
OF DAVID SALMELA

THOMAS FISHER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER BASTIANELLI-KERZE

ARCHITECTURE AS THE START OF AN EDUCATION

Although I have been a full-time professor for only 22 years, I have always thought of myself as an educator, having engaged in education in a variety of ways over my 40-year career. There are many ways to teach and to learn and I have pursued as many of those paths as I could.



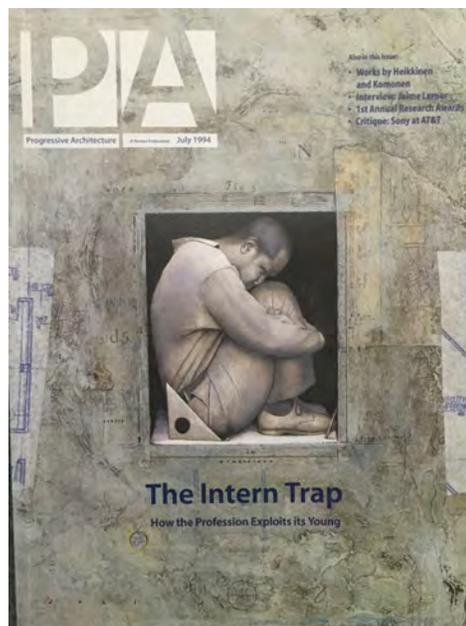
The first path I took came from my interactions, during my undergraduate architectural education, with the cultural historian and *New Yorker* architecture critic, Lewis Mumford, who lived in Amenia, New York, near where I worked and who generously gave me his time and his advice. I once asked, with all the naïve chutzpah of a 20-year-old, how I could become an architecture critic like him and he wrote out a reading list for me that included everything from Plato's *Republic* to Emerson's *Essays*, and he urged me to study cultural history to place my architectural education in a larger context.



I took his advice and after architecture school, I attended the great-books program at St. John's College and completed a graduate degree in intellectual history at Case Western Reserve University, where I did a thesis on Lewis Mumford and the differences he had with people such as Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses. Although I eventually came to see the limitations of some of Mumford's work, I have continued to ask myself, throughout my career, "What would Mumford say?" which was the title of a piece that I wrote in one of the last issues of *Progressive Architecture* magazine.

WRITING AS A FORM OF TEACHING

While I had intended to join my family's architectural firm in Detroit after school, Mumford sent me off in another direction as I started to write about architecture for both the profession and the general public. My writing career began while serving as the Historical Architect in Connecticut's State Historic Preservation Office and as a project manager in an architectural firm in Hartford. But after a couple of years and still in my 20's, I joined the staff of *Progressive Architecture* magazine as its Technics Editor. I had become fascinated with the history of technology, in part because of Mumford, and the editorial position at P/A let me to explore that topic and to convey its technicalities in as clear and concise a way as possible.



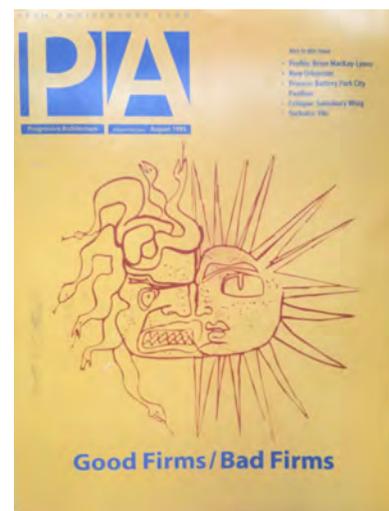
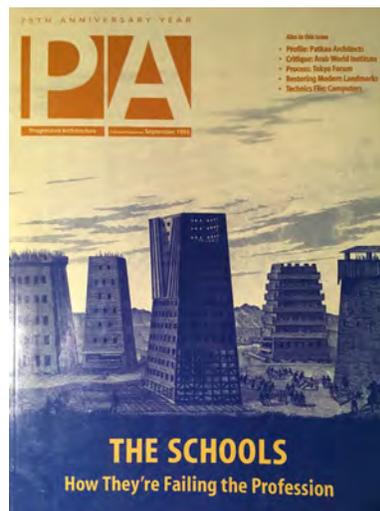
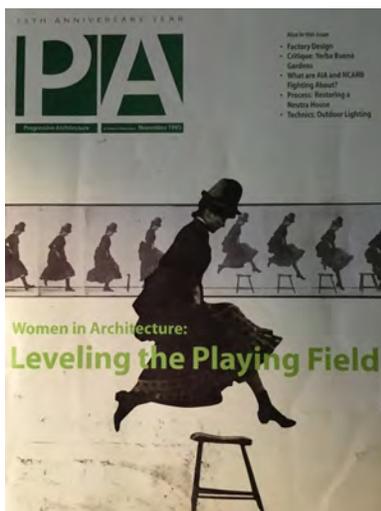
During the years I served as the Technics Editor, I also started the "Practice" section of P/A to explore the changing conditions of architectural practice, including the rise of computer-aided design, interdisciplinary offices, boutique firms, and pro-bono efforts that have all become central to practice today. I used the pages of the magazine to raise questions about conventional ideas and to challenge readers to see how practice had become an area of great creative potential and professional opportunity.

JOURNALISM AS A PROVOCATION

After several years as the Technics Editor, I became the Executive Editor of P/A and then the Editorial Director of both P/A and a new magazine we started, Building Renovation (BR), which addressed the issues encountered when dealing with the preservation or renovation of older buildings. We took on controversial topics, such as the saving of threatened buildings and criticizing the short-sighted upgrading of historic structures. The staff of both BR and P/A focused on what we can learn from projects and what we can teach in the process of writing about them.



As the Editorial Director of P/A, I thought that we had an obligation to provoke debate and to use the freedom of the press to engage in the most controversial topics, from the tensions between the profession and the schools to the unequal treatment of women, interns, or people of color in the field. We angered influential people the profession, from noted practitioners to the AIA itself, which set in motion the process that led to P/A being purchased and killed. Journalists have to face the fact that those in power will sometimes try to silence them.



THE ACADEMY AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ADVOCACY

After P/A closed, I was offered the position of Dean of the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota. While I had not had a full-time academic position before then, I found that my experience leading a group of writers and editors served me well in leading an equally talented and independent-minded group of faculty, staff, and students. I had always admired Mumford's role as a public intellectual, and I discovered that deans and tenured faculty can – and should – play that role in our communities.



With deanship came a number of board positions in design-related organizations. I served as the ACSA President in 2009-2010, in the teeth of the Great Recession, and I viewed the downturn as an opportunity for the architectural profession to pivot to a broader and more socially and environmentally engaged field. I have also continued to write about architecture and social justice issues in various venues, from the local Minneapolis newspaper to *Architect* magazine to the *JAE*.

I have long believed that tenured faculty members have a responsibility to communicate to the public as clearly as possible about issues upon which our expertise can shed some light. The withdrawal of many academics from public discourse has been one of the tragedies of the last 50 years and that is particularly problematic for architecture. We are responsible for helping give form to the public realm and we also create a built environment that expresses public values and enables social justice to occur.



DESIGN AS LEADERSHIP

One of the often-unrecognized skills that we teach our students is leadership. Architecture students learn how to envision what doesn't yet exist based on needs that we cannot fully predict, and our students also develop the skills to help others see what that future might look like through images and words that clients and communities often find compelling. Those skills enable our students not only to become architects, but also to lead people toward new ideas and new ways of doing things: toward a better life for themselves, their communities, and the planet as a whole. I have consistently tried to teach design as a form of leadership, encouraging all of my students to apply their skills not just to design problems, but also to the challenges their communities face, and I have tried to model that in my own behavior.

An example of that is the work I did, along with colleagues such as Kim Tanzer, Daniel Friedman, and Fritz Steiner, to help establish a National Academy of Environmental Design (NAED). Although the NAED did not survive the cash-flow challenges that all non-profits face in their first years, it showed how a group of design professionals can envision something that the nation (still) needs and can create and lead an organization able to act on that vision. I have also continued to write about design and leadership for many years in various public venues, such as the Huffington Post.



Cities as Sitting Ducks



Why Architects Should Care About Public Health

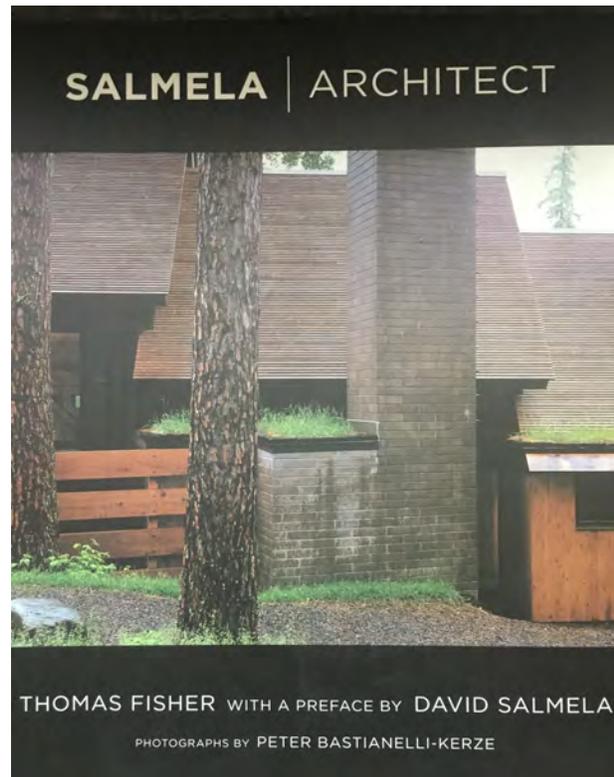
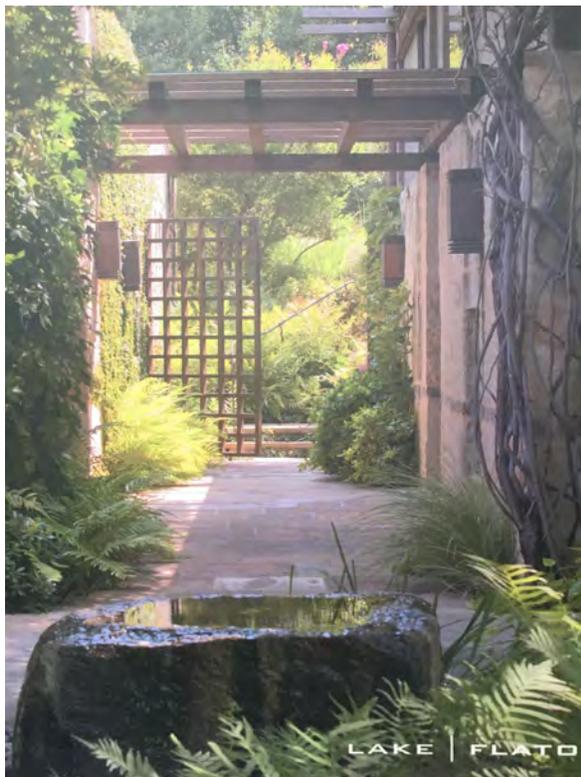


Biggest Threat to Health? Solving the Wrong Problems



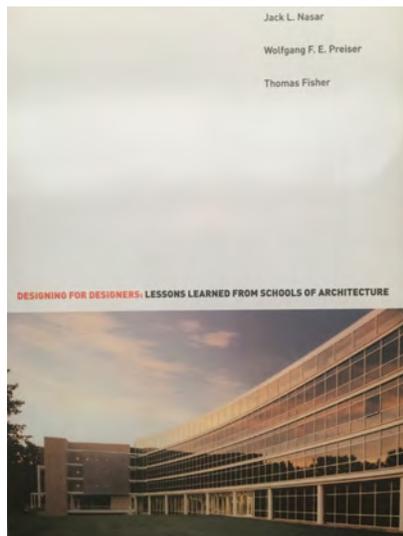
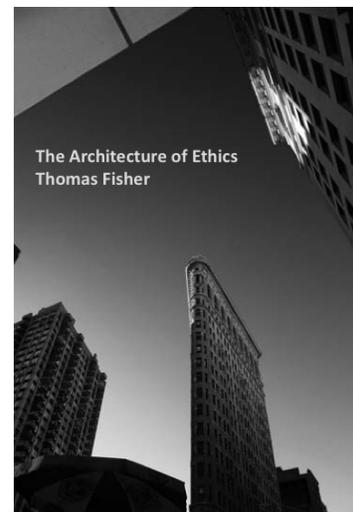
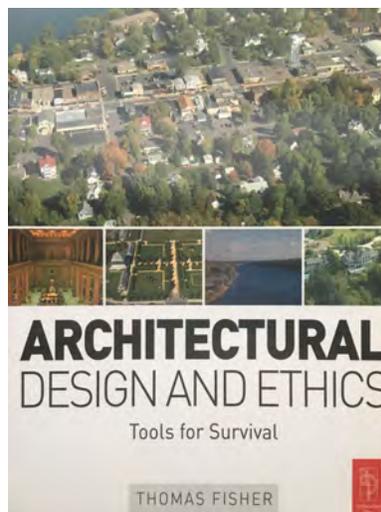
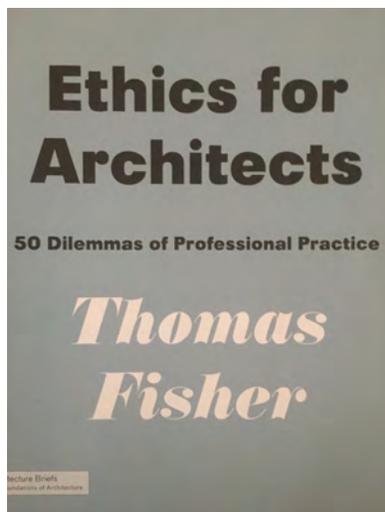
THE BOOK AS A PUBLIC VENUE

Over the last 22 years, I have written nine books and co-edited another volume. Like writing and editing magazines, authoring a book demands a discipline much like design, in which we learn in order to produce and developing our ideas in the process. Just as artists think through drawing, and architects, through designing, I have found that writing has become the way in which I discover what I know and believe. I have also tried to write these books with the general reader in mind, knowing that the printed work remains one of the best ways to communicate with the public about what we care about and what I hope others will come to care about it as well.



My books cluster into three categories. Some of them focus on the work of a single architectural firm, be it Salmela Architects in Duluth, MN or Lake/Flato in San Antonio, TX. In these books, I look at how their architecture responds to its social and physical contexts and reflects broader cultural and conceptual ideas, trying to capture the way in which their buildings represent an on-going conversation among ourselves and with the world around us.

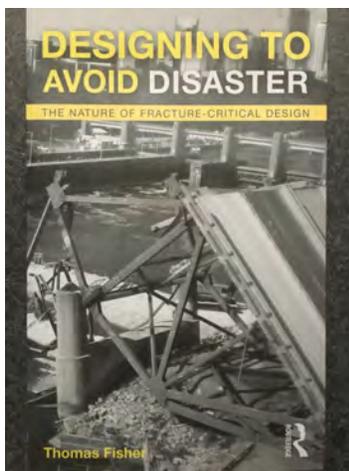
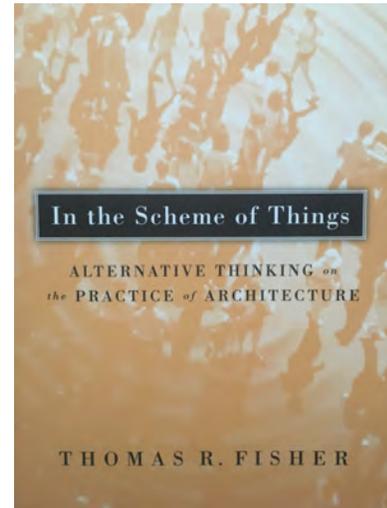
A second set of books address the under-studied field of architecture and ethics. Ours has long been a discipline driven by aesthetics, but since the late 19th century, ethics – its intellectual twin – has received relatively little attention, even though virtually every architectural decision has ethical as well as visual and practical implications. How we position people in space in relation to each other, how we affect the natural environment through our product choices and system designs, and how we consider the impact of our work on building users, future generations, and even other species are just some of the ethical dilemmas that we constantly face when creating architecture.



I have one book that I co-edited with colleagues Jack Nasar and the late Wolf Preiser, on post-occupancy evaluations of architecture school buildings, in which I also wrote a chapter on the history of the architecture school as a building type. The ethical idea of the book reflects the influence of American pragmatist thinkers, such as William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty, who argued that we cannot know the meaning and value of anything without assessing its effects on the people who use it every day. Post-occupancy evaluation is our ethical responsibility as a profession.

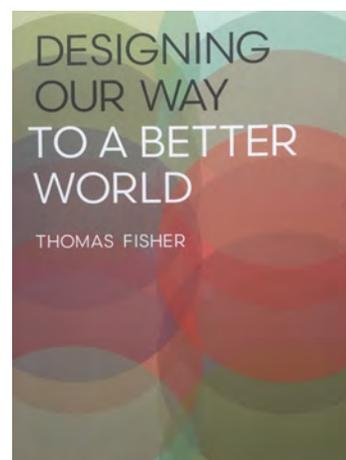
DESIGN AS A FORM OF THINKING

A third category of books has to do with design thinking and its relevance to larger systems and diverse applications. My first book, *In the Scheme of Things*, explored how architectural practice might change as the profession addresses the broad range of challenges people face in the built environment, from sustainability to social justice. Although written over 20 years ago, this book has some chapters that anticipated a lot of issues that our field continues to face.



The book *Designing to Avoid Disaster* began as a chapter in another book on the I-35W bridge collapse in Minneapolis. The failure pattern of that fracture-critical bridge characterized a number of other collapses occurring at the time, from the fall of the housing market to the failure of big banks to the fueling of climate change as a result of carbon pollution. This book looked at the parallels in those system failures, why they are happening, and what we need to do in order to avoid future collapses.

The most recent book, *Designing our Way to a Better World*, looks at how design methods and abductive thinking can help us address the dysfunctional social, political, economic, and educational systems we now suffer from. Based on articles that I have written over the years on design for the Huffington Post, the book has been widely read not just in the design community, but also in public policy and business circles.



DEANING AS A WAY OF TEACHING

From 1996 through 2015, I served as the Dean of the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, which later became the College of Design at the University of Minnesota. I used that position as an opportunity to talk about the value of design and the importance of the built environment in as many different venues as possible. That included interviews with the likes of Swedish Television, *New York Times*, *Time*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Minnesota Public Radio, *The Design Observer*, PBS, *Mark*, *CRIT*, and the Design Management Institute, among others.

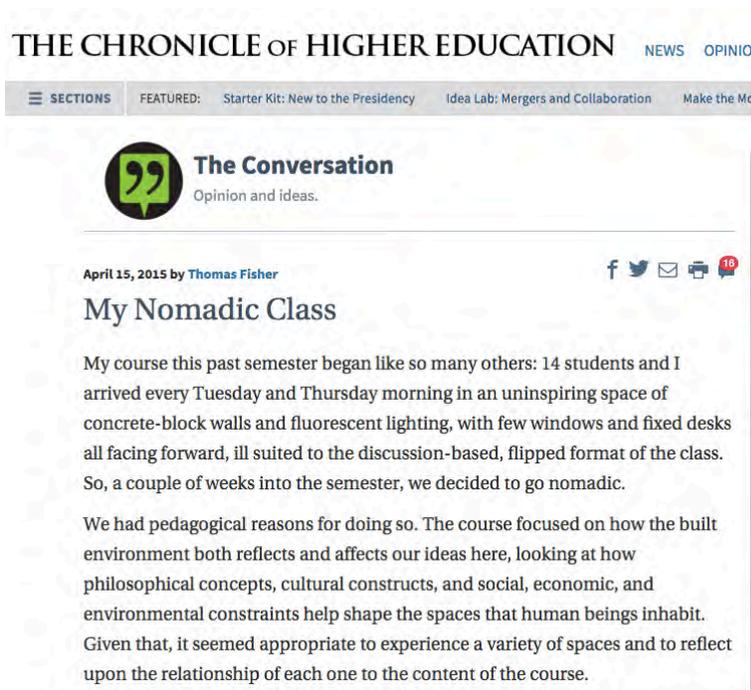


It also have also continued to write articles and editorials in the *Huffington Post*, *The Conversation*, *Architect*, *Architecture Minnesota*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *ACSA News*, *Public Sector Digest*, *Faith & Form*, *Places*, *Architectural Research Quarterly* (which I co-edited for several years), and *JAE*. In all, I have published over 430 articles in the last 36 years.



Talks in public forums have constituted another form of public education. The professional meetings I have spoken at include the Society of Architectural Historians, Urban Land Institute, American Public Works Association, the ACSA, ASLA, APA, and many components of the AIA as well as AIA national. I have also lectured at over 50 schools of architecture both in the U.S. and abroad, using those talks to refine ideas and develop the texts that later became chapters in my book. In all, I have given 361 talks in the last 36 years.

TEACHING AS A WAY OF LEARNING



During my 19 years as a dean, I continued to teach out of the conviction that academic administrators need to remain connected to their field and a contributor to the educational enterprise. Being a dean also provided a degree of freedom, since few of my courses had to fulfill a curriculum requirement, which let me explore new pedagogies. I taught a nomadic

class, for instance, in which students decided where they wanted to learn, never once choosing a classroom. They not only sought out comfortable furniture, daylight, and public settings, but they also remembered the material better, linking ideas to the places in which they learned. The campus become for them a mnemonic device, in which engaging all of their senses helped them recall ideas and facts.

I think that the future of higher education depends upon our doing what the online world cannot, which means immersing students in interdisciplinary, interactive, and community experiences. The Grand Challenges course that I co-teach with business and policy colleagues involves teams of students working on innovation projects in India, Uganda, and Nicaragua. I teach the design-thinking part of the course and I learn a tremendous amount from these students.



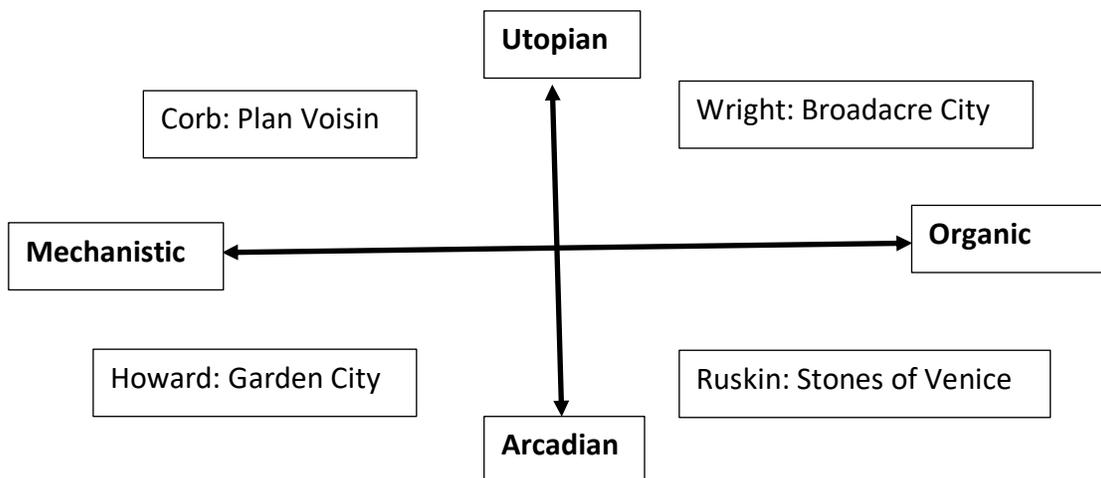
THEORY AS A WAY OF KNOWING

The one required course that I taught for several years as a dean was architectural theory, which provided an opportunity to explore with the students the diverse range of perspectives about architecture that have emerged over the last 100 years. The class itself represented a theory about architectural theory: that it runs along spectrums of thought that we can map.

This spectrum theory came from the lectures that I heard Colin Rowe give when I was a student in his theory classes at Cornell. Rowe, for example, liked to position the work of modern architects based on the essay by Isaiah Berlin, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” in which Berlin sorted thinkers according to whether they were “hedgehogs” who had one big idea their whole lives, like Plato or Marx, or “foxes” who explored a diverse set of ideas, like Aristotle or Montaigne. Architects, according to Rowe, sorted in the same way, be they hedgehogs like Mies or Wright or foxes like Corb or Saarinen. The advantage of this approach is that it helps students see connections among works that may not look similar.

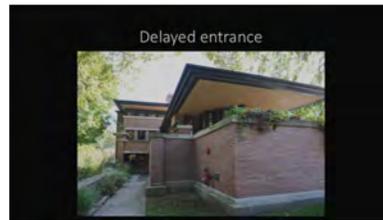


In my theory course, we use this spectrum idea as a way to look at how architects and theorists sort according to a number of issues, with students placing themselves along these spectrums as they develop their own perspectives about architecture.



WRITING AS A FORM OF ARCHITECTURE

I have also taught writing-intensive classes and courses on architectural criticism. Teaching writing to visually oriented architecture students has been a challenge and as a result, I have learned to make connections between the ways in which we organize and build space and the ways in which we structure and arrange written work.



Thinking of writing as an architectonic activity has certainly helped me. In all the years that I have been writing, I have always thought of it as a design activity, ordering elements in ways that function well and helping readers find their way through a piece to what they seek. In 2005, I was ranked as the eighth most published architectural academic in the English-speaking world, according to the Centre for Architectural Sociology.

Academic	Research Score	Nation
Remment Koolhaas	649	USA
Kenneth Frampton	581	USA
Kester Rattenbury	526	UK
Peter Eisenman	431	USA
Jeremy Melvin	416	UK
Peter Cook	368	UK
Bernard Tschumi	361	USA
Thomas Fisher	353	USA

RESEARCH AS A FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING



AWAYFISH/Tom Fisher/Saidat/KIVA Architects

ARCH 5711: Theories and Principles of Urban Design

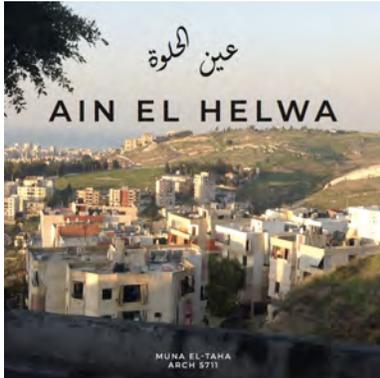
- A half-semester, 7-week, 3-credit course
- Meets Tuesday/Thursday mornings
- Taught by MDC Director, Tom Fisher
- A required course for the MS Metropolitan Design degree and the Metropolitan Design certificate
- Open to all upper-level undergraduate and graduate students
- No pre-requisites

The course looks at the tension between what it takes to create a thriving, diverse, opportunity rich city and what we have done to make American cities economically challenged, socially segregated, and physically decayed. Who, what, why, how, when, and where that has happened and what we can do about it will remain the focus of our work in class. If you have questions, contact Tom Fisher at tfisher@umn.edu.

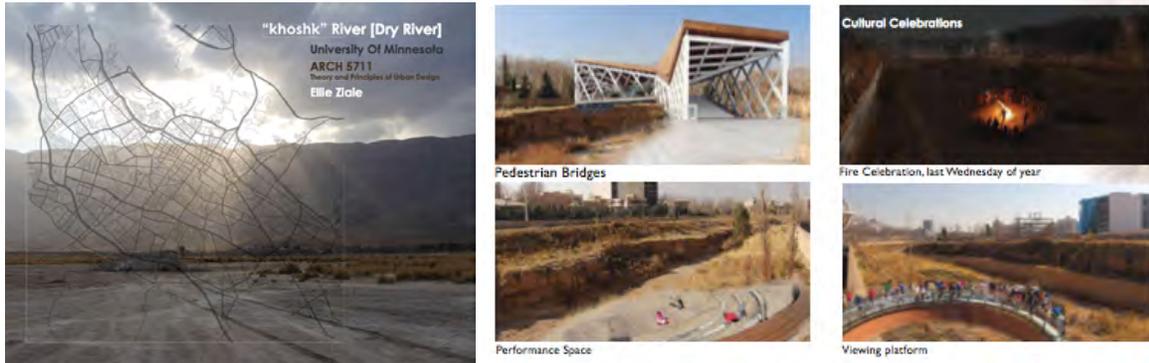
Since leaving the deanship, I have taught undergraduate and graduate urban design courses, in which we review the dominant urban design theories of the last hundred years and apply that knowledge to the development of urban design proposals. In the graduate course, we begin each class with questions that students develop from the readings. I also lecture on the history of urban design and show examples of recent urban design projects to give them a sense of what is involved as they develop their proposals.

The way to keep students engaged in their learning is to have them work on things that they care about and that are meaningful to them. As a result, I do not assign the projects that my students work on, but instead have them focus on a site and challenge of their choosing: a place and a problem that they already know and have connections to. This builds on students’ existing relationships, which makes their research more effective and insightful, and it leads to greater learning not only on the part of individual students, because they care about the topic, but also on the part of other students, who get exposed to a much wider range of sites and problems than they would if all of them worked on the same project. Recent projects include:

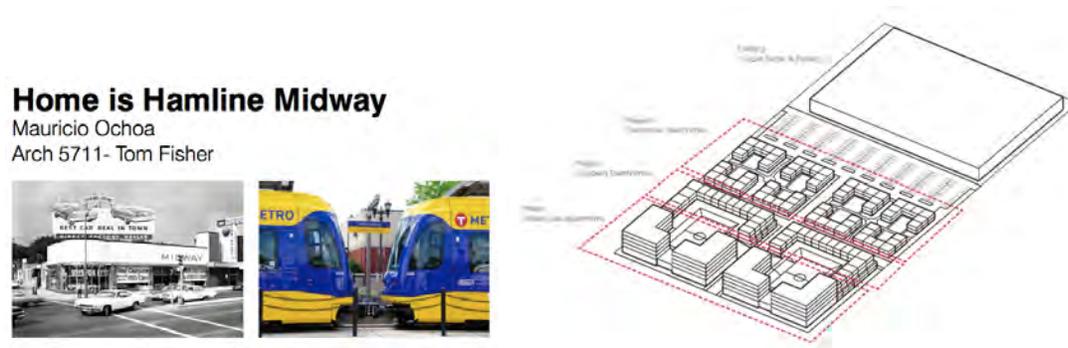
Reconnecting a Palestinian camp to the surrounding city of Saida, Lebanon.



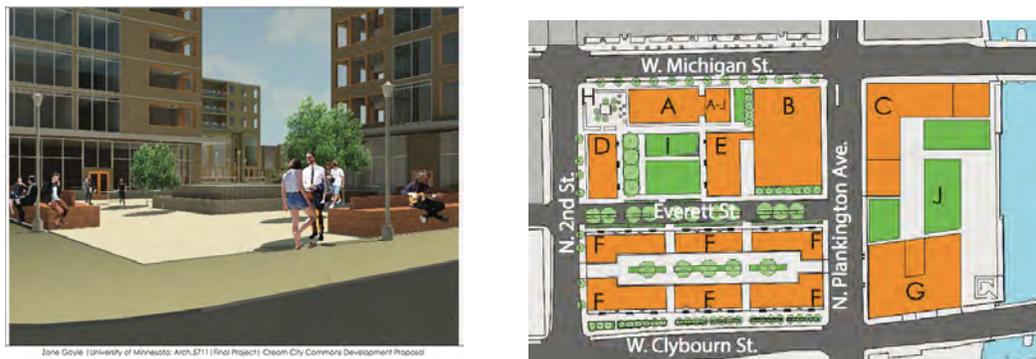
Creating public space over and along a dry river bed in the Iranian city of Shiraz:



Densifying an urban neighborhood with housing on a big-box parking lot:



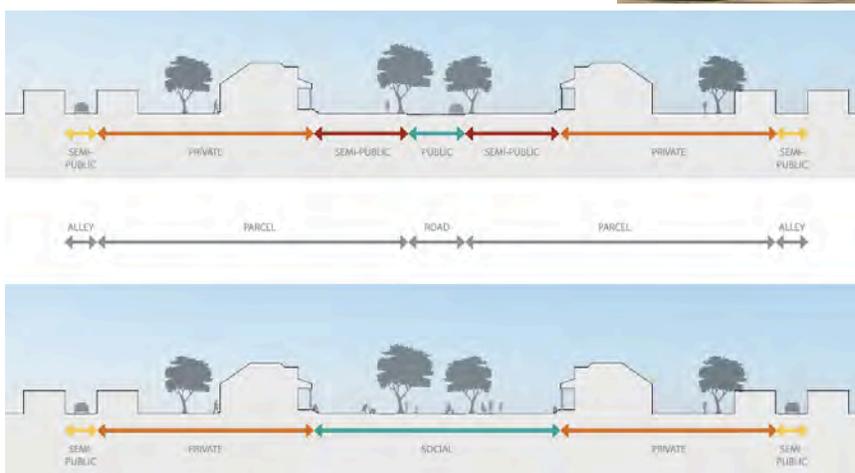
Replacing parking lots along Milwaukee's river with a mixed-use development:



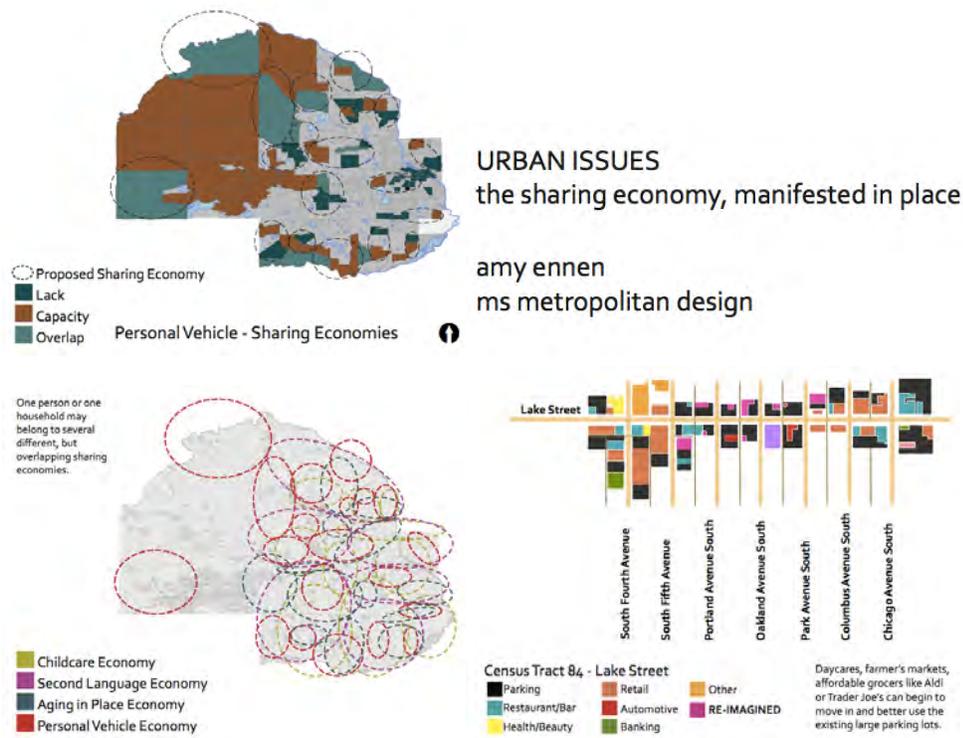
THESIS WORK AS A FORM OF EXPLORATION

I also direct the Metropolitan Design MS degree and Certificate program. These programs allow students to explore an urban-design issue that they care about deeply and wish to explore through coursework and a thesis. This work often builds upon the Masters Final Project in Architecture or the Capstone Projects in Landscape Architecture or Urban Planning – the three fields where most of the MS students come from – and these theses have played a role in changing the thinking among leaders and community members around about a range of issues.

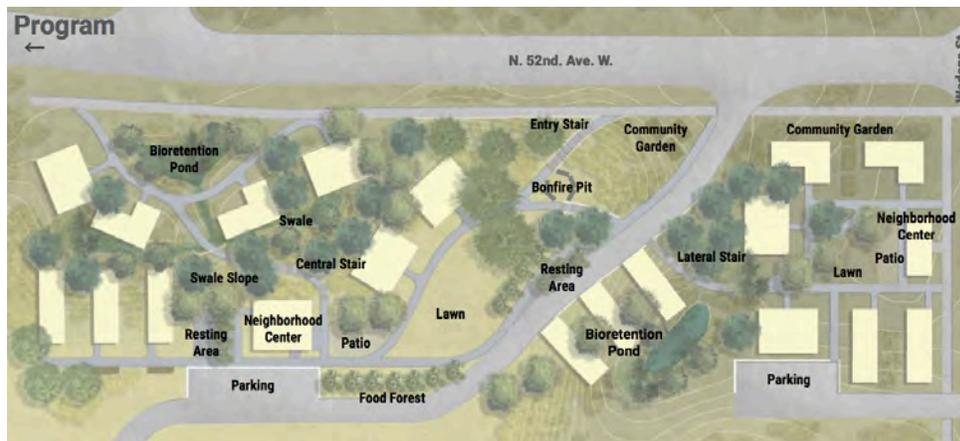
One recent thesis by Jessica Horstkotte looked at converting streets in many residential areas of Minneapolis served by alleys into green space owned and maintained by neighborhood community associations, reducing the public expense of maintaining infrastructure while improving the safety and quality of life of those living along those streets. This work has influenced the future plans of the city's public works department.



Another thesis by Amy Ennen looked at the opportunities provided by the sharing economy to map underutilized assets – space, vehicles, etc. – and to connect them to people who might have a need for housing, transportations, and so on. Her work has led to two funded projects in which this approach is being explored in urban and rural communities underserved by national sharing-economy companies such as Airbnb and Uber and Lyft.



A recent capstone by MLA student Luke Nichols focused on the affordable housing opportunities provided by underutilized land in cities like Duluth:



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A PLATFORM FOR ACTION

I also serve as the Director of the Minnesota Design Center, which focuses on urban design, rural design, and service design in the Upper Midwest. I run the center as a platform, with faculty and practitioners serving as affiliates who run the projects they help bring to us. This has attracted a diverse group of architects, landscape architects, and planners who have greatly expanded the capacity and the impact of the Center, with projects across Minnesota and nationally, with organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and ESRI.

All of these projects involve external funding and a close collaboration with community partners. Some involve new kinds of infrastructure, such as the St. Paul Balcony and the West 7th Corridor Transit study.



Some projects entail the development of design guidelines, as we have done for the city of Rochester, MN, or for the Towerside Innovation District



Signature Public Space at Green Fourth and 29th Avenue SE near Prospect Park Station.

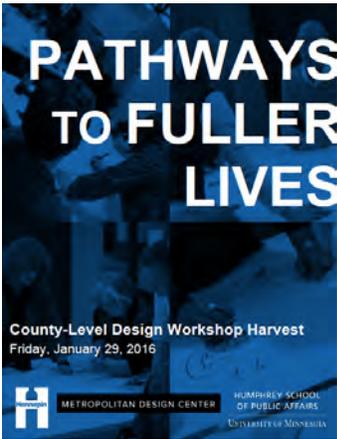


Weyerhauser Park is a Signature Public Space in the Westgate Station Area public realm plan.

Other work at the center involves innovative ways of addressing the problem of homelessness, done in partnership with the medical and religious communities.



We also have a growing amount of Service Design work, much of it for public agencies, like the Centers for Disease Control, where we trained their leadership in design thinking methods or like county governments in the Twin Cities region, who we have worked with to redesign the adult foster care housing system and the county emergency services system.



At the same time, we have had a growing Rural Design practice, working with several towns in Greater Minnesota as well as in places like Puerto Rico.



The impact of autonomous vehicles on the public space in the city has become another area of focus for the center. After graduate school, I did a study for the U.S. Department of Interior on the early automobile industry and the buildings associated with the electric and steam car companies. During that research, I saw how quickly we transitioned from horse-drawn to automotive transportation and how that affected urban streets and land use in cities. I have argued – and our students have shown in a variety of research efforts – how we are about to go through the same transition from human-driven to driverless vehicles and how that will have an equally dramatic effect on the public realm, enabling us to recapture much of the public right-of-way for other transportation modes (bikes, pedestrians, transit) and other non-transportation activities (gathering space, play space, relaxation space). We are part of two National Science Foundation grants looking at this issue.

