

# Poiesis: The Missing Hyphen

## Between the What and How of Architecture

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"Architecture today exists in a peripheral condition. It is dispensable. Due to expense, to ineptness, to chivalric attitude, to aloofness, to precious elitism, to liability, to a design method that amounts to choosing from catalogs—the practice of Architecture has become expendable. The world all too readily eliminates architecture from the 'real world'. The cost is our lives." — William Tate<sup>1</sup>

Architecture takes time for incubation, cultivation, experimentation (and blind alleys), playing, coordinating, celebrating, risking, cooperating, meandering. These words are not soft: intensity and diligence are paramount. But they are inviting the subconscious to play. And the intuitive. Wondering and musing are such words when it comes to time. They are real process words. Not about schedules, but about ripeness. Bearing fruit. Architecture is an organic act, not a mechanical one. Treat it as one. —William Tate<sup>2</sup>

### Eros' Creative Powers

The above observations delineate the contours of the two concerns of this paper: the indisputable and tragic failure of our built world, and a reassessment of what and how we teach our future architects, in particular at the early stages of their development.

While the causes behind the breakdown of the architectural project include economic, social, and political factors, the one culprit upon whom we design educators have any control of is our pedagogy, and thus it will be the focus of my argument.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez in his book, *Built upon Love*, summarizes and synthesizes both issues thusly: "Throughout modernity architecture sought the origins of creation in rational frameworks ... Contemporary building design generally operates on the premise

that the process of planning must be thoroughly rational ... [Such a method] creates novelty without love [Eros], resulting in short-lived seduction, typically without concern for embodied cultural experience, character, and appropriateness."<sup>3</sup> His thesis is that Western

architecture at the onset was intrinsically identified with Eros, and that Eros' agency was to lure the architectural response. He also asserts that this originating and organizing impulse was named *poiesis* by the early Greeks as a way of identifying the poetic as the instigator and the intentional primacy of the architectural act.

Pérez-Gómez further asserts that Eros' musings were understood as a kind of madness. In one of his epigraphs, he has Plato claiming: "The poetry of the sane man is utterly eclipsed by that of the inspired madman." And another one by Giordano Bruno, who declared that "poetry is not born from rules ... rather it is the rules that derive from poetry."<sup>4</sup>

Thus Pérez-Gómez assembles his contention that at its origin Western architecture was identified with Eros' creative and libidinal powers, with Daedalus—the emblematic architect—being "the one who harnesses the power of the poetic image to engage others in a communion with other worlds within our world."<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying that these provocative thoughts offer us an opportunity to examine *what* and *how* we teach our future architects, in particular at their embryonic stage.

And lastly, he warns us of our peril if our practice fails to reconnect to architecture's originating source: "A partial or total ignorance of the deep relationship between [Eros] and architecture has dire consequences, perpetuating the modern epidemic of empty formalism and banal functionalism, condemning architecture to passing fashion or consumable commodity, and destining the cultures it frames to their present dangerous pathologies."<sup>6</sup>

### Crawling Comes Before Walking

"Babies have to go through a crawling period and should not go straight from scooting to walking, because in the crawling period they're learning how to coordinate both halves of their brain." —Richard Rohr<sup>7</sup>

While most schools of architecture, if not all, offer their students studios which purpose is to introduce them to the design process and the principles of design, it is my observation however that these fail to consistently offer therein an atmosphere that is *unreservedly* conducive to the suppleness and openness, plasticity and playfulness that precede the poetic urge; to follow Rohr's assertion: we do not let them crawl enough. One obstacle I have observed is a premature insistence to formalize by explicit rules; ones that function as decision procedures and which inevitably lead to the right-or-wrong realm with its attendant apprehension and dread. All of which is

countered to Bruno's suggestion of letting the poetic derive its own rules.

At our school, since the mid-80s, we have been continually exploring and developing a pedagogy that identifies as our most important objective to facilitate a deeper yet playful engagement between our students' creative capacities and the semantic impulses of their germinal ideas and themes. The core of this instruction happens in the first two years of our students' undergraduate education. The paramount objective of these four studios is a sustained encounter; one that is not compromised, truncated nor abridged due to other competing objectives and curricula constraints: For this encounter to be genuine and for its concurrent process to remain in flux, a tolerant and generous letting be needs to prevail.

Such an approach acknowledges the importance of time in the creative process. Too often capricious timing constraints are allowed to interfere with the flow of an idea, preventing it from remaining vigorously and daringly underway. Mark Taylor puts it this way: "Thinking has rhythms of its own—it must simmer and cannot be rushed. It is impossible to know how much time is required for thought to gel because I am not in control of this process ... Thought thinks through me in ways I can never fathom ... The dynamics of thinking eludes consciousness."<sup>8</sup>

#### **Rigor and Tolerance: A Venture in Dichotomy**

"To teach design, one must be intolerant but patient."

—Olivio Ferrari<sup>9</sup>

The origin and generator that drove most of our initial pedagogical explorations was Virginia Tech's architecture program. My colleague Alan Hines had recently received his master's degree at that institution, and I had just returned from a visiting teaching position there in 1982. Architecture education at Virginia Tech has been consistently recognized as one of the most innovative and unique sites for studying architecture: Its pedagogical roots can be traced back to the Bauhaus.

Charles Burchard, founding dean of the school, was a student of Walter Gropius; and Olivio Ferrari was a graduate of architecture at the Hochschule für Gestaltung (an offspring of the Bauhaus) in Ulm, Germany. Both were responsible for the architecture department at Virginia Tech in the 1960s. These two individuals, established a new teaching model for the design profession. It was out of this exposure and our very own dissatisfactions with our school's methodology that provoked us to initiate changes at our university. In addition, we initiated an extensive investigation on the education-as-process theories of John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, Jerome Bruner, Jean

Piaget and Maria Montessori; they provided us with useful insights. These educational pioneers helped us in our search of new possibilities for *structures*, *content* and *conduct* in the design studios. Throughout this arduous process, one fundamental component always directed our search and strengthened our resolve: the conviction that any pedagogy worthy of its name had to aim its focus solely on the site of learning: the student.

Throughout the push-and-pull of acquiring a position, a conviction, a framework from where to teach, Jerome Bruner has been by far the most stimulating and influential guide; in particular, his insights that address how young children's instinctive will-to-learn can best be stimulated, directed and amplified. We came to believe that his assertions were pertinent and easily transferable in the designing of a pedagogy that was aimed at our very own beginners.

In his landmark book, *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, he provided us with a core thesis: true instruction is the assisting and facilitating of the processes whereby human beings go from a state of utter helplessness to one of control. Bruner sees the process through which this takes place as a staircase with rather sharp risers, and the dynamic as being a matter of spurts and rests: The spurts ahead in growth seem to be touched off when certain capacities begin to develop. And some capacities must be matured and nurtured before others can be called into being. This observation—coupled with our own awareness that in most of our beginning design studios, students differ greatly in terms of rate of growth and level of competence—caused us to examine the critical role that time and pacing play in facilitating the proper integration of the long sequence of acts that must take place if learning is to happen.

Once we became cognizant of the decisive role time plays in learning, particularly complex skills such as designing; we decided to structure the first two years as a Foundation Program: a generous and hospitable time and space that is deliberately and intentionally dedicated to fostering the gradual and progressive development of each of our students. The Foundation's main objective became to provide each student with a studio environment that was most conducive for the complex and delicate internalization of skills to occur in its totality. To this day, the aims and intentions of the Foundation have proven themselves to be a decisive factor in the consistent success of our program.

#### **Cognitive Wonder**

"The major condition for activating exploration ... in a task is the presence of some optimal level of uncertainty. Curiosity, it has been persuasively argued, is a response to uncertainty and ambiguity." —Jerome Bruner<sup>10</sup>

So far my writing has been mostly about the mechanics, the structural changes that had to take place. But, at an even more fundamental level—at its very core—our collective endeavor throughout the last twenty-plus years has been about *activating, exploring, and stretching the transformative capacity of design as didactics, as discipline, and as practice*. Our shared conviction has been that *design*, as a particular path of thinking; it is a daring, tenacious and audacious act, one that pursues questions regardless as to where they lead. Thus, we can assert that design thinking comes into its own only when it is located in the ambiguities and unresolved tensions of life.

Positioned in what Alvaro Siza calls the *interior of doubts*, the creative process then becomes a contained chaos, or a chaos that contains order. It is only there that the design instinct displays its primal, creative force, since, by its very nature, the wild and furious force of a germinal-idea-at-work moves, grows, and accrues complexity and clarity by repeatedly falling apart. But, under our previous methodology, we preempted this kind of search and thereby concluded projects prematurely, settling for solutions that did not deserve to be called conclusions.

Our new position changed all that. A single project was now allowed to exhaust and transform its creative force into the serendipitous events of the search. For us, this was worth immensely more than two or three truncated ones executed in the same length of time. We firmly believed that *this is what every design student must experience* at the onset of his or her design education, that this alone deserved our unreserved generosity. It was our foundational conviction that, in our school, it had to hold primacy over any other objective.

### A Supplement, Always

"For a process to begin, something must happen. What there already is—the situation of knowledge as such generates nothing other than repetition. For a [process] to affirm its newness, there must be a supplement. This supplement is ... beyond what is ... It interrupts repetition." – Alain Badiou<sup>11</sup>

Since the shift in the way we teach was initiated, one thing has not changed deliberately, one thing has remained a constant by choice and practice by the entire faculty: the primacy of its heuristic orientation; an educational approach by which the student is stimulated to make his or her own investigations and discoveries. Moreover, at the end of each academic year the whole faculty reviews, assesses and adjusts what has been previously constructed; the essential task remains: to continue to seek ways to better arouse and engage the intellectual and creative process of each of our students.

Most importantly, it has always encouraged and supported each faculty member's initiative to exert his or her own particular way for enacting this in his or her studio. In my view, this is one of our strengths: we have been able to articulate a worthwhile common objective, while soliciting each faculty member to experiment as to how that is best achieved and improved upon.

### Modifying our Habits

"Certain poets have the ability to remain in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after reason." – John Keats

We have also benefited immensely from philosophers of science as well as others who have criticized the myth that rationality alone has directed science and the scientific method. One of these being Paul Feyerabend, who in the quote below, from his book *Against Method*, captures not only a more truthful depiction of a scientific investigation, but also captures the heuristic character of a design process released from our very own methodological constraints: "Creation of a thing, and creation plus full understanding of a correct idea of the thing, are parts of one and the same indivisible process and cannot be separated without bringing the process to a stop ... The process itself is not guided by a well-defined programme, and cannot be guided by such programme... It is guided rather by a vague urge, by a 'passion.'"<sup>12</sup>

This approach works on the premise that one must *try* to design a 'thing' in order to know *how* to design that 'thing' or even to know *what* that 'thing' might possibly be. This heuristic process operates as a cyclic and nonlinear network wherein a designer seeks to synthesize whole yet incomplete formulations during all of the phases of a project. This dynamic is similar to Marco Frascari's assertion that *construing* and *constructing* are inseparable. It is characteristic of this approach that throughout the entire process, product and content are entwined, interacting continuously.

Margaret Wheatley echoes such perception when in her book on the new physics quotes Werner Heisenberg: "A lucky guess based on shaky arguments and absurd ad hoc assumptions gives a formula that turns out to be right, though at first no one can see why on earth it should be."<sup>13</sup> Wheatley's insights into the quantum world ask us to be more patient and tolerant toward the innate uncertainties of the creative process. She comments that quantum reality "teaches that there are no prefixed, definitely describable destinations. There are, instead, potentials that will form into real ideas, depending on who the discoverer is and what she is interested in discovering. Only by venturing into the unknown do we enable ideas to take shape, and those shapes are different for each voyager."<sup>14</sup> This describes our very own

experience of the design process, whereby the trajectory that eventually yields the conclusion of a project is rarely like a pine tree pointing in a single direction. At its best, it is more like a live oak with a dozen of branches going in all directions.

The next writer is John Caputo, whose radical hermeneutics is the equivalent to the path of thinking of the creative act. They share the same tenacity and audacity to pursue a question regardless as to where it leads. Just as Caputo claims that radical hermeneutics arises "when reason is cut adrift,"<sup>15</sup> so also design thinking comes into its own only when it is located within ambiguities; it is there that the creative process becomes a contained chaos, or a chaos that contains order. It is there that the design instinct displays its primal, creative force. Thus, by its very nature, the generative force of a germinal idea at work moves, grows, and accrues complexity and clarity by frequently falling apart.

There is no substitute for the genuine pleasure felt by a student who, once she has been lured and energized by the uncertainty of a task, is allowed to sustain her attention over the long and loosely connected sequence. This is what every design student *must* experience: This alone deserves our unreserved generosity.

### **A Cloud not a Clock**

It has been my intention through these vignettes to persuade you that one thing alone is truly necessary to know, and that is what Maria Montessori discovered through her own exposure to another set of beginners: education and learning are innate processes, which can be developed spontaneously in every human being. Her approach has much to teach us, and it is one that is easily transferable to a college level condition. We have found ourselves inadvertently creating in our four foundation studios, a learning space similar in its aims and conditions, for instance:

–The fostering of a sustained engagement with compelling and provocative ideas and themes is vital. Such is not allowed to be subverted by any extrinsic requirement or constrain

–Projects are theme driven, and not skill acquisition, as important as they are; it is our view that skills are merely the vehicles for the explorations and are not ends in themselves

–We have reduced the number of projects per semester to 3 or 4: depth is preferred over range (See Figure 1 below for an example of our first year studios' seven-project sequence.)

–Process is privileged over product

–Each student works at his or her own pace; each student's temperament and learning style is respected

–The desk critique has been replaced with group reviews

–No grades are given except at the end of the term. Moreover, we give no long range due dates, instead students are required to bring new and updated work each time the studio meets

–No digital media in foundation studios just models, multimedia drawings, constructs and full-scale constructions.

–The faculty's effectiveness in participating in this process is dependent upon a stance that is both critical and intentional yet remaining open to all the diverse interpretations unfolding

–All studios are team-taught. This arrangement offers the students multiple points of view. Also, the interaction between the faculty models the language and the way our discipline questions and reasons

This space is not unlike a maternal matrix that harbors our beginner's initial fumbling; that "configuration half-perceived, a relation faintly grasped, or a concept newly emergent."<sup>16</sup> This rigorous-but-patient approach accepts this embryonic 'thing' and nurtures and challenges, invites and stimulates, orients and dares it, until it undergoes the full range of the push-and-pull of the evolutionary havoc that is required for yielding that which is worthy of being considered designed.

"A world without sensuality is also a world without sense." –Dorothee Soelle



Fig. 1. A seven-project sequence of our first year studios, organized clockwise from upper left corner: 1) Self-portrait collages, 2) Mask, which further explores self-portrait, 3) The Pretty-Ugly Project, where student finds or buys an ugly, offensive object and transforms it into a well-designed, well-built artifact, 4) Poster of a song selected by student from a list of forty rock & roll songs, 5) Mapping the selected song, 6) A fashion garment based on the selected song, and 7) A Civil Rights Memorial.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Tate, W. (1992). On Risk. *Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, Southwest Regional Conference*, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>3</sup> Pérez-Gómez, A. (2006). *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Rohr, R. (1999). *Everything Belongs*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 128.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, M. (2003). *The Moment of Complexity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 197.

<sup>9</sup> From a conversation with Olivio Ferrari at Virginia Tech, 1982

<sup>10</sup> Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge: Belknap, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, A. (2005). *Infinite Thought*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Feyerabend, P. (1975). *Against Method*. London: Atlantic Highlands, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted without citation by Wheatley, M. J. (1994). *Leadership and the New Science*. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, X.

<sup>15</sup> Caputo, J. D. (1987). *Radical Hermeneutics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Corradi-Fumara, G. (1995). *The Metaphoric Process*. London and New York: Routledge, 12.