Critical and hermeneutic inquiry: A feminist approach to architectural discourse

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Abstract

We have noted that first-year architecture students arrive as products of a positivist/absolutist education system. As a result, student work seems to be driven by a procedural approach to knowledge; one opposed to the pedagogical intent of our design curriculum. Previously, we have addressed this opposition by encouraging a critical regionalist approach (Cline and Person 2010); however, this paper seeks to (re)vision our previous understandings through the lens of a contemporary feminist methodology. We are developing a curriculum that helps students engage in meaningful architectural discourse—a discourse grounded in a feminist understanding of how phenomenological characteristics function as constituent elements of design.

Architectural discourse grounded in feminist critique fosters the development of students' critical engagement, while problematizing their existing positivist backgrounds. This approach encourages student work that represents each student's unique understanding of the world he or she inhabits. These worlds, the places of their daily lives, are complex assemblages of ideas, experiences, and associations that do not readily conform to order, to categorization, or to the rational output necessitated by their positivist/absolutist backgrounds. Students soon begin to understand that the messy complexities of their lives do not have to be defined by procedural approaches to knowledge but, rather, can be understood as the

necessarily "impure" products of individual experiences, personal narratives, and muddled interpretations. Encouraging students to critically explore their particular identities, their growing awareness of empathetic knowing, and their existential modes of participating in the world is integral to developing architects who can fully engage the discipline.

Introduction: Critical engagement

Enough will have been gained if dwelling and building have become *worthy of questioning* and thus have remained *worthy of thought*.

<div align="right">Martin Heidegger (2001, p. 158)</div>

The worthiness of architectural questioning and thought is one of the primary concerns of a contemporary architectural education. Acts of questioning and thought imply a critical engagement with particular identities, with multiple forms of knowing, and with existential modes of participating in the world. These non-categorical means of being, these messy complexities, engage and sustain an architectural discourse that relates to the fullness of life from multiple perspectives. The beginning design studio at the University of Oklahoma (OU) is structured to engage students in these messy complexities in order to problematize categorical frameworks while grounding students in methodologies that are both material and phenomenal.

As a result of classroom interactions with first-year architecture students, we have constructed the hypothesis that these students arrive in the beginning design studio as products of a positivist/absolutist education system. As a result of the organizational methodologies inherent to that system, student work seems to be driven by a procedural approach to knowledge; one that is diametrically opposed to the pedagogical intent of our beginning design curriculum. Previously, we have addressed this opposition by encouraging a critical regionalist approach (Cline and Person 2010); however, we now seek to (re)vision our previous pedagogical strategies through the lens of a contemporary feminist methodology. This (re)visioning has been compelled by our observations that in previous beginning design studio courses grounded in critical regionalism, students gained an understanding of what critical regionalist architecture might entail in an imagematic or categorical sense; however, the study of critical regionalism did not seem to encourage students to

take an engaged approach to understanding why and how they and others encounter and respond to the environments they inhabit. This lack of engagement implies that student's perceived critical regionalism as an "end," but not as a "means to an end;" that is to say, critical regionalism became a categorical framework to organize encounters within, rather than a methodological framework of exploration. As a result of these realizations, we felt that a feminist methodology, one that could not be conceived of as categorical, would allow for the establishment of a hermeneutic, or interpretive, framework for exploration and knowing, and thus, lead to an architectural discourse that is worthy of sustained questioning and thought.

Because feminist methodology stands in opposition to the "hard, logical, quantitative," or positivist, approaches to which students are accustomed, it encourages "qualitative, unstructured methods that lead to empathet[ic]" responses (McDowell 1992, p. 411). This "empathy" allows for more complex understandings of personal, cultural, historical, and geographical identities, as well as awareness of place, and myriad forms of knowing. These complex understandings allow for a methodology that (re)focuses the procedural approaches to knowledge that we have observed. Enabling each student to problematize his or her own complex understandings, at multiple scales, coheres to the pedagogical intent of our beginning design studio, which is to prioritize critical engagement over the categorical boundaries of absolutism. By calling upon a feminist framework to address the conflict between incoming students' procedural approaches and our pedagogical intent, we are developing a beginning design curriculum that helps students engage in meaningful architectural discourse—discourse grounded in a feminist understanding of how phenomenological characteristics function as constituent elements of design.

Students' Expectations

The beginning design program at OU functions in support a professional degree program in architecture that is accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board. This support, as articulated by the particular needs of the OU architectural curriculum, generally consists of the teaching of meta-architectural design principles such as organizational strategies, formal manipulations, and proportioning systems. In addition, students are expected to become proficient in manual skills appropriate to architectural studies—for example, mechanical drafting, modeling, craft, and representation. While these particular

skill sets are traditional to architectural education, we have observed that they do not meet the expectations of beginning design students (Cline and Person 2010). We have noted, and Prof. Gregory Palermo's 2008 study reinforces our findings, that first-year architecture students have an expectation of "doing" without the requisite expectation of "learning" or discovering. When Palermo asked his first-year students the question, "Why do you want to study architecture?", their responses typically centered on the act of doing architecture, rather than expressing the desire to learn or engage in architectural discourse (Palermo 2009). More often than not, when students at OU introduce themselves on the first day of class, they convey the idea that they have come to architecture school to design "beautiful houses" or "imagematic buildings." Consistently, students express surprise at the abstract nature, time commitment required, and high level of craft associated with architectural education. Additionally, students have been unaware of the complexity of architectural discourse; generally they anticipate being taught a quantifiable, formulaic process that leads to "architecture." It appears that they desire to *be* architects without learning *how to be* architects; they expect to begin designing without realizing the necessity for theoretical or methodological rigor (Cline and Person 2010).

Many students arrive in the beginning design studio as products of a decidedly positivist/absolutist culture; a culture in which education is driven by procedural approaches to knowledge that are informed by the focused methodologies of scientific inquiry (Goode 2005). One telling example of the shortcomings of this methodology is the teaching of a scientific method which has been reduced to an instructional series of steps whose end goal is only positive outcomes. The "threat" of failure or possibility for exploration are, in many ways, excluded from this linear framework. As a result, students believe that there are only two possible answers: affirmation or negation. This straight-forward, yet deeply ingrained, learning approach under-emphasizes both critical and hermeneutic exploration; acts of imagination and discovery seem foreign to students given their previous educational experiences. There is widespread agreement that United States' high schools are not currently preparing students for the rigors of a collegiate education (Olson 2005) that requires critical engagement. As a result, many beginning design students experience difficulty when presented with questions intended to elicit phenomenal discourse.

Because they are unacquainted with these complex modes of inquiry, many beginning design students appear to ignore stimuli that might solicit critical engagement with particular identities, multiple forms of knowing, and their physical and cultural environments. Having been taught that the most-valid forms of knowledge are scientific, hierarchical, and linear, students appear to easily dismiss contemplation of particular identities as being sentimental and, as such, not worth exploring within a professional degree program. This situating of identity within the realm of the trivial, combined with students' lacking exposure to critical and hermeneutic inquiry, has led to a lessened awareness of, and engagement with, the complexities of their "physio-cultural environments." This lack of critical engagement with one's environments appears to correspond to an inability to articulate more than a simplified understanding of personal identity. Without a critically engaged understanding of personal, historical, geographical, and cultural identities, students' articulations of design solutions lack relevance within the context of their newly problematized knowledge frameworks.

Pedagogical Intent

bell hooks argues that "we must decolonize our minds and construct new alternative[s]" ways of knowing (1992, p. 411). This "decolonization" can be initiated through post-positivist approaches, such as feminism. These alternative ways of knowing acknowledge that each person "construct[s] his or her own "world[s]," rather than merely "find[ing]" them (Lather 1992, p. 89). The constructions of these worlds are informed by what Dr. Lynn Staeheli and Dr. Eleonore Kofman (2004) refer to as our unique "positioning[s]" that ultimately govern our ability to "'see' or gain perspective" (p. 11). It can be understood that, while worlds are constructed by individuals, individuals can choose to (re)build new "worlds" by exploring, through acts of problematization, why and how their knowledge is produced. Architects are actively involved not only in the intrapersonal construction of their own unique worlds, but also in the literal construction of the physical environments we all inhabit. Because architects have such a tangible impact on the "user-experience" and, by extension, "world" construction of other people, it is important for them to understand how their "worldviews" impact the worlds inhabited by others.

More than thirty years ago, Prof. Kent Bloomer and Dr. Charles Moore raised the concern that, as a field of study, architecture "seldom [makes] reference to the unique perceptual and emotional capacities of the human being" (1977, p. ix). More recently, Dr. Robert Imrie (2003) produced a study that found that many architecture curricula in the United Kingdom fail to discuss human aspects of architecture at the intimate scale of the embodied individual. More often, "[a]s one architect said, 'the human subject is rarely made explicit, it's assumed that we're all the same,'" (p. 59). Concerns like those of Bloomer and Moore and Imrie, can be addressed through the feminist "decolonization" to which hooks (1992) refers.

While difficult to define in any unambiguous manner, "feminism" holds that each person's perspectives are "inherently culture bound," and that each person's own values will always frame his or her inquiry (p. 91). Feminist pedagogical principles are not new to the realm of architectural education. For example, Professor Leslie Kanes Weisman (1999, p. 160) writes that:

> Feminist pedagogy can be especially useful in constructing a new model of architectural education. Its attention to collective processes, to redefining power relationships, to deconstructing false dichotomies (theory/practice, client/professional), and to eliminating inequalities of gender, race, class, disability status, and sexual orientation produces teaching and learning approaches that can help to build in students the skills and capacities they will need to be effective practitioners, problem solvers, and leaders.

As Weisman indicates, a feminist approach to architectural education encourages students to be cognizant of and (re)position their design strategies with respect to a wide spectrum of significant social factors.

The "positioning" required to enrich students' abilities to critically explore the messy complexities associated with particular identity, empathetic knowing, and individual modes of participating in the world is central to our pedagogical intent, but contrary to incoming students' expectations. Incoming students' educational backgrounds seem to encourage mindsets that are more accustomed to categorically specific, expected responses, as opposed to critical exploration of a variety of hermeneutic responses. For example, during critiques, students often ask if they are "doing this the right way," rather than taking the initiative to independently explore and assess multiple solutions. When exploring the relationships in proportioning systems, they are uncomfortable performing exegetical analyses of these systems; students ask to be shown the relationships, rather than discovering them on their own. Simply put, students'

heretofore-unquestioned cultural and educational experiences seem to limit a critical engagement that encourages acts of imagination and discovery.

This critical engagement with the messy complexities of experience, generally perceived of as unknowable because they are not readily categorical, does not seem to fall within the domain of typical American primary education. As one beginning design educator wrote, "Education's current shortcomings are held fast in notions that knowledge is primarily hierarchical, logical, and memorize-able, which contributes to an inability to address the relations *between* things and the complex causality that follows" (Teal 2010, p. 753). Any pedagogical framework that allows for easy categorization and encourages expected responses furthers the hierarchical, logical, and memorize-able ways of knowing that students are accustomed to. Problematically, this framework leaves students unprepared for engaging in an architectural discourse that explores the complexities of particular, or individual, identities.

Having been introduced to a positivist knowledge system prior to coming to university, one that encourages the polarized responses of affirmation or negation, incoming design students at OU do not arrive well-equipped to address the messy complexities of personal identity, notions pertaining to place, and the possibility of myriad outcomes. We hypothesize that these two responses are informed by a cultural predilection for scientific knowing and moral absolutism. In response to the strictures of this binary system, we employ a feminist methodological approach to beginning design pedagogy that fosters critical engagement and hermeneutic forms of knowing. This critical means to knowing, coupled with intra- and interpersonal awareness, will later serve as the foundation for architectural exploration in which students examine, acknowledge, and assess numerous avenues of understanding. To establish this foundation, the beginning design studio curriculum does not address architecture *per se*, but rather basic precepts of design and what it means to be designing within social and environmental contexts of varying scales. In choosing not to focus on conventional architectural issues initially, this studio sequence allows students to develop unfettered design processes, while also introducing them to new ways of exploring which are grounded in feminist modes of inquiry.

Through in-class discussions framed as dialectic critiques informed by feminist methodologies, students are introduced to a methodological framework for interpolating their evolving ideas in relation to their particular understandings of the messy complexities allowed by the problematization of their positivist/absolutist backgrounds. A feminist methodology was introduced, because principles of feminist inquiry encourage the development of relationships between critical engagement, hermeneutic inquiry, and existential participation in the world—all as components of an architectural discourse. Students begin to critically engage their environments; an engagement that evolves throughout the academic year, and produces more thoroughly considered responses to each successive project. Students begin to understand the muddled connections of particular experience and develop the ability to articulate those experiences. This ability to articulate complex experiences allows students to establish a narrative synthesis which coheres to an evolving feminist methodology. This synthesis acts to incorporate both their particular identities and their multiple forms of knowing and participating in the world into what Prof. Kenneth Frampton calls "a process of cross-fertilization and reinterpretation [that] is impure by definition" (Frampton 1983, p. 148). An awareness of this *a priori* "impurity" stands in opposition to the "purity" expected by a positivist education system. Ultimately, the principle challenge of our pedagogy is to introduce the idea that there are messy complexities that inform our knowledge frameworks and that exploration of the complexities within each of our frameworks can be prioritized over the categorical boundaries established by the positivist/absolutist scenarios that have informed students' previous educational experiences.

In developing this feminist methodology we encourage each student to generate work that represents his or her unique understanding of the world he or she inhabits. These worlds, the places of their daily lives, are complex assemblages of ideas, experiences, and associations that do not readily conform to order, to classification, or to the rational output necessitated by their positivist/absolutist backgrounds (Cline and Person 2010). Students soon begin to understand that the messy complexities of their lives do not have to be defined by procedural approaches to knowledge but, rather, can be understood as the necessarily "impure" products of particular identities grounded in individual experiences, personal narratives, and muddled interpretations. Enabling students to critically explore their particular identities and individual modes of participating in the world is integral to developing architects who can fully engage the discipline. This feminist methodology toward architectural engagement becomes

the vehicle for uniting our pedagogical intent with the students' expectations of an explicitly "architectural" architectural education.

Pedagogical Framework

In an effort to mediate between the pedagogical intent of our design curriculum and incoming students' expectations, the beginning design sequence is structured to ensure that students develop an understanding of meta-architectural design principles and technical craft. Additionally, students are exposed to a feminist methodology that problematizes positivist means of knowing and engaging the world. This year-long pedagogical sequence is fostered through a series of projects, across both semesters, whose outcomes are designed to illustrate students' developing understandings of both technical and theoretical frameworks of design. The first semester encourages each student to (re)situate, through problematization, his or her understanding of personal experiences and means to knowledge construction. By extension, the second semester encourages each student to (re)contextualize, through reconciliation, his or her understanding of a variety of environments, based upon previous explorations of personal identity and knowledge constructs.

During fall semester, the first day of class begins with a panel discussion; the panel consists of senior faculty members, recent graduates, and current design students. The discussion initially addresses such administrative details as the resources available to incoming students and the diverse career opportunities an education in architecture affords. The practical nature of these discussions serves as a prelude to more conceptual discussions and, by extension, suggestions, including how and why students may benefit personally, academically, and professionally from challenging their conventions, their notions of "self," and their fears of failure. As students leave the studio following this introductory discussion, they are each handed a small card encased in a 3 5/8" by 2 1/8" envelope. The card simply reads, "*on 27 august provide your identity / it should be exquisitely crafted / and fit in this envelope / ask* [the instructors] *no questions.*" This initial assignment acts as a radical means to situate our pedagogical intent and stimulate discussions regarding perceptions of "self" and "identity." That is to say, the assignment problematizes how students choose to present and, thus, define themselves in relation to or opposition to their peers and their lived experiences.

From these discussions problematizing individual identity construction and representation, we transition into discussions of identity at the scale of the community. Students are asked to explore Norman, Oklahoma by roaming local yard sales in order to engage with residents and the detrital objects of their evolving lives. This localized engagement with the yard sales of Norman acts as a means for students to curate a collection of five objects that each feels characterize his or her unique understanding of this particular community. Following these weekend curatorial expeditions, the class discusses each student's unique collection and how each collection can be viewed as self-referential. Discussions emphasize that the past experiences of each particular individual and his or her accompanying assumptions regarding both "community" and Norman's "sense of place" have a direct influence on the content of each curated collection. At the conclusion of these discussions, one object from each student's collection is chosen for further hermeneutic analysis and graphic documentation. Among the eighty-seven objects chosen for further documentation were a child's roller skate, a 1970s era ash tray, "shutter shades" sunglasses, an expanding plastic sphere, a 1950s Singer sewing machine, a vintage hand mixer, an in-wall volume control knob, a hand-formed candlestick, an oil-field rock drill, a faux 1950s handheld radio, and a large fishing lure.

The graphic documentation of the curated objects allows students to develop an understanding of drafting techniques, architectural terminology, and the rigorous necessity of craftsmanship, all-the-while engaging in analytic conversations about the cultural context(s) from which these objects originated and were gathered. Focusing on the delineation of line-weight, the clarity of drawings, and the representation of assemblies, students are asked to produce a series of two-dimensional drawings in various tri-view orthographic formats. Each student then produces a series of ten successive section drawings, representing his or her object, for the purpose of understanding the spatial relationships of the constituent elements of each object and how these elements unite to form the object itself.

After several weeks of honing technical skills and discussing ideas of craft and critical engagement, students are introduced to rendering as one means of three-dimensionally representing the documented objects. At this point, our conversation regarding the identity of the objects evolves into a discussion of the abstract nature of graphic representation. These discussions illuminate the notion that

constructed drawings and rendering techniques are, inevitably, representational abstractions of physical objects. To further explore the notion of abstraction, students are asked to create figure-ground representations of their objects, while simultaneously exploring issues of the abstract nature of scale. The formalized shapes that result from these figure-ground exercises become the primary elements used in a series of patternmaking exercises. The first of these exercises introduces the use of ordering principles as being generative of pattern. This introduction is accomplished by illustrating and discussing the graphic ordering principles developed in *Architecture: Form, Space, & Order* (Ching 2007), and asking that students create hand-bound sampler booklets, reminiscent of stitching samplers, which convey an understanding of ten different ordering principles.

These first explorations of patternmaking lead to further expressions of pattern and craft through the development of wallpaper systems that represent each student's abstraction of their documented object. Students are encouraged to explore their objects not only in a formal manner, but also through hermeneutic means that examine each objects' unique cultural and intended contexts. Some contextual themes explored among student wallpaper projects included the stresses of chronological time, mechanistic production values as opposed to organic form, the juxtaposition of counterculture urban youth movements in relation to suburban domesticity, and representations of carcinogenic substances reinterpreted as exemplars of domestic beauty. The final (re)situating of their object-generated patternmaking allowed students to explore their wallpaper in relation to one notion of domestic scale. After providing both basic instruction in Photoshop and a template representing a contemporary domestic setting, students were asked to apply their wallpaper to the walls of this constructed domesticity. This (re)situating, or returning, of the objects to a domestic setting—in abstracted form—provided a segueway into discussions of the cultural significance of each object, no matter how detrital, or trivial, each object might have initially seemed.

These discussions regarding cultural significance, in turn, informed the beginnings of our final project for the semester, which situated the curated object in relation to cultural contexts and particular meanings as understood by each student. At the outset of this project, each student completed additional research regarding his or her object. This research was presented in the form of a written narrative that documented the history of the object,

situating it as a meaningful cultural artifact. This final project, a reliquary, was derived from the notion that reverence toward an object of meaning—the curated object of each students research—leads to a desire to both display and protect that object. The primary expectation of the project is for each student to create a reliquary that protects and displays his or her cultural artifact; the reliquary also being a means of disseminating each student's particular understanding of the artifact enshrined. One representational outcome of the project was articulated by the reliquary for the 1950s Singer sewing machine. The sewing machine was form-fitted within a matte black crate lined with fabric-covered foam; the formal (re)presentation of a standard gun case. Upon opening the case, one is presented with the compartmentalized sewing machine, its cord and pedal, and a tidy row of metallic gold thread, mimetic of ammunition. By assuming this (re)presentation, this student (re)situates the sewing machine as an object that embodies the conflicting values he perceived to have existed among housewives in the 1950s as they struggled for recognition beyond domesticated gender roles.

While the second semester of the (re)visioning of the beginning design curriculum at OU is currently underway, and, as such, not yet situated for sustained analysis, it is pertinent to outline the framework of the semester in relation to our pedagogy. Spring semester began with a (re)contextualizing of the abstractions inherent to three-dimensional representation by exploring notions of perspectival space as related to Piranesi's *Carceri* (Piranesi and Ficacci 2000). Students pursued sketch techniques to spatially expand the sixteen plates of the *Carceri*, while considering how perspective methodologies can be a medium for the exploration of ideas and a process capable of generating place. After this exploration of the abstraction associated with articulating places that do not physically exist, students were asked to create constructed perspectives of several significant works of architecture, again discussed as abstractions of the phenomenal worlds we inhabit. Upon completion of these studies, both theoretical and technical, the studio has shifted to exploring individual responses to particular architectural situations. The first of these explorations has been the mediating condition described by a wall system. Students have been asked to construct wall systems that are indicative of their particular relationships with a series of photographic images that represent the messy complexities of participation in the world. The second series of exercises asks that students create threshold conditions that can

describe the decidedly human interactions resultant of moving between spaces at varying scales. Both of these exercise sets prepare students for the final project of the semester, a community bus stop that serves to unite conceptions of the multitude of ways one can mediate between the individual and the community, at various scales in relation to spatial interaction.

Conclusions

Having only begun to explore and refine the framework of the beginning design curriculum at OU, we have not yet determined how to evaluate our successes or failures in any quantitative sense, and, as such, are unable to make any significant statements about the potential of our pedagogical methods. That said, based upon qualitative feedback from upper-division studio instructors, noticeable changes have been observed. Most of these observations have been couched in terms of current students' engagement in critical dialog, as compared to student engagements prior to curricular changes. Second-year instructors have remarked that students now appear prepared to immediately explore and engage with the intricacies of each project, rather than "waiting to be told what the first step should entail." For the time being, we'll take that as a sign that we are moving in the right direction.

The implementation of a methodological framework grounded in the feminist notion of situating oneself with respect to the entangled contexts in which we live and participate appears to support our curricular directive. By implementing this methodological framework, rather than a categorical framework, we have begun to mitigate the categorical initiatives of positivist/absolutist linearity, initiatives which can prevent meaningful engagement with particular identities, with multiple forms of knowing, and with existential modes of participating in the world. We feel that we are moving in an appropriate direction; however, there are a number of issues that must be addressed as this feminist methodological framework evolves. First, we have struggled to integrate critical readings into the curriculum; we will have to continually refine how we present conceptual arguments in order to insure that they can be made accessible to beginning design students. Second, as OU's student body becomes more internationalized, we must remain aware of and work to engage the particular perspectives of non-western students. Finally, and most importantly, we feel that it is necessary to provide students with more clearly articulated explanations of why attempts should be made to

problematize the positivist/absolutist view of the world. These explanations should become more explicit during the panel discussion on the first day of class and should be included in the syllabus alongside other course objectives and the NAAB Student Performance Criteria.

As our students (re)colonize their methodological approaches, it is imperative that the beginning design curriculum temper their predilection toward positivist methodology by emphasizing the necessity of personal meaning, hermeneutic thought, and critical engagement. It is their "impure" synthesis of experience, their emerging awareness of messy complexity, that calls into question the privilege granted students' positivist/absolutist cultural and educational backgrounds. While these backgrounds attempt to create rational and categorical order in response to the confusing intricacy of existence, when employed as methodologies of design, they cannot communicate the messy complexity of experience—a robust complexity that enriches our lives, allowing us to find meaning in that lived experience. In response to the positivist exclusion of unquantifiable complexity, the integration of a feminist critique into the beginning design studio encourages students to problematize the categorical standardization and order requisite to the narrowly focused approach to knowledge afforded them through positivist inquiry alone. This feminist framework allows students to search for multiple solutions based upon their personal experiences and the unique anthropological, geographical, and philosophical circumstances surrounding their individual existences and the particulars of any given design scenario. By accepting the messy complexity afforded by feminist critique—the critique of geo-historical context and the employment of imaginative interpretations of said context—students are permitted to explore a knowledge framework that operates outside, and can be privileged over, the rational world of positivism. This process represents each student's particular identity as a designer, and the synthesis of his or her distinct experiences, allowing for an architectural discourse that is worthy of sustained questioning and thought.

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