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History, Theory, and Construction in a First Year Architecture Studio

The search for a first year design programme seems to be common to Schools of Architecture internationally. The question of the appropriate knowledge to share with the incoming architecture students can be hauntingly profound. One primary intention of this programme is to encourage the student of architecture to consider seriously the implicit relationships between culture, architecture, history, theory, philosophy, sociology and human inhabitation, as integral to the process of designing a building, whilst keeping the student constantly informed about the construction and structure of materiality and its power to communicate ideas. One wishes to inform the students of the complexity of the subject without thoroughly overwhelming them. It is the responsibility of the tutor of architecture to introduce the student to the 'realistic possibilities and the possible realities'.

Despite the intentions of some of the original thinkers of the modernist movement, its popularisation has resulted in a preoccupation with systems, technology, efficiency, finance, function and formal design. The issue of human beings living their lives in the buildings that we make has been subordinated to the point of deprivation. Too many cities and landscapes have been built up with clever products of efficient systems, ignoring the necessity to respectfully cohabit the environment in which they have been built. If we are to return to a civilised understanding of the role of architecture, one essential consideration would be its contribution to the quality and dignity of people's lives. Acknowledging the necessity for efficient systems in the twentieth century, this programme aims to establish a healthy balance of considerations, to reinstate inhabitation as one of those primary factors in the making of architecture.

Throughout the entire year the primary underlying assumption is that one thinks with one's hands, rather than predetermining a design in one's head. While the hands build, the eyes per-

ceive and the mind learns, constructing more ideas for the hands to think about, while building. Thinking, making, perceiving and learning occur simultaneously in the 'thinking hands', the precious gift of the architect.

The following projects are presented in two sections; group (A) for those produced between 1989-92 and group (B) for those between 92-93. The transformation of these projects from a more abstract programme to one which is more building oriented, is the focus of this text. The pedagogical intentions specific to each project are embedded in these descriptions.

(A) Project One—Analysis The first project includes the analysis of a painting from the Late Medieval/early Renaissance period. Owing to its particular location in history, the student becomes familiar with some of the issues of symbolism and perspective, and their historical and theoretical relevance to the twentieth century. This project is designed to integrate history and theory into the process of design and to introduce the student to some of the relationships between architecture and art. Through researching and then constructing a space which has been created by one of the masters he or she soon becomes familiar with such phenomena as qualities and sources of light, perceptual and symbolic weight of objects and space, materiality and meaning of place. Through dwelling in a period of time substantially different from our own, the student gains insight into the state of contemporary architecture.

(A) Project Two—Place While the first project includes the intellectual and perceptual analysis and construction of an 'existing' space, the second project 'Place' introduces the students to the process of design. After researching and discussing some of the modern movements of art and architecture in the twentieth century having to do with perspective and Cubism, they then proceed to design a significant space called 'A Room of One's Own', inspired by Virginia Woolf.

Although it might initially seem to be a rather large leap from the Late Medieval/early Renaissance period to Cubism, it is easily under-

stood when one remembers that the shift of perceptions between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was marked in the art world by the shift of two dimensional symbolic space to three dimensional perspectival space, and that Cubism marked the shift in perceptions from three dimensional perspectival space into four dimensional simultaneous space.

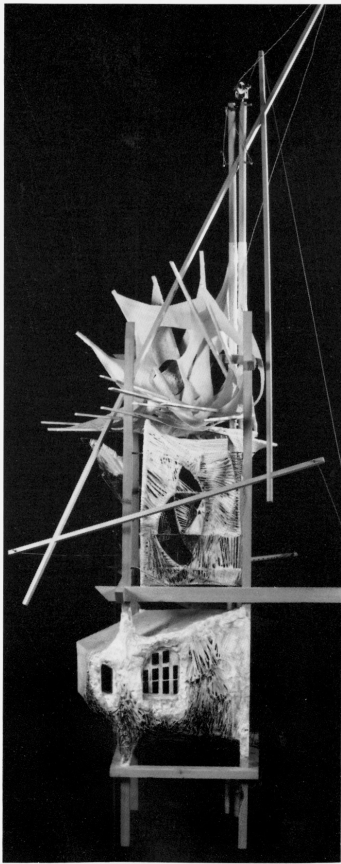
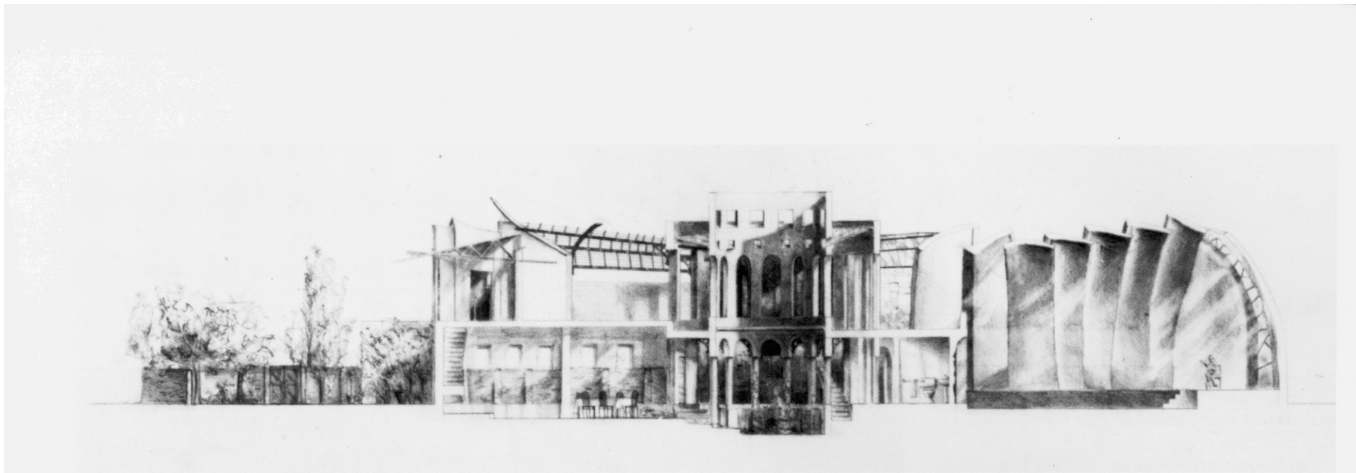
(A) Project Three—Monument Having now created two rooms, the student is required to design and construct a structure to house them. Whereas the two previous projects involved the use of materials to create a small scale place which implied that it could actually be a full scale room, the third project introduces the student to the use of materials on a scale closer to 'one to one'. The focus of his or her attention is primarily on the design of details as well as the gesture and form of the structure. In that the two previous spaces were inspired from markedly different points in history, there remains the possibility of this structure metaphorically representing the bridging of the centuries which lie between them.

(A) Project Four—Path Having now positioned the two rooms of project one and two within the structure, the issues of movement in architecture are now introduced. It is a study of the space of movement as a significant experiential condition. This project is intended to counteract the unconscious assumption that the space between rooms is less important than the rooms themselves, resulting in non-spaces called corridors. This particular project focuses on vertical circulation, employing the use of elements of intrigue

Opposite above: Aled Evan, University of Cambridge; House for Julian Bream, (A) Project 7, section drawing

Opposite bottom left: Jose Esteves de Matos, University of Cambridge; House for Heronymous Bosch, (A) Project 6, model. Photo: M. Clifford

Opposite bottom right: David Kohn, University of Cambridge; House for Heronymous Bosch, (A) Project 4, model detail. Photo: M. Clifford



LORNA MCNEUR

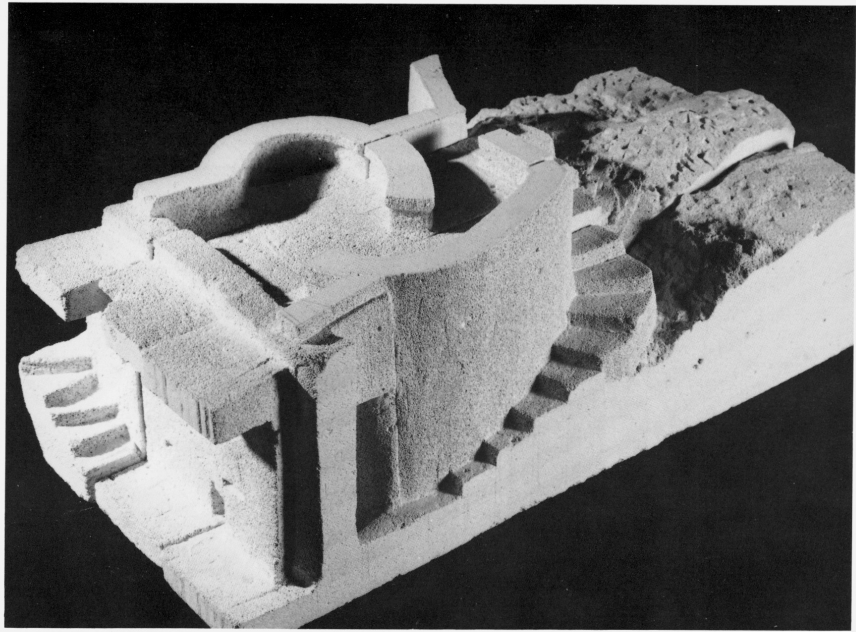
and surprise, by designing an experiential path as the inhabitable space of transition between the realities of the 'Medieval' and 'Cubist' spaces that have been created thus far.

(A) Project Five-Section Having completed this architectonic building of two rooms, a path and the structure, it is now appropriate to construct measured drawings of it in plan and section. This is exclusively a drawing project in which various kinds of drawings are discussed and studied such as: measured drawings, historical sections, and perceptual drawings involving qualities of light, shadow, and texture. The section is discussed relative to the structure of the human body and architecture, along with interiority and the inhabitation of space.

The body can be seen as the house for the mind and the soul. The building can be seen as the house for the body, the mind and the soul. As the house for one's entire being, architecture can embody both our physical needs for shelter as well as our intellectual and emotional dreams and desires. A self portrait can reveal the nature of one's physical state as well as the spirit of one's existence. The section of a building can reveal both the structural composition as well as the quality of the spaces, which contain the intimate stories present in the journey through the structure. Architecture can be seen as the physical manifestation of human space.

(A) Project Six-Facade Returning to the structure, the design of Facade is discussed relative to its ability to reveal and conceal the structure and the spaces and qualities of the interior. Upon completing the design of facade, the student then constructs drawings of it. Having studied section as a way of revealing the structure and perceptual qualities of the spaces within bodies and buildings, façade is now studied; first through the making of a self-portrait and then through the constructing of a façade.

In a self-portrait, the face, the hands and the gestures of the body can reveal or conceal the feelings, thoughts and perception of the being within, the façade of a building can reveal or conceal the qualities of the spaces within. The face



of the building is the masque which reveals or conceals.

(A) Project Seven - A House for an Artist This project is designed as a transition between architectonics and architecture as well as a 'bridge' between first and second year, particularly focusing on physically manifesting conceptual issues into inhabitable form and space. Having dwelled individually with the more historical and theoretical issues, the student is now prepared to design a building, working with the issues simultaneously.

The student is asked to choose an artist and to design a house and studio for him or her. It is a retreat from the complications of city life where

the artist will be able to concentrate on his or her work in the quietude of a peaceful setting. The house should reflect the sensibilities of the artist chosen as well as be respectful of the context in which it is created. These considerations include the history and character of the 'place' and the dialogue between the new building and the existing environs such as building materials, qualities and height, pastoral view, 'city' frontage etc. Since this project is situated between the city and a pastoral view, it affords the opportunity to develop the design according to the theme

Above: Alejandra Cadiz Aravena, University of Cambridge; (B) Project 2, model. Photo: M. Clifford

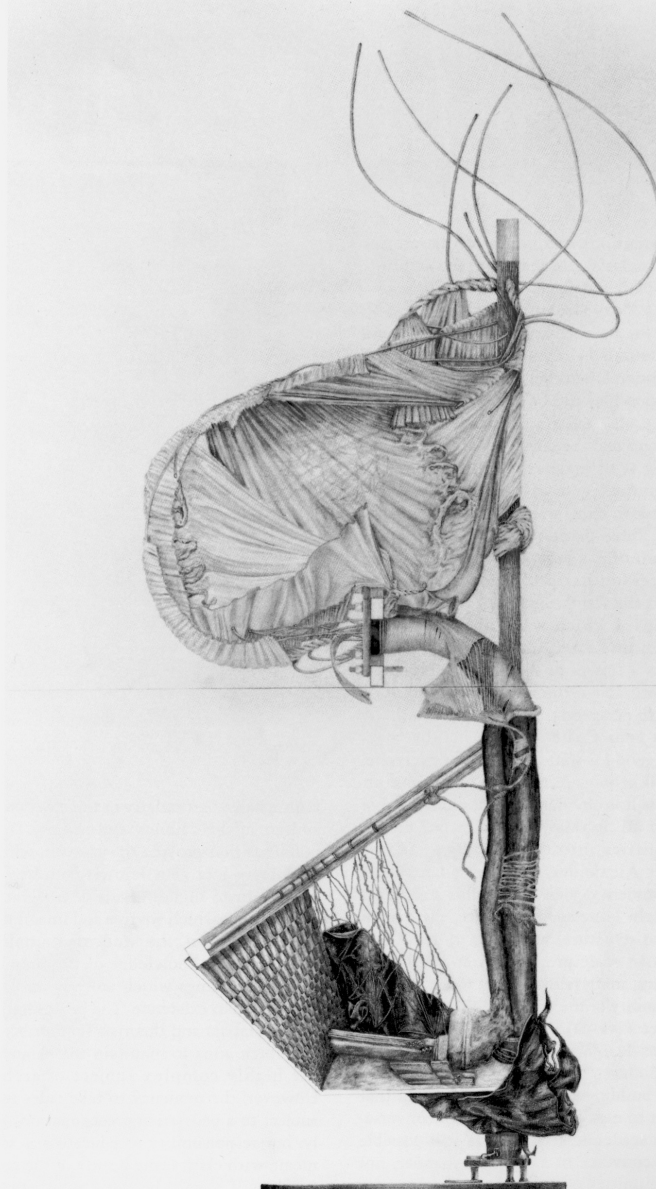
inherent in the site, the transition from culture to nature. Therefore the design can acknowledge this theme in some way appropriate to the artist chosen.

These last seven projects were given with the understanding that the architect must be prepared to use a great deal of imagination, not only regarding design solutions, but also in the approach to problems. The unconventional forms of the first six projects stretch the imaginative capabilities of the students and encourage them to discard some of their preconceptions about buildings that can sometimes be a hindrance to them in discovering more innovative solutions to previously unresolved problems in architecture.

While some students are enthusiastic about the imaginative challenge of the more abstract approach, others have a stronger interest in building-oriented projects. Transforming the project to suit these differences added an intriguing complexity to the story while it was still possible to retain the underlying intentions described above. The following five projects attempt to include the history and theory considerations more implicitly, especially in the philosophers' garden, the grotto and the painter's studio. The chair project incorporates many considerations of the previous 'structure' project, while all projects address meaning and materiality. The students are designing buildings throughout the year and culminate with a more complex building which is considered to be a mini-thesis of the year. The number of projects has been reduced to allow for more concentrated efforts.

(B) Project One - Philosophers' Garden The design of a garden with an outdoor theatre where people meet for discussion, debate, readings and art exhibitions. The spaces for a hermitage and a studio are included in the garden design but are addressed later in projects two and three. The site is a rural area along the banks of the River

Right: Jane Thompson, University of Cambridge; House for the Master of Flemalle, (A)Project 5, drawing



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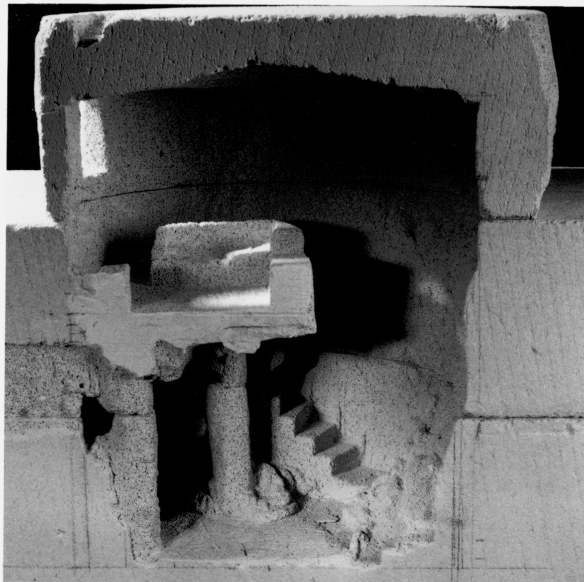
Cam. The intentions and issues of this project include site analysis, site planning, the architectural garden, path and place.

(B) Project Two—Grotto Hermitage A one room retreat for a stone carver by trade who was originally educated as an historian. He wanted a grotto and garden where he could retire to think and reflect upon life, and he wanted the space to speak of the past. He has a particular interest in the Middle Ages and the discovery of perspective. The building is of masonry construction and somewhat submerged within the earth and addresses shadow, light, water and dreams.

(B) Project Three—Painter's Studio A one room painter's studio for a surgeon who gains peace from the stress of her profession by painting miniatures in the Cambridge Fens. She wanted a modernist space which was Cubist in origin, with a garden integrated into the design of the building. It is a timber or metal frame construction and raised above the earth for her to view the world with perspective.

(B) Project Four—Chair "Obviously, the 'average chair' is good for some, but not for everyone. Short and tall people are likely to be uncomfortable... What is less obvious, and yet perhaps most important of all, is this: we project our moods and personalities into the chairs we sit in." (Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, 1977) Each student designs and builds a chair for him- or herself. Issues addressed are: the overall clarity of the structure, attention to detail and joinery, human scale proportions and full scale design, gravity, materiality, use of tools, longevity and personality of the chair.

(B) Project Five—Dining Hall This project involved the design of a dining hall for Lucy Cavendish College. The Cambridge College dining hall is a building that houses a tradition that has been lost to many people, the art of conversation. In this academic setting, it is still possible to dine and converse in a civilised manner, not unlike communities of many centuries past who modelled their customs after Greek and Roman antiquity. It is no coincidence that many college



dining halls, particularly of the older colleges, are similar to their library and chapel. They are all buildings that provide the space in which people may learn and gain knowledge of realms that lead them to higher levels of understanding of the world in which we live and imagine.

In conclusion, the students completing this course gained knowledge of the foundations of making buildings which embody an understanding of human existence. The proverbial argument of pragmatists and theorists is probably the vehicle which aims to maintain the balancing act of the highly complex subject of architecture. However, the tendency to take sides reduces the subject to a pedestrian preoccupation. Ultimately, our responsibility as educators is to communicate with clarity, the beauty of the complexity. There will always be those who enjoy abstractions and others who have more conventional predispositions. Allowing the programme to

change according to fluctuating tendencies is to understand it as the means for communicating essential messages to future generations of architects. The transformation of this project bridges both worlds, enabling the students to understand more explicitly the necessity of embodying meaning in buildings that otherwise might be technically sound but spiritually vacant.

Above: Suzanna Bach, University of Cambridge, Grotto, (B) Project Two, Model

Opposite: Charles Marsden, University of Cambridge, Cabinet of Curiosity, (A) Project Five, Drawing

