

From: Thresholds 12 (1996) on "What is Thesis?"

Thesis: "As Necessary for the Health of the Institution as the Student"

Bruce Abbey

The idea of a final project as the cumulative experience to an architectural education is as old as the Beaux Arts system itself. Ever since the establishment of Blondel's Academy of Architecture in 1666 with the Prix de Rome as a goal, the conceptual basis for a final thesis has been explicit in the educational process of architects. Certainly the methodology of the École des Beaux Arts was directed towards the preparation of candidates for the Prix de Rome competition, as a form of final examination and as a method of rewarding the most promising student talent. The focus was therefore on the reiteration of the methodology of a fixed design process throughout the curriculum and the emphasis on competition for grades, advancement and awards as a measure of recognizing and rewarding talent. Today's thesis practice carries some of these original goals but it has been infused with a new set of values that reject a monolithic approach to the end result and a certain disdain for elitist recognition. Hence the current confusion about the purpose of the exercise and how to measure success, or even if that is necessary.

If, by involving a rigidly controlled system of professional education Louis XIV could control style as a means for the glorification of the realm and personage of the King, then today's often introspective thesis exploration in the name of individual freedom and personal angst can seem rather diffuse and perhaps even a meaningless exercise in a pedagogical system that appears to have no singular purpose of focus. Nevertheless, many educators continue to see value in a cumulative experience at the end of the formal period of professional education, as both a necessary rite of passage and as an exposition of the effectiveness of the values of the individual institution.

SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

ARC 505

Thesis Preparation

Autumn 1995

Professor Lawrence Davis

Class Sessions: Tuesday 1:00 to 1:50

Discussion Sessions: Alternating Tuesdays 2:00 to 2:50

Office Hours: Wednesday 11:00 -2:00

t h e s i s

thesis (thē'sis) noun

plural **theses** (sēz)

1. A proposition that is maintained by argument.
 2. A dissertation advancing an original point of view as a result of research, especially as a requirement for an academic degree.
 3. A hypothetical proposition, especially one put forth without proof.
 4. The first stage of the Hegelian dialectic process.
 5.
 - a. The long or accented part of a metrical foot, especially in quantitative verse.
 - b. The unaccented or short part of a metrical foot, especially in accentual verse.
 6. Music. The accented section of a measure.
- [Latin, from Greek, from *tithenai*, to put. Sense 5 and 6, Middle English, from Late Latin, lowering of the voice, from Greek, downbeat, from *tithenai*, to put.]

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition .

Introduction:

Thesis is a required effort and product intended to demonstrate the professional student's ability to summarize and apply basic conceptual, analytical, technical and compositional aptitudes necessary to successfully create architecture. While it is impossible to review all skills in one's education, much less a single thesis project, in its most basic state, this terminal exercise is intended to be comprehensive in that use the critical elements at an architect's disposal (traditionally defined by Vitruvius as "Firmness, Commodity, and Delight") become tools for exploring a basic set of conceptual issues. These issues must stem from a position supported by a specific set of values that originates from the interests and attitudes of the thesis author.

In the School of Architecture there are two required components for completion: Thesis Preparation, Arc 505 and Thesis Studio Arc 508/607.

The function of Thesis Preparation is to provide a structure within which students pursue independent research and analysis in order to develop a coherent proposition related to the field of architecture. The process of Thesis Preparation is the production of a written and graphic document developed before and refined during the subsequent Thesis Studio. The Thesis Prep document becomes the foundation for the design investigation conducted during the second semester.

But there are problems. The pedagogy of most schools of architecture has evolved from that of a method of controlled responses in a highly centralized system to a model that eschews the normative and the obvious in favor of the idiosyncratic and personal ... a mirror of contemporary cultural, social, and political realities. What seems to have been lost is the capacity to posit solutions to problems that are both universal and personal, artistic and technical, comprehensive and speculative – using tools and skills that have been systematically learned during the course of the educational experience.

Thus the use of thesis as a necessary cumulative experience should be a demonstration by means of a design proposal to a well formulated hypothesis, but most often a problem that is indeed selected by the individual student and not the school. But a structured research component, i.e., a semester of thesis research, is absolutely necessary in order to establish the grounds for evaluation and viability of the design response. At the end of the process a convincing argument showing the connection between the research and the design proposal needs to be made by the individual student and at the very least the thesis should represent a summation of what he/she has learned and explored in the period of formal schooling.

Thesis today, when properly organized, is still as labor-intensive as ever and it calls for the ability to think clearly, write well, express one's ideas orally and above all to communicate a set of ideas graphically. It should, if possible, be more than a solution to a building program, be more than a cultural critique, be more than a feel good exercise. At Syracuse there is still the desire to see the thesis proposal as an invention within the constraints of a problem that is well formulated and to convincingly present an examination of a set of ideas rooted firmly in the culture and tradition of architecture. A fit between idea, program, formal representation and technical competence at least demonstrates a basic understanding of a workable design process and the ability to communicate effectively one's ideas. Presumably, these abilities do indeed prepare one to function effectively in a professional milieu.

How best to prepare for this experience has occupied a great deal of faculty meeting time. Not every design exercise is a thesis experience, yet no exercise is without a premise or intrinsic system of values. In the early years these values are most often supplied by the faculty writing the program, curriculum structure, etc. The real issue then is the process of weaning from the institution-supplied goals to

Thesis Studio is a graphic and modeled process and product that demonstrates the thesis proposition (idea) through an applied problem of architectural design. Requirements of the Thesis Studio include, but are not limited to, complete two dimensional and three dimensional representation sufficient to demonstrate the student's ability to solve relevant intellectual, pragmatic and aesthetic issues raised by the thesis proposition. Defining the goals and intended results of the thesis studio is a requirement of Thesis Preparation.

The two primary vehicles for defining the thesis goals are a written proposition and graphic argument in defense of one's position. As a result, research is an implied and necessary component for gathering knowledge required to develop such a defense. The quality and relevance of a particular student's research has a direct influence on the quality and relevance of the Thesis Prep Document and subsequent Thesis Studio effort and product.

Many fields in academia require a thesis as a culminating effort towards a degree. Within the school of architecture (and the profession at large) what constitutes a relevant thesis has historically been and will likely continue to be elusive. (One can argue that this is not necessarily a negative condition.) Naturally different faculty and students respond differently to defining what the boundaries and goals should be in managing the thesis experience. It is the student's responsibility to acquire the guidance from the Thesis Prep, coordinator, faculty advisor, thesis committee needed to assist in the definition and refinement of a student thesis.

Thesis Prep Goals and Recommendations

1. The thesis is a speculative proposition (hypothesis) that one develops and tests during the design process (Thesis Studio)
2. A Thesis is about architectural ideas that have been identified by the student
3. A Thesis proposal most often emerges from a body of research within a specific area of investigation.
4. The student should select a set of issues (or questions) about architecture which will sustain him/her for two semesters
5. Within the issues identified, one needs to establish, prioritize and limit the scope of the research and analysis
6. From the research and analysis one needs to establish a speculative proposition: i.e. a thesis statement which becomes the beginning and foundation of the Thesis Studio effort
7. In most cases both the program and the site are selected to support issues raised in the thesis statement. This means that considerable thought should be given to finding a place and building purpose that objectively reinforces the proposed area of investigation.
8. Most students should build upon issues of previous training rather than explore areas that they have had little exposure to
9. Since it is generally thought that a thesis is a body of speculative research that is to be shared in the community of the school and the discipline at large, it is extremely unwise to develop a thesis that is overly personal and/or can not be discussed collectively in understandable terms.
10. Sketchbooks and/or binders are very useful tools for both collecting and organizing ideas, information and sketches

those of the student. How best to encourage confidence in decision making and the setting of agendas becomes a *desideratum*, but as contemporary architectural critique becomes increasingly more complex, the need for structure to the learning process may paradoxically become more necessary. Every school by necessity con-

tinuously re-invents itself, or should, over how best to cope with these issues.

A critical issue in developing any thesis process is the inherent fairness of the system itself. This was a major failing of the Beaux Arts system as it aged and ultimately collapsed. Today, it is necessary to approach the problem of fairness with shared faculty responsibility and clearly expressed expectations. Committees need to be large, the projects reviewed by many – including outside professionals and educators – and the prizes voted by the entire faculty. While this will not necessarily insure fairness or quality, it will at least express the will of the majority. Unfortunately this is a very labor intensive process and not universally appreciated by all those who must be involved. The alternative, however, is to let everyone do their thesis without much faculty guidance on a pass-fail system ... not a very useful option, in my mind, and one that proves very little to anyone.

Reform to architectural education is always painful, which is why it has not changed all that much. The thesis issue plays a central role in any potential reform given the variety of possible positions to be taken by individual faculty and each school to some of the above discussion. These and other questions suggest them-

selves. Should it be required? Should it be independent study? Should it be only a reflection of the student's personal interests? Should it be a measure of the effectiveness of the value in place of a given school? Should awards and prizes based on perceived merit be made and by whom? Is an undergraduate thesis the same as a master's thesis?

It was attributed to a prominent dean many years ago that if one controlled the first year design experience and the thesis process you could make a real "school" in no time. Certainly a school of architecture without a thesis requirement and a process to support that requirement is in danger of not being able to evaluate where it has been and discuss cogently where it might go. Thesis, it would seem, is as necessary for the health of the institution as the students.

Dean and Professor of Architecture at Syracuse University since 1990, Bruce Abbey was previously Chairman of Architecture, Director of the Graduate Program in Architecture and Associate Dean of Architecture at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, where he started his teaching career in 1974. He has practiced architecture since 1966 and is a registered architect in New Jersey, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

11. A common test to qualitatively evaluate a thesis is to seek an affirmative thesis to the following questions

- a. is there a research component to the thesis (implicit or explicit)?
- b. is the applicability of the thesis proposal beyond the specific site and program of your particular project?

Course Structure and Content

The Goals of the course are straight forward: produce a single document used to inform the effort in the Thesis Studio. Consequently the course structure has many components in order to assist in the conceptualization and production of the Thesis Prep booklet.

1. Lectures

Lectures about specific aspects of general thesis and thesis prep issues are given at the scheduled Tuesday afternoon course time. As a means to expose students to a broader spectrum of positions and expertise, a number of lectures will be given by guests from the School of Architecture faculty. The lectures are intended to stimulate thinking and discussion within the class relative to the relationship between ideas, speculation and architecture.

2. Discussion/Workshops

Approximately on alternating Tuesdays, immediately following the lectures, there will be discussion sessions specifically devoted to issues regarding the Thesis Prep document. In most cases these sessions will be conducted as student initiated question and answer sessions. Students should come prepared to participate in class. Evaluation of student work will be periodically used to direct the discussion. These sessions will be topical in organization, covering such questions as: what constitutes a thesis? What is an annotated bibliography? What is adequate base documentation? What is considered legitimate research in the School of Architecture? etc.

In addition to the discussion sessions, selected workshop are planned for the post-lecture time slot with University personnel reviewing important basic topics such as writing skills and library resources. Even though students may feel comfortable in these primary areas, students are strongly encouraged to attend these sessions.

3. Faculty Advisor

Assigned the third week of class, the faculty advisor should act as a mentor during both semesters of thesis work. While thesis is, by definition, independent work the advisor can and should be used as a consultant and critic throughout the two semester process.

4. Thesis Committee

The thesis committee formed before the first review, is composed of three members of the faculty including the advisor. The committee convenes during the formal review sessions scheduled during both semesters. Reviews before the committee are working sessions intended to benefit the student. The thesis committee, through consensus, determines the student grade in the Thesis Prep course based on the final submission and presentation by the student. A final grade of 'C' or better is required to pass the course.