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

A Thesis

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Defining a thesis is not an easy task, not even for the faculty under whose auspices it comes about. However, it would probably be safe to say that in principle a thesis constitutes the threshold between the student and the professional and between architecture as a subjectivist fantasy and architecture as an intellectual discourse. A thesis should try to transmit knowledge and intention in a way that can be both rigorous in locating boundaries in an existent discourse and yet poetic in its capacity to reach beyond the immediate problem to some larger issue: in our case, to the open question of architecture's position in society. This ideal has to be framed, however, within the context of a constantly mobile whole. Institutions, determined and weighed down by the long history of their pedagogical, ideological, and academic commitments, set up expectations about what is and is not a 'thesis' without those expectations ever being put into writing or expressed in words. The thesis thus becomes part of a *mysterium* that the student is meant to unravel. The result is an almost Darwinian-styled logic that gives preference to those who are best equipped emotionally and intellectually for the task. But this does not mean that the institution is absolved from the responsibility of guiding the student or of reflecting on the successes and failures of its approach.

As part of this reflection, one has to remind oneself that a 'thesis' is part of an intellectual tradition which is larger than the local context of a particular institution. In essence, it defines the scholarly exchange between an individual and a disciplinary collective. In architecture, if one thinks of the various parties that have an interest in defining and controlling the identity

of this 'collective', one would list the thesis advisor with his or her unique approach, the discipline of architecture as defined by the institution's curriculum, and finally the profession itself. Given the various scales at which these interests operate (sometimes one against the other), it is difficult to find a level of criticality that would be accepted in all places. Ultimately an architecture thesis, unlike a thesis in the sciences and even in the humanistic disciplines, works on a scale that favors the local rather than the meta-local intellectual community. This works in two directions. It gives the institution a degree of autonomy that in turn breeds diversity, but it also means that students, often possessing limited awareness of how pedagogy operates, lack the information and expertise to make a sound judgment about what direction to take their thesis.

This means that in architecture, 'a thesis' may be more open-ended in what is tolerated than in other disciplines, but it is also more dependent on the context in which it is created and evaluated. The situation is not to be lamented simply because it sounds so chaotic. But it does mean that faculty are called upon to exhibit habits of *self*-examination which are more encompassing than what one might find in a traditional studio environment. For example, as professors should ask, is a thesis simply a re-summation of the process of schooling, or does it begin to go beyond what was taught in the studio? Is it an act of 'coming into consciousness', or is it the demonstration of institutional indoctrination? Is it the site where the institution reveals its culminating power to produce the next generation of architect-thinkers or is it the site where the limitations of the institution are masked by the rhetoric of its potentiality? These questions play themselves out in each and every thesis whether or not a student is aware of it. The thesis process, therefore, becomes important to the institution, perhaps more so than to the individual students. Each and every thesis touches on a whole range of problems having to do with the nature of architectural education, from its status as para-professional enterprise, to its status as an independent intellectual discourse, and from the compulsions to control the student's mind to the freedoms that only the institution can permit.

A good thesis, I would argue, will recognize the debate and position itself within the ongoing polemic that is at the heart of *everything* architectural. A good thesis will also see the design project as a means of coming to terms with that polemic in its *ambiguous* state. The thesis thus has the possibility to work within the obscure domain of identity and difference which structures other aspects of our personal, cultural, and institutional life, not simply the ones having to do

with architecture. In that sense, the work becomes less a statement about professional preparedness and more about a student's growing intellectual competency in dealing with the complexity that is intrinsic to architecture. If done well, the thesis gives something back to the institution which both legitimates it and helps guarantee its survival. It gives not only fresh perspectives on old problems, but a sense of energy and commitment that will be necessary if architecture is to maintain its relevance to our world.

Achieving this is no easy task and not all thesis students (and thesis advisors) are equally capable. This does not mean that a thesis which fails to excel in this respect does not warrant faculty praise and honor. Some students are not served well by the thesis process, especially in a 3-year M.Arch program where a potential architect, though talented, might still lack the experience of handling the obligations that thesis work constitutes. This is all the more reason for the student *and* instructor to discuss and understand not only what a thesis is but what it can be. If this is done in the spirit of critical openness, most theses will inevitably accommodate themselves to the dynamic situation of our modernity and can thus transcend the immediate problem that has been set out for them. They can investigate the process in which thinking and doing reflect each other and do this in a way that can make the thesis experience essential to the intellectual world of the institution. Most students see their thesis as the end of their education, and most will find little or no opportunity *ever again* to think with such freedom. But this is only half of the story. A good thesis has two lives. For the faculty, who after all *remain* in academia, it can be an inspirational experience, a true *mysterium*, that reminds them of the original purpose and mission of education. I have directed many thesis projects, too many to remember them all. But there have been some that have affected me in a profound way, and I am sure that all faculty members have had similar experiences. These theses live on in ways that their authors could hardly have imagined.

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