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

The Anti-Thesis Pedagogy
a fax from Kenneth Frampton

Along with the seeming 'anti-thesis' consensus on the part of the architectural faculty at Columbia University, I remain basically opposed to the thesis as the end qualification, so to speak, of a three year, six semester graduate education in architecture. My opposition is based on the following:

1) Given the way academic freedom generally operates in respect to studio teaching in M.Arch programs, every faculty member is typically free to give whatever studio subject he or she sees fit particularly after the first year. The net result of this is there is no guarantee of any meaningful pedagogical sequence in terms of studio exercises that in the last analysis often have no clear pedagogical aim. Under these circumstances how can one expect students to be mature enough (i.e. experienced enough) to bring an independent thesis to a successful conclusion? Students who pass through a five or six year program have more of a chance in this regard and in the case of these longer professional B.Arch curricula a thesis would seem to be justifiable at least in terms of it being an appropriate terminating exercise. It is surely obvious that three year M.Arch programs are architectural "boot camps," particularly for students who have not studied architecture before. Such students, in my view, stand to be exposed to the experiential "losses" of experimental studios without also suffering, in addition, relatively unstructured thesis exercises.

2) A further fallacy of the architectural thesis is that it is supposed to validate a supposition that has been derived from a specific piece of research. Even with the best will in the world an enormous gap usually remains between the descriptive-analytic level of the research and the postulative, synthetic character of the project, so that, more often than not, little is effectively validated. This view of the thesis still derives consciously or unconsciously from the idea of architecture as some kind of applied science which, in my view, is a fallacious proposition.

Surely students acquire craft knowledge by internalizing success rather than by repetitive partial failure. In my view, if any student was to obtain a particularly good solution in any senior studio exercise they should be given the option of carrying this exercise to another level of resolution. This would be a more productive form of exercise-in-depth and could well substitute in any graduate curriculum for the place previously occupied by the thesis.

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