

ARCHITECTURE  
FROM THE  
OUTSIDE IN

*Selected essays by* Robert Gutman

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as a result of the entire team's engagement, as opposed to the conventional studio where each student carries out their own project on their own. One atelier is located in the offices of Lexington's Downtown Development Authority, and projects there have led to major developments that are presently in planning or construction. Another atelier designed and built a house for a nonprofit foundation that incorporated new ideas of building materials and technologies and successfully integrated of contemporary design into the historic fabric. And another has spent three years on a campus design for a small college in Japan, with client meetings for the entire team in both Kentucky and Japan.

The overriding strategy for all of these diverse steps was to be able to engage with the public about design—to elevate their understanding of good architecture and design to the point that the public became a part of the educational program—and to make the college a leading voice for good design across the commonwealth of Kentucky. The value of this larger public sensibility had its origins for me in the teachings of Robert Gutman, who knew all along that the public context of a design education is an opportunity not to be missed.

## WELCOME TO THE BANQUET (or, How to Increase the Relative Happiness of the M. Arch. Thesis Student)<sup>1</sup>

Sarah Whiting

*In saying that architecture students exhibit relatively high morale at the moment, however, it is important to stress the word relatively. Most architects and architectural educators, in my experience, are never really in good spirits or happy for very long.*

—Robert Gutman, "Educating Architects: Pedagogy and the Pendulum"

Robert Gutman always knew how to zero in on the key term: "relatively" so perfectly captures the fragile state of architectural student life. Students are liberated from the liabilities that daily threaten the practitioner, but that very freedom is countered by the obligation to navigate an endless horizon of seemingly disparate knowledge. It doesn't take much to tilt this delicate balance. To puncture an architecture student's relative happiness, all that's needed is the mere mention of thesis. And the anxiety doesn't just blanket the students. Nothing raises a faculty member's blood pressure faster than the predictable, panicked silence that all too often meets the perennial thesis pin-up question: "So what, really, is your thesis?"



Thesis anxiety is as multifarious as it is inescapable. It stems from the desire to link a project to the entire discipline, the anxiety of influence, the fear of taking a position, and the dread of closure. This pervasive anxiety is inevitable: any independent project will necessarily encounter major and minor hiccups. The challenge for any program is to minimize their severity. The benefits of working through one's own agenda, defining one's own ambition—while securely within the safety net of school but on the threshold of the profession—are immeasurable, as one can see by looking at Robert Venturi's thesis for his MFA at Princeton in 1950.<sup>2</sup> Entitled "Context in Architectural Composition," he's been continuing the same project ever since. Thesis gave Venturi a valuable bubble of time during which he could initiate this lifelong project. Without being required to face some moment of specificity or editing, a student can all too easily be silenced by architecture's seemingly endless, generalist horizon. The consequence of such silence? Potentially never initiating a lifelong project.

But while architecture is necessarily generalist, research is necessarily specific. In his 2003 novel *Millennium People*, J. G. Ballard—the generalist par excellence—articulated one way out of this dilemma: "Learn the rules and you can get away with anything." But what are the rules? Even if we understand our discipline to be generalist, that certainly doesn't mean that anything goes. Architecture's generalism is what theorist James Chandler, in his article "Critical Disciplinarity," would call a *disciplinary system*—that is, a compounding of specific disciplinary threads.<sup>3</sup> So the key is finding the thread or threads that form a specific area of research.

Faculty advisors are there to help guide this research, but, as Gutman noted in 1985, it's not as if they have a much more focused sense than the students do of what a thesis should be. In his article "Educating Architects: Pedagogy and the Pendulum" [reprinted in this volume, pp. 258–86], Gutman called out two faculty camps: the *purifiers* (who want to focus architectural education on an "ideal-type of cultural object") and the *simulators* (who want to tie students to "real conditions of architectural production"). Today, almost twenty-five years later, this simple split seems almost quaint. While the divide between practice and the academy remains perhaps the greatest gulf in architecture, over the past quarter century the black-and-white simulator/purifier binary has multiplied into innumerable shades of gray, with the simulators engaging anything from fabrication technologies to office organizations to everyday scenarios while a new generation of purifiers argues that architecture's particular ideals

can be found not only in form and history, but also in material and technology. Consequently, today's architectural landscape is populated by plenty of *purifying simulators* and *simulating purifiers*.

How might we alleviate the anxiety over our discipline's multifarious nature? It simply makes sense to put thesis into terms that make it easier for a student to navigate. Rather than a blank slate or a final capstone, why not recast thesis as a *long banquet*, lasting one or even two semesters. As with most banquets, then, the first order of business is to figure out where to sit.

If thesis is a banquet, then each table represents a disciplinary thread already populated by certain figures—contemporary and historical—who have written and built within that particular thread. So, for example, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Rudolf Wittkower, Rafael Moneo, Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, and Anthony Vidler might be sitting at the *language* table. At the *program* table—which would include, among others, the subthreads of precedent, institution, and organization—might be seated Rem Koolhaas, Stan Allen, and R. E. Somol, maybe with Michel Foucault as a special guest. The *form* table could include Wittkower again, Peter Eisenman, Greg Lynn, and Colin Rowe. At *surface*, you might find Gottfried Semper, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Robin Evans, Mark Wigley, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Farshid Moussavi, and Alejandro Zaera-Polo. The seating arrangements are endless. So the student's first task is to pick a table. The faculty's role is to help the students understand what differentiates each one.

In addition to the seating, three things affect any dinner party: *etiquette* (the technique of interaction), *taste* (the quality of the flavors) and *sustenance* (the proposition of the meal—how long it satisfies). Etiquette, or technique, is as important for research as it is for the execution of the final product. The best banquet guests come prepared: they've researched their dinner companions or, at the very least, know how to ask the right questions. And once they understand the rules of the table's disciplinary thread, they probably can indeed get away with anything, from switching seats to dancing atop the centerpiece. But that is only the first step. It is only by stating one's own rules that one can get away with anything but not look the fool. That's the moment people begin to listen.

So how can a student formulate rules? How does one enter into a conversation that's not a mere string of polite questions, but actual engagement? That's perhaps the hardest part of thesis. Architecture's consummate form of research comes from the combination of its

formal and programmatic attributes. Choose well and chew well. It's like selecting from a menu. The artichoke, for example, *looks* complicated, but, using the right technique, artichokes are actually easy to eat, not to mention very tasty. Compare that to eating quail. It's entangled with fine bones that make it extremely complex to eat, no matter what technique you deploy, and in the end it still tastes like chicken. Food (or architecture) shouldn't be so complex that it leads to anxiety.

So students have to work through the menu. And it's the school's role to offer both framework and feedback. Reminding students what categories they should consider keeps their meal well-rounded. Otherwise, it's all too easy for a student to consider a disciplinary thread, such as materiality, in isolation from questions of site, program, historical and theoretical precedents, research and design techniques, and scale. Students need help in figuring out what parameters might best test their hypothesis.

It's all a matter of etiquette, taste, and sustenance—setting up the right parameters for the right proposition or contribution to a thread of disciplinary table talk. Techniques—the methods architects use for research, drawing, and modeling—are intrinsically biased; they tilt an architect's thinking in particular directions by virtue of how the choice of specific working techniques color particular aspects of design. Even loaded with such biases, however, techniques are not in themselves *propositional*. Architectural research, architecture itself, is produced out of the interactions of technique and proposition. And this is precisely the point where people hesitate (students in particular, but everyone in fact). The act of choosing exposes the difficulty of choice, of making a decision, of selecting from the menu. The typical justification for this hesitation among students is that architecture is an "old man's" profession—that architecture doesn't happen until you've accumulated an enormous amount of information or you've become an expert at all aspects of the generalist fields. But it's important to remember that architectural ideas, like most innovations, tend to be the purview of the young. Venturi was only forty-one when he published *Complexity and Contradiction* in 1966, and one can already see this book germinating in his thesis, presented sixteen years earlier. So rather than hesitate, it's important for students to plunge in. How else can we hope for the discipline to evolve?

In short, a proposition is intrinsically opportunistic. Ballard also said that we should place the logic of the visible (architecture) at the service of the invisible (proposition).<sup>4</sup> A proposition—or whatever you

choose to call it: idea, concept, parti, ideology, thesis—can only be defined in proactive terms. While predicated on sufficient knowledge to make a case, a proposition always treads on the uncertain grounds of speculation. Ideally, a successful thesis is a *simulating purifier*: a project that advances the intellectual project of the discipline while also offering an effect on practice that will resonate throughout a graduate's career. Even if Robert Gutman often seemed to wear the hat of the simulator in pushing students to engage problems of the real world, few people knew the intellectual discipline as thoroughly as he did—the players, the histories, the precedents, the stories, and, most importantly, the resonances. He was, ultimately, the quintessential simulating purifier, pushing students to take on that same challenge: to engage the discipline as well as the field. Proposition, or architectural research, readily acknowledges that biases and ambitions are the only way to expand or advance the discipline of architecture. So, students, chew well; we're all looking to you to stand up at your banquet table, and propose an important toast from which we'll all learn.

#### Notes

1 This text springboards from my presentation at the "Paratheses" conference held at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation on February 4, 2006, organized by Jonathan Lott, Brian Price, and Dominic Leong. In revising it for this publication, however, it is Robert Gutman's voice, rather than the conference, that rings through my head. I truly, truly miss his bemused, pointed, and always pertinent questions and comments.

2 Robert Venturi, *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 335–74.

3 James Chandler, "Critical Disciplinarity," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004–5): 355–60.

4 J. G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991): 203.