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A DESIGN STUDIO EXPERIMENT ON SITE AND BUILDING INTEGRATIONS TOWARDS PLACEMAKING

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1. Introduction

"Attempting to introduce you to architecture, the path of my reasoning has led me to that highest point, the source of inspiration. I speak of intention" [Le Corbusier, 1999].

Architectural profession is increasingly being subordinated by fashionable image and object production to meet the desires of today's consumer society, instead of making buildings to dwell and places to live in. Taking *place* as the primary concern of architectural design is a challenging and intricate task. *Place* is usually defined in dictionaries as a particular form of location, of surface, a position or an arrangement. However, *place* definitions are not pragmatic instruments that can be used for form giving to design works, nor are philosophical statements that can shadow realities of architectural built work. My concern on place is how its components can be conceptualized to form a body of knowledge that can creatively inform and generate architectural design [Deviren, 2001]. Hence, I see placemaking as the central activity of architectural praxis and as one. That kind of approach to architecture is applicable to architectural design at all scales, from details of a building to settlements. It necessitates contextual thinking and integrates ecological consciousness into architectural design process since the contexts and the components of real world places are considered.

This paper describes an experimental design project in a beginning design studio focusing on fundamentals of placemaking. By being the instructor of the studio I have determined the main goal of the project and the studio work as 'to introduce students with contextual thinking that would help them to explore and understand the nature of site and building integrations', which relates architectural design product to its ground, since definition of *ground* is the fundamental level of identification of place types.

2. On the design problem

"A beginner, unfettered by rules of having to be something special, sees only what the answers might be and knows not what they should be. The one who thinks of himself as an expert, on the other hand, is bounded by the rules that govern being an expert. Such a person considers himself or herself as something special, the one who knows the "correct" answers should be, yet is too often blind to what other answers might be. The beginner is free to explore and to discover while the self-appointed expert grows rigid in a self-created prison" [Maser, 1996].

In the case of introducing beginning students with fundamentals of placemaking, first, it was needed to focus on the question of 'what is the nature of architecture and its context?'. "Though its limits cannot be set, and should perhaps always be under review, architecture is not a free art of mind. Discounting for the moment those architectural projects that are designed never to be realized, as

conceptual or polemic statements, the process of architecture are operated in (or on) a real world with real characteristics: gravity, the ground and the sky, solid and space, the progress of time, and so on. Also architecture is operated by and for people, who have needs and desires, beliefs and aspirations; who have aesthetic sensibilities which are affected by warmth, touch, odor, sound, as well as by visual stimuli; who do things, and whose activities have practical requirements; who see meanings and significance in the world around them" [Unwin, 1997]. Although it is obvious that we can not rely on only one definition of architecture to understand its nature and context, Unwin's definition is important to view architecture, its nature and its relation to real world as the basis of its operation process. The real world characteristics and components also constitute the context in which places can be generated through architectural design. But, how? This leaded to a second question that focused on how students can be informed in a way that can help them to become critical and creative designers who can differentiate the nature and the results of *architectural design* than that of *object design*, since object design mostly considers objects in themselves but architectural design necessitates a contextual approach to the nature and design of built work that relates it to its setting in real world.
A further step was taken to interrelate the way of thinking introduced by these two critical questions with an experimental design problem. The primary educational objectives of the design problem were set as the following: (1) to introduce students with contextual thinking in order to motivate them to deal with architectural design problems that are naturally place specific, (2) to develop a consciousness on relations between an architectural design proposal and its setting in real world context by simulative design exercises, (3) to involve students in a creative thinking process that would help them to deal with complex, uncertain and sometimes contradictory nature of architectural problems, (4) to increase experience in architectural programming by giving a flexible program that can be developed by students during the design process, (5) to evoke ecological sensitivity and awareness.

3. On the process of the project 'unitopography'

"Let us go slowly towards the spot where we propose to build the house," said the cousin, as soon as they were out doors; "a knowledge of the ground is the first of all that the architect should posses" [Viollet-Le-Duc, 1874].
The studio consisted of fourteen second semester students, enrolled in the undergraduate program of the College of Architecture at Texas A&M University. The experimental design project 'unitopography' was planned to cover nine weeks of a sixteen week semester in spring 2005. The problem was defined as design of an individual living unit by using modular planar and linear space defining elements, then, integration of all the individual units on a collective site to form a small scale experimental settlement. The title of the project is also summarizing the idea behind the design problem.
The design process of the experimental project has been carried out in three major steps. From the beginning of the process students were involved and encouraged to explore the ways to transform abstract ideas, schemes and sketches into two and three dimensional physical models. These models were used as instruments to construct relations between elements, spaces and the site conditions –the context..

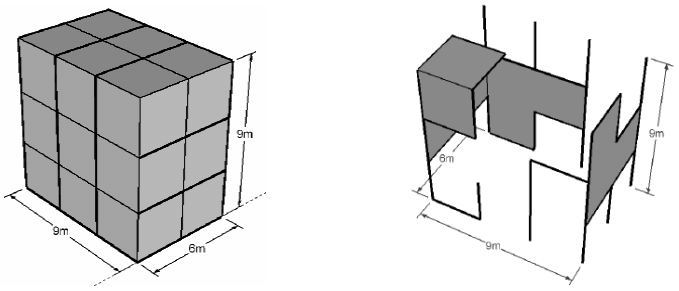

Figure 1. The box and a sample deconstruction of it into liner and planar elements

The first step of the project has covered one week and the students deconstructed a given rectangular prism box model into modular pieces to obtain linear and planar space defining elements. (Figure 1.) According to the given architectural program they have organized the planar elements in two dimensional compositions in order to form *plan* layouts of their living units. (Figure 2.) The idea was to help the students to experience and to explore the ways of creating various compositions by using similar modular elements and to make exercises on *ground* definition of their design works.

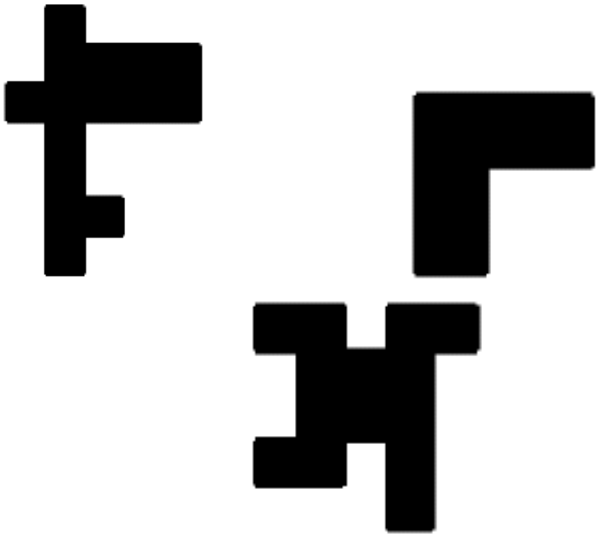

Figure 2. Samples of plan organizations with planar elements

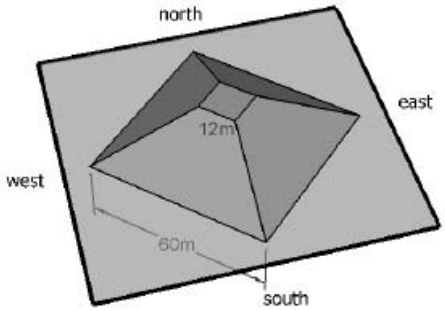

Figure 3. The 'island' - the collective site model

During step two, the students worked for two weeks on three dimensional, mass model organizations of linear and planar elements to define open, semi-open and closed spaces of their living unit. In step three the students made a collective site model -an 'island', and worked for developing an experimental settlement on it for the last six weeks of the process. It was hypothesized that open participation and motivation in the design studio can be promoted by making this island model with the contribution of all students as a teamwork. 'Island' was used as a metaphor to represent a special topographical condition that is open to all directions and a limited piece of land surrounded by water as a natural boundary. The idea was to provide a simulation model of a natural place to work with. The island was given a pyramidal form with a cut off top part defining the center of this place, which was kept as the central open area of the experimental settlement that was going to be developed. (Figure 3.) The students worked on re-forming and detailing their mass models to form their living units and to integrate them with site conditions (topography, directions and, hot and dry climate).

(Figure 4., 5. and 6.) By doing that, they have also developed and re-modified the given architectural program in order to complete the scenario, the spatial order and the landscape of this experimental settlement with connecting pathways, shared open areas, etc. (Figure 7.)

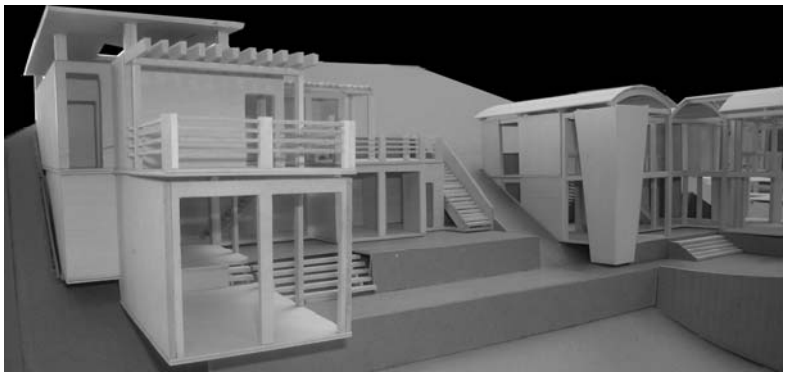

Figure 4. Living units on north-east slope (Kristen Buckalew (on the left) and Nicholas Thorn)

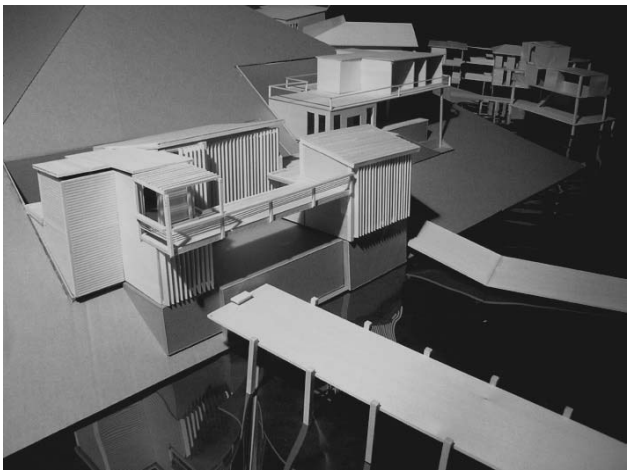

Figure 5. Living units on south-west slope (Darryl Rubscha (on the left) and Rachel Corley)

Figure 6. Students working on to integrate their living unit design works with the site model

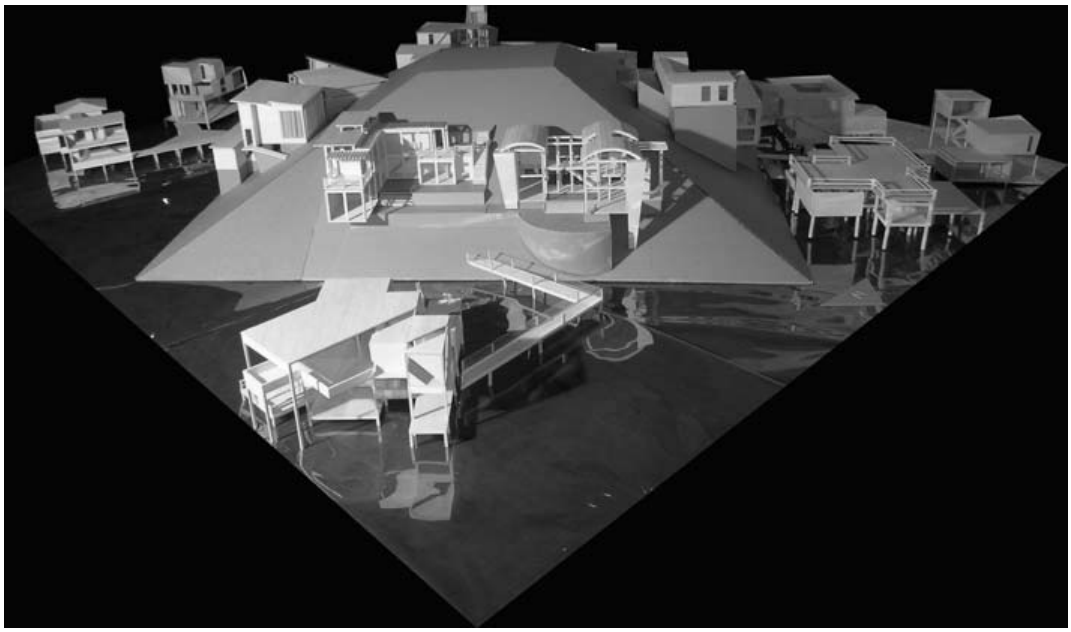

Figure 7. 'Unitopography'

The explained steps of this studio work did not constitute segregated phases; rather, they followed an interrelated and interactive flow in an investigative and experimental design process. The flow was not totally controlled, except the beginning and final submission dates, to allow spontaneous creativeness that can bring unforeseen opportunities. In addition to individual creativity, the teamwork and the collective site model created a highly interactive and motivated design environment in the studio.

4. Critical observations on the design studio experience

The goal of this nine week design process was to help students move forward in a way that they can contextualize their conceptual thinking and individual design works towards placemaking. That was a comprehensive and complex process including both individual and teamwork design study in the studio at the same time. Both the experimental character of the project and the design environment in the studio motivated students to focus on and work with interrelationships of site, building and programming. Particularly, the collective site model played a key role in this process. (Figure 8.) It became a dynamic interface for communicating design knowledge in the studio and morphologically has been evolved by active participation of all students during three major steps of the design process to form a *topological setting* – a microcosmos.

The following observations have been made during this design studio experience: (1) It helped the students to understand that site and building relations in architecture can not be viewed merely as formal and visual figure-ground relations and that they are naturally interrelated; (2) it fostered creativity and design sensitivity by focusing on design in different scales; (3) it motivated the students to think critically and comprehensively on designing for complex needs; (4) it helped the students to realize architectural creation not as an object production but as generating a living complex, (5) in a broader sense, invoked contextual consciousness and incorporated basic ecological design principles towards placemaking.

At this beginning studio, during the design process the students followed an experimental path to understand the fundamentals of placemaking through architectural design. At each step they have confronted with the challenges of designing for diverse human needs, interdependencies and interrelations of site, building and programming that necessitates ecological adoptions and different responsibilities than that of object and image production. Even though the 'unitopography' project

remains experimental in character, it has reached its goal if it informed beginners' minds to think creatively and critically on the question of 'what can be the architectural response to the challenge of placemaking?'

Figure 8. Beginning students observing "unitopography"

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