

ARCH 793a  
**ARCHITECTURAL  
DIRECTED DESIGN RESEARCH  
(THESIS PREP)**  
2.0 UNITS  
Fall, 2016  
M 12:30-1:50pm

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### **Introduction:**

The typical academic focus on innovation, originality and creativity often takes architecture's own identity for granted. What seems like an appropriate focus of an architectural education gets overlooked as the student dives right into *design* from the start, ever confident that architecture will be the result. But when it's time for thesis and the student is finally on their own—when the core studio briefs and programs disappear, or the vocational crutches of technique, methodology, or software are removed—it is no longer so obvious what this thing, architecture, *is*.

This does not mean that the student is not thinking throughout, but that this thought is generally tactical rather than ontological. While architecture is notable for the degree and character of the thought that goes into its design, as well as its self-consciousness, it is not particularly known for its self-awareness. Yet, whether or not architecture is the catalyst or subject, the *academic* experience will always somehow involve thinking: school is a place for learning, and the test for proving that something-has-been-learned involves not just the reproduction of effects but a demonstrated awareness of the reasons for deploying them. The “architectural thesis,” a catch-all term that dignifies final semester's studio effort, is the final test of this awareness.

“Thesis” comes from the Greek θέσις, for “proposition,” “to place before.” The architectural thesis can be understood as a proposition, “placed before” the jury, about architecture. Architecture's elective nature demands this, in fact. Each actual instance of architecture stands, itself, as a proposition: that architecture should *be*, rather than not be (since building alone is sufficient). Therefore, the architectural thesis must necessarily include, if not feature, the student's answer to the question of architecture itself. An architectural thesis involves both thinking and imagination, a demonstration of this answer and exploration of its consequences. Thesis claims a territory, which it maps out in relation to the discipline and larger culture.

Architecture has become a question that demands a thesis because the answer is no longer given. Historically, the architect worked within received traditions and architecture was expected to exemplify well understood conventions. Today, though, such traditions “are history” and conventions are seen as repressive, or boring. Today, each architect has to figure out the answer for themselves, and demonstrate that answer in each example of their work. The Hippocratic Oath sworn by doctors urges them to “do no harm;” the responsibility the architect *must* accept in proposing their answer is far greater.

In an era when everyone gets an award for participation, though, the *necessity* for invention is often confused for creativity, and the burden of responsibility that comes with architecture's elective status is misunderstood as entitlement. Architecture is not immune to the general bias toward novelty and originality in cultural production, and this has disrupted the balance of competence and creativity within the field. Consequently, un-judge-able idiosyncrasy or incomprehensible complexity are routinely applauded, while the remarkableness of architecture's elective presence is taken for granted.

The doctor's responsibility is to the individual patient, but the architect is also responsible to the community. Beyond the client for whom the design is created there is always a larger pool of folks who will come in contact with it as the context for their lives—the audience, the users, the viewers, the passers by—but they never have any direct hand in the design's determination. If the most basic obligation of community is to communicate (with the corresponding assumption that such communication is trustworthy, intentional), and if its sheer presence makes architecture voluble, then architecture in particular needs to take charge of what it is saying. Despite being crucified for the poor management of meaning (modernism), criticized for anachronistic meaning (HistoPOMO), or celebrated for denying any responsibility for it (Decon), architecture continues to attract interpretation, meaning and sense.

Architecture distinguishes itself from “mere building” on this basis. Architecture is meaningful. It is through this meaningfulness that architecture accomplishes its primary mission of “place us in our world.” This role—consciously pursued or not—is true of all of architecture, and for each individual architect's version. Further, the responsibility bestowed by architecture's elective status stipulates the *need* for such a version. While the strength of this demand might be challenged--whether it is an imperative or a description--all architectures will exemplify it to some degree, and this plays a substantial role in the determination of the thesis as an architectural *proposition*.

In the academic context as a thesis, Architecture is not simply a statement of personal genius. A thesis is a demonstration of how that genius connects with the world—and thus also how it fulfills architecture's public responsibility. So it requires the student's ideas to operate/communicate/make sense out in the world among other minds. In other words, not the ineffable stuff, but the stuff that can be communicated to others, and which therefore necessarily invites judgment of its clarity, rigor, discipline, etc. (and allows it to identify all of the corollary ideas that follow from and fill out the basic proposition). In accepting the responsibility to place us in our world, architecture must be rich enough to sustain that world and provide the fuel for continued exploration and development.

### **Course Organization:**

This course constitutes the *Thesis Prep Seminar*, required of M.Arch and M.AAS candidates at USC for the semester prior to the *Thesis Design Studio* in the year-long thesis sequence. As the “official” name implies (Architectural Directed Design Research), it will involve research that is both directed (not open-ended) and design related. As the unofficial name implies (Thesis Prep) this semester is intended as preparation for the design work in the following semester, so that the design semester can be more productive and rewarding. It is imperative that students take both these senses to heart if they wish to have a successful thesis at USC.

Many years of experience in the thesis mills of academia have taught that this seemingly simple and straightforward goal may be better approached obliquely. The pressure of “coming up with something original” outside a context of necessity is conducive to neither decisiveness nor discrimination. Therefore, to avoid consuming the bulk of the following “design” semester in making up for what was not actually accomplished during the “prep” semester, the USC “prep” experience will be pared down to a single, clearly understandable task.

### **During the entire 793a semester the student will exhaustively document and critically analyze a single architectural precedent.**

This precedent will be chosen by the student during the first week of class. The “deliverable” at the end of the semester, upon which advancement to the following design semester depends, will be a report that assembles this documentation and analysis into a comprehensive, finite (complete) package. **The “thesis” that emerges naturally—by necessity—from this work during the following semester will be “simply” the design of a “new” version of that precedent, which**

**measurably improves upon the original according to the criteria discovered and enumerated in the “prep” semester’s critical documentation and analysis.**

This organization dramatically shifts the axes of judgement away from difference and novelty to excellence and innovation, with the documented precedent offering a proven standard. Since “there is nothing new under the sun,” and “everything has already been done” the exclusive focus on precedents should not be at all limiting. At the final 793b DDR review in the Spring, the documented precedent will be presented alongside the thesis project design, encouraging a direct comparison of the two versions by the critics and requiring the student to own the differences.

Because thesis is so important in the student’s career, per the introductory remarks above, it is entirely appropriate that the student pick their “favorite” building as a precedent, without excessive worry about its suitability. The precedent’s prior status as “favorite” should already establish its aptness, again according to the measure outlined in the Introduction. During the Fall prep semester, the student will demonstrate, or discover, why that precedent is favored. If every building/design is already a thesis about architecture or statement of what architecture is or should be, then examining why the student is drawn to that chosen example (obliquely, through documentation and analysis) should reveal to the student a lot about their own (previously unexamined) architectural sense and assumptions. This newly revealed understanding then naturally becomes the guide to the design of the student’s new and improved version of that favored building during the Spring design semester.

For convenience’s sake the precedents will be required to be buildings, though systems (structural, envelope, etc) or other media (cinema, games, etc) may be considered if an adequate relationship to architecture, and potential for exploration in a building design, can be demonstrated. The burden for making such a demonstration will be on the student, as a condition of acceptance by the instructor. In order to maintain the desired standards of comparison, though, students who elect to study precedents other than buildings will have the additional requirement to document that precedent’s relationship to specific buildings, in such a way that the following semester’s eventual building design will be adequately supported.

The student will be responsible for choosing their own precedent. Students may request help from their instructors in this regard only as a last resort. Despite the organization of students into sections and an interest in those sections being “themed” or “coordinated,” it is imperative that the students feel that they own their choice and their choice of section *follows* from that. For all these reasons, concern about whether the student’s precedent is good architecture, is immaterial: The Fall semester’s research will naturally take up this question and the Spring semester will answer it by improving the poor choice or validating the good one.

### **Goals/Objectives**

- To gain experience researching basic historical and theoretical issues in architecture.
- To gain experience thinking originally about architectural issues within a well understood context such that their thoughts may be communicated and evaluated by others.
- To gain experience communicating non-obvious ideas about architecture in a variety of media.
- To gain experience accurately documenting architecture
- To gain experience analyzing architectural precedents
- To support DDR/Thesis students in developing their individual interests and strengthening their independent voices as they formulate their approach to their Research Project.
- To strengthen understanding of how contemporary cultural and technological factors shape the development of the built environment in general and architectural practice in particular.

## **Schedule**

All class meetings will be on Mondays, 1230-150pm, held in either Watt 1 for LECTURES, or assigned section meeting areas for sections. Two sections will be located in Watt 1 for the duration of the semester, while four will take up the corners of the third floor and one section will be in Linhurst

### **Meeting 1 (22 Aug) WAH 1**

- Course Introduction
- Instructor's introduced, present individual section focus/theme
- students choose instructors/sections by lottery on basis of this presentation

### **Meeting 2 (29 Aug) WAH 1**

- Lecture on UTILITY OF PRECEDENTS
- Break out: in sections students discuss precedents, choice

### **LABOR DAY HOLIDAY MON 5 September—no meeting**

- Precedent choices due to instructor by email

### **Meeting 3 (12 Sept)**

- In sections, review of precedents, choices

### **Meeting 4 (19 Sept) WAH 1**

- Victor Jones lecture on DOCUMENTATION, with examples
  - purpose, kinds

### **Meeting 5 (26 Sept)**

- In sections

### **Meeting 6 (3 Oct) WAH 1**

- Amy Murphy lecture on HISTORY, with examples
  - design: early schemes, place in oeuvre, alternates, process
  - reception/influence: initial, later, current

### **Meeting 7 (10 Oct)**

- In sections

### **Meeting 8 (17 Oct) WAH 1**

- Peter Zellner lecture on ANALYSIS, with examples
  - appreciation
  - critique

### **Meeting 9 (24 Oct) WAH 1**

- Jose Sanchez lecture

### **Meeting 10 (31 Oct)**

- In sections

### **Meeting 11 (7 Nov) WAH 1**

- Yaohua Wang lecture

### **Meeting 12 (14 Nov)**

- In sections

### **Meeting 13 (21 Nov) WAH 1**

-Cliff Pearson lecture

### **Meeting 14 (28 Nov)**

-In sections

### **Meeting 15 (5 Dec) WAH 1**

Presentation of 4 selected precedents from sections

-review of individual's work

-discussion of individual's precedent's relation to section theme

### **Deliverables/Final DDR report**

A report is required at the conclusion of the initial "thesis prep" 793a semester and a Final Report will be due at the conclusion of the "thesis" 793b design semester, at the date specified by the University for thesis submission. These reports are required to be submitted as a pdf, with embedded animations as appropriate. The following outline is the required structure of the initial "thesis prep" 793a DDR report:

#### 1. DOCUMENTATION

##### a. Summary description of the building

1. Architect(s)/Author
2. Date of design/construction
3. Location
4. Program
5. Size
6. Systems (structure, construction, etc)
7. Reasons for choice

##### b. Plans

##### c. Sections

##### d. Elevations

##### e. 3D dwgs—axos, perspectives

##### f. Diagrams—as appropriate to document salient features

#### 2. HISTORY

##### a. Design

1. Early schemes and alternates
2. Place in oeuvre
3. Process

##### b. Reception/influence

1. initial, later, current

#### 3. ANALYSIS

##### a. Appreciation

1. Why this precedent was chosen
2. What is good about it beyond that personal preference

##### b. Critique

1. What is wrong with it
2. **Suggestions for improvement (this effectively becomes the design proposal for the following semester)**

#### 4. Bibliography and References

## **The fine print:**

### *Course Requirements and Grades*

Grades will be determined based upon quality of work produced, improvement over the course of the semester, completion of class requirements, quality of participation, attendance, attitude and ethical conduct. USC grading policies will be discussed on the first day of studio, and any questions regarding grades or policies should be directed to the instructor and/or the registrar. A passing grade in the course requires committed completion of all assigned work. Incomplete work will not be evaluated.

### *Attendance Policy*

Any student who is absent will be expected to make up any missed assignments or work sessions missed; any student who is absent more than five times during a fifteen-week term, regardless of reason or efforts to make up the missed work, will not receive credit for the course. The instructor may view unexcused lateness or departures from class as full absences.

### *Statement for Students with Disabilities*

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 am - 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 7400776.

### *Accreditation Statement:*

The USC School of Architecture's five year BARCH degree and their two and three year MARCH programs are accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB.) . All students can access and review the NAAB Conditions of Accreditation (including the Student Performance Criteria) on the NAAB Website: [http://www.naab.org/accreditation/2014\\_Conditions](http://www.naab.org/accreditation/2014_Conditions)

### *2010 Imperative Statement*

"The design should engage the environment in a way that dramatically reduces or eliminates the need for fossil fuel."

### *Statement on Academic Integrity*

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A:

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>

Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at:

<http://www.usc.edu/studentaffairs/SJACS/>