Advisor

Yale University
Mike Tower (MT) and Andrew Mazor (AM)

Is a university the best environment for creative work?

MT: It plays a large role. I don’t know if it’s the only place. But yes, of course, the structure is there in the university. It isn’t necessarily utilized. It becomes a professional system like any other. The issues of tenure and who stays, who goes, whose in charge, whose running the place, whose finding that hierarchy in all those sorts of things really plays a very large role in what goes on in the school. There’s a great responsibility on teachers and on deans and heads of schools to really raise the stakes and it doesn’t happen very often.

How much leverage did your studio mentors or professors give to you? Which of their methodologies most impacted your own thesis work?

AM: It’s an extremely political question between professors and their superiors and things like that. I think it’s… it’s, you know, part of the thing at Yale was at one point, you know, the Dean wanted projects, he wanted sites. He wanted buildings and he wanted architecture in quotes.

There’s a constant dilemma I mean with our advisor who is very interested in exploring the way the thesis is set up before we do the actual thesis semester work in studio. We have a thesis prep which is fairly common and we discuss a number of issues that deal with locating your project within a site. What Keller Easterling would say, who was wanting to explore with us as you were interested in here, was about the issue of how your project is bound within a certain cultural intelligence but kind of falls out of the specific geographic location — something more risqué. Mike was looking at a prototypical house and I was looking at these manufacturing sites which really there are no geographic sites for these things. So in that sense there is a certain realness to it but at the same time I guess we can go back to fantasy.

MT: To answer the other question about the kind of support we got from critics, I would like to throw in my experience as well. I had a really positive experience with my advisor which was Ed Mitchell. Keller advised us in general and became a specific advisor to Andrew.

AM: Ed Mitchell was my secondary advisor.

MT: Ed and I had a really great dialogue and good rapport – Keller as well. From the courses he has taught, from what he has written, from his work I knew there was affinity so I sought him out when I decided to do a thesis. The interesting thing is, and this has a lot to do with the responsibility of the student to be accountable for their work, I never felt corrected or told to stop doing one thing or another. It was always understood at the end of the discussion what I should do. He didn’t have to say anything. I just felt like I’d produce a certain amount of work and we’d meet with him or we would meet regularly too. It was insane how many meetings we had.

AM: There was a lot of concern for our development.

MT: Yeah, we were handled like...

AM: …we had a lot of attention paid to us...

MT: …which was good and intimidating but mostly good. And so I would find myself just kind of producing an amount of work and thinking hard about certain issues. We would discuss it the next time we met and certain thoughts would come up and I’d say, well this is what I’m going to do. And he’d be like, yeah, I think that’s a good idea.

And it wasn’t that he was indifferent. I think he was thoroughly interested and felt someway invested in the research and I think that’s really important. It’s not just the kind of responsibility of educators to listen, to give direction, or to stand from afar and say well, you’ve done this wrong and this wrong. Here I applaud you and praise you and you move on. I think there needs to be a real professional...
what's the word? It's almost personal but I don't want to imply that a friendship necessarily needs to come out of this. But really it's about a true investment in your ideas. I think they need to feel that they are a part of this in a way – that they share. I mean that's why I sought him out. Because I know his concern is about the same kinds of issues as I am trying to answer, as difficult as they may be.

AM: There's an interesting dialogue between or dilemma between having an original work or original thought or critical thought and then also on what level does thesis become just your work, or also are you being taught at the same time? So how does that sort of...and that sort of relationship between professor and thesis student becomes very interesting.

Not only did Keller give a lot of support and now that I look back at it, guidance through my topic and not necessarily giving her opinion as to what I should end up with or what I should be doing, but questioning the moves I made in a way that would allow for the development.

What key questions were fundamental to the development of your work?

AM: Well, maybe they weren't key questions. It was more about questioning the direction that she and I were talking about. And when I was interested in going in a certain way with the project, it would become more fixated on a specific site. And I say site being a certain geographic location whereas by going about it in a more abstract way, separating it from its location, it becomes more compelling to the project and something I really sought after in doing this project and the research. So it was a really excellent experience.

What key questions were fundamental to the development of your work?

AM: Well, maybe they weren't key questions. It was more about questioning the direction that she and I were talking about. And when I was interested in going in a certain way with the project, it would become more fixated on a specific site. And I say site being a certain geographic location whereas by going about it in a more abstract way, separating it from its location, it becomes more compelling to the project and something I really sought after in doing this project and the research. So it was a really excellent experience.

MT: And I should also add, too, because at least in my case it was a little bit different. I added onto what was a separate thesis studio a separate but joined research study. What I realized was that there was a lot of actual text and information that I needed to go through that went along with the actual studio work, the actual physical study of what went on. Eva Liserpulinen was my advisor on that. She worked with me on the paper component that went with that. She was an incredible resource – as enthused as Ed Mitchell was in that process.

So I feel like that really rounded it out. And that added another critical voice in the discussions. Amazingly, I didn't feel that it stifled me in the least bit. I can't imagine having a regular studio assignment and having three full time critics. I've had some experiences with two and it was terrible.

Cooper Union
Yael Erel (YE) and Tao Sule (TS)

Could you describe the relationship you had with your thesis professor?

YE: Basically, the way the studio worked each semester was that we had four faculty advisors that would basically come around on studio days. Some of them, usually for a student request, would come on weekends and basically have desk conversations. The amounts that you would have with each person was, I think, personal...like it was random. It didn't work on a structure for each advisor but it was kind of a casual entrance to the studio and talking.

TS: Well, they would come to your desk and speak to you on individual levels. This was in second semester. What we were actually doing our thesis first semester was structured differently. There would be reviews where you presented to the class...

YE: ...and sometimes faculty.

TS: There was open discourse between you and the faculty and the rest of the class which was...specific.

YE: I think sometimes there were confused...there were different faculty members who would say different, give different advice, or have different confronting views on the topic, naturally, or what you were working on. And either you had to make up your mind or sometimes you would have to call a conference or kind of have...but I think in a way it's a very healthy way to not let one view dictate basically. Really make up your own mind because no one really agrees, unless they do agree, then you are probably in trouble. You have to do that (laughs).
So basically, I find that I got a lot of guidance based on referencing my reading matter and visual material and trying to figure out a strategy in which I wanted for the thesis project or a way of conceptualizing it. Sometimes I got a little too physical too fast and needed to get...you know, I got some guidance both the way I was thinking and you know, strategy wise, but I think I got enough to really make up my own mind, you know. I got enough I would like to think.

I think that some of them were very more structured than others so they made sure they see everyone at least once a week and that no one is really hiding somewhere. So, I think, there was a consideration to make sure no one was really left out or doesn't get a conversation but I do think sometimes you know...but it's about chemistry as well but basically there was some sort of structure that they followed.

TS: It was also interesting the first year group project [a group project done in fall semester before the individual thesis project in spring], class project, so to speak that sort of generated in the studio itself a kind of war more or less but some more than some less – a kind of physicality between students whereby when you begin second semester your project was not necessarily just yours in the kind of solitary sense. A thesis would be...it was yours in the sense that it was...It was yours in the same sense that it was also the class's but you would actually discuss your ideas with other students.

And the reason I am saying this is that I think, I assume actually, that it was the way that the instructors, faculty structured the class the first semester that was deliberate in order to construct a new model where, because of your dealing with the influences within your very own peers, each project would have a certain physicality in one sense but would also have...it would be very specific in your interest there by making most projects actually very interesting. So, I think I would not say all but some of the faculty could actually relate to each project with almost the same level of interest and could fluctuate at the same level of considerate thoughtfulness because they had really truly fostered a relationship where they had a real interest in the projects.

University Notre Dame

Tiffany Haile (TH)

Did your professors have different approaches to design thesis? Were you allowed to choose your professor?

TH: We were given a choice to a point. You can't have overloading of a studio. We chose our thesis critics. I knew that the critic I chose was going to be able to help me a lot in thinking about urbanism as well as the building that I wanted to design. And so that's one of the reasons why I chose him. One of our critics was very much into the high classical architecture. So students who felt their building was going to take on that sort of character I think tended toward him. And the third professor, we had three that we could choose from, was a very open-minded man. He's taught at Notre Dame for many years. He provided an opportunity to explore within reason. He wasn't so caught up with stylistic or urbanistic mind points though he was very good at keeping you in line, keeping those things as part of your project. He didn't...he had less of a personal ideology that was steeped in traditional architecture.

So students who wanted to explore other things like deconstruction or things like that, he kept you honest about what you were doing – a very good critic. So that was another option. So we were given three options as studio professors. I think people leaned towards either familiarity or a personal relationship, or they had the professor from another class, things like that. So, there was no strict ordering per se that we were given a critic.

How did your professors help or support you during in the design thesis? In what ways could they have better prepared you?

TH: Well, like I said, the critic I had chosen to work with was very much involved in urbanism as well as knowledgeable about architecture. So in that way he was a good resource. And we had many informal meetings as well as studio desk crits. We would have a crit in studio and really talk about my design, and when I was a little confused or things like that, we would go into his office and maybe he would pull out a book or two to look at and often they weren't...you wanted the answer that you wanted to be in those books but usually it was some sort of philosophical question or a type of drawing that he thought would help you
relationship...like if you’re serious about what you’re studying a professor sees that. And at Notre Dame there’s really never a problem about getting a professor to meet with you before or after class or for a longer period of time. The help was always there.

So I would say just, you know, if you’re serious about what you’re studying, which you should be by thesis or whatever you’ve chosen since you do get to choose it, just approach...be mentored by people who you think can help you and just open up a dialogue. I mean, I talked about issues in my thesis with professors who didn’t even teach thesis – a professor that I had the year before. Maybe there’s an issue that I knew they really knew about or they had written a book about or something.

Can you give an example?

TH: Let’s see. I know that I wanted to have a wood truss as the structural element in this great hall. One of the professors I had in my fourth year was referred to me by my thesis professor. Go talk to Professor Crow about this. I know he’ll be able to help you with the form of it and the structure. Or we were told, go talk to your old structures professor and see if this works. So we were sent or encouraged to talk to those people in the school that had vast knowledge in different areas of thesis. So I went to talk to him about that and we sat down and he maybe did a little sketch or something for a half hour.

So I think thesis is an exciting time for the professors, those who help you during it and those who have taught you over the years, to see what you can come up with and what drives you in terms of architecture and things. So there is help all around. You’re encouraged to access the help when we needed it or advice and things like that.

The Pennsylvania State University
Christopher Renn (CR) and Daniel Mayer (DM)

Could you talk about your relationship with your advisors? How could they have better prepared you for the design thesis?

CR: It is such a self-motivated thing that it is really hard to think there is...

DM: ...I would have liked to have seen more exposure to different ideas in the earlier years. It’s just now that thesis is over that we are quizzing our professors for books to read and people to look at and things like that and they all have really amazing knowledge of these things and I would have liked to have been exposed to those earlier.

I think that the role of the advisor in the thesis was just that, an advisor. It wasn’t someone to sort of like...well, I don’t know if advisor is the right word. They’re not there to correct you or to make sure you do it right. They’re there to sort of prod you and ask you questions. They’re not there to make the value judgments on what you do but to make sure that you do...and do it consistently.

What makes Penn State unique as a place to develop a design thesis?

DM: I think for me it’s the personal contact with our professors and administrators. I feel like I’m privileged at this university among all of the university students here that I know my professors and I talk to them on a daily basis and we call each other by our first name and I know their children and their husbands and wives. And they come in here on the weekend and we go out and have dinner together and that’s the kind of contact that is really hard to find at a university.

CR: And that doesn’t result in a lack of respect in any way. The way that you communicate with professors, you almost felt like it made you work harder. I think, because of, like, you didn’t want to let your professor down, you know, when they show as much interest as you do or a lot of interest then, you know, you’re trying to live up to something.