Culture

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

Describe the culture at Cooper Union. What makes it a unique place to do a design thesis?

YE: I see them in two ways, well more than two ways. The architecture school, first of all, the architecture school has an engineering and art school in it as well. And for me the art school is very helpful. It’s something that I’ve always had a relationship with – a place that I’ve had a relationship with and something I am very, very happy to have been exposed to. Different degrees of art classes that I have been exposed to seep into my architectural work giving different depth or meaning or perspective or…on my work architecturally through a totally different place of creating which is the less intellectual of the school, well maybe not less intellectual, but for me less of a physical non-straightforward architecture – but something that gets the same thing through a different sense. So for me that is critical in my thesis. That was a critical part. And then as part of my thesis I had an advisor from the art school. I took a class where I basically talked about my work and saw my thesis through her eyes. So I had a very fruitful relationship. As to the architecture school, okay do you want to go?

I see the architecture school…I think there is a tradition of rigorous intellectual studies and structural concerns…and an idea or a developing consciousness about the discipline of architecture which is not always the fantasy part of architecture. It’s something…is up there with maybe…sometimes you develop something in just a parallel language to architecture…like finding architectural tools or implementing them.

TS: I wish we had gone to more schools to see what they were like so I have a kind of contrast. I think two things. I don’t think two things. I think one. Cooper Union, it must considered demographically I would say. It’s very small and very international in terms of the enrollment component, students – a small, international body. So now that in itself, regardless of the faculty, regardless of the course work, regardless of the actual discipline of architecture, I mean, that alone creates a certain kind of environment for learning that is fantastic – fantasy again. That is one thing that is very important.

The culture of the studio which is not a Cooper culture, it is a lot of architecture student studio culture, the idea, the notion, is that each year is run by very specific faculty and the students don’t have a choice that you might have in a larger school where they might choose what professor you want to teach you. Here it is very specific who teaches you as you go through the years. That in a sense could be a bit dangerous because you don’t really have control of much. But what is very, I don’t know if it is unique because I don’t know if it is done at other architecture schools, but what I am very, very grateful for in this school is that each year has very specific faculty, but the faculty represents also a very specific set of ideas.

Most times that I have witnessed, sometimes they alter, but the fact that the faculty has conviction is very, very important and it means that they have a desire to teach you something as opposed to simply the desire to teach you. I think that is critical. Maybe that could be difficult, maybe not, but it has worked very well for me personally. For some strange reason the only thing that goes into my mind…everything I say in my mind and think about the culture of a place, I just think there are so many people here from all over the world doing so many things…just on a very basic kind of human level I would just come here for that. So it’s been quite an enjoyable time for that experience.

University of Notre Dame
Tiffany Haile (TH)

Could you talk about the culture at Notre Dame? What makes it a unique place to study architecture and develop a design thesis?

YE: site map
water as ground: a habitation
TH: Well, I think obviously, the sort of, you know, the classical and traditional urbanism – the focus on that, I think, is something that is not common, you know, across a lot of architecture schools. That’s putting it lightly. But that, I think, is a very different culture, the idea that you study the past to come up with new ways of solving the problems of the future but don’t ignore what came before you. Don’t ignore the site. Don’t just think that you can impose a building on something. Respond to the site whether it’s to site constraints like water or things like that, or also just look at the buildings around you. You know you’re not designing in a vacuum and the world you live in is not in a vacuum. Even though you might have a secluded site it somehow, whether it affects a watershed or it affects a trail, it affects something. So look at the way that you’re interacting with the world. So in that way, I think that Notre Dame is interesting because of the aspects of not only what you’re doing but what’s around you is always an important part of designing anything.

I think also the architecture school is known for its watercolor renderings. But the professors I had are just as interested in process as they are in product. The product is what you see in the magazines and newsletters. But the process is what you don’t see and what every student goes through no matter what style or what place they’re designing or anything like that. When all of that falls away there is still the underlying process, the problem solving process that I think is unique because you’re looking at things in multiple scales.

Being steeped in tradition and learning I find now that working in a firm who does traditional buildings and traditional urbanism, the important thing for my education is that we learned the rules. And once you know the rules you know when it’s appropriate to break and to not break those rules. But until you know those rules, any set of rules, you can’t really understand the inverse of it. And so for me, whether you go on to pursue in your career the very sort of architecture that we were taught or not, it’s sort of moot. It’s really about having a process and a way in which to do it. And that’s one way of looking at architecture and designing architecture. But the process of design within that is still just a process.

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

Could you talk about the culture at Penn State? What makes it a unique place to study architecture and develop a design thesis?

CR: I’m not sure that we’re part of a culture that’s as prevalent anymore. Things are changing pretty rapidly. I have a lot of interaction with the younger kids because I really enjoy interacting with them, especially sitting down and talking to them about their projects. I really get more from it than they do probably and maybe it’s really selfish but I think that there is a culture, not even what that is, but the fact that there is a strong culture that pushes us all and drives us all.

DM: That is something else that varies from year to year. When I was a freshman and in second year we didn’t have as much contact with the upper years as we as fifth years have maintained with the younger years. It depends. I know the first time that I came [to Penn State] I was still in high school and convinced that I was going to be an engineer or something. And it was walking through the studios that really convinced me that this is what I wanted to do. I walked through and just looked at all of the models and drawings and watched a critique and decided this is what I wanted to do.

CR: You sort of feel the energy of the place by experiencing that environment. There is a lot of energy.

DM: I don’t think it’s defined mostly by the students necessarily. I think that the rigor of Penn State is what defines it. Everyone here is expected to be very, very passionate about what they are doing.

CR: And that’s something that’s instilled. It needs to be within the students.

Is there anything you would do to change or enhance the culture?

DM: I think that more communication would be better between the professors – between the students and the professors...

CR: ...and even between the years like you were talking about. There is a lot of value to that interaction.
DM: ...it really changed the atmosphere of the school.

CR: Yeah. Ever since first year or second year you’d be in studio. We, you know, always pushed each other and we’d be there in studio, and you’re looking over and Pete’s still here. He’s building a sectional model now. Now I’m going to have to build a sectional model and I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight.

DM: And I think that’s something that’s been encouraged by our professors is not in the...I think the term, I guess, has a different connotation.

CR: Right.

DM: ...because we compete with each other as a way of, of sort of, maintaining a level of work.

CR: But it’s also, like, but it maintains a level of excitement about the work and stuff like that, too. There’s a healthy component to that, really healthy.

Southern California Institute of Architecture
Liz Falletta (LF) and Jonathon Cantwell (JC)

Describe the culture at Sci Arc. What makes it a unique place to study architecture and develop a design thesis?

JC: A culture of collaboration or culture of...what do we call it? Culture of...

LF: I don’t know.

JC: You have to develop a culture of collaboration or a culture of working together, of working around other people. And I guess, part of what we were talking about, this idea of originality, that part of that mythology comes from the idea of the heroic architect and one of the things that we were doing and one of the ways we were operating in at least the last year or so at Sci Arc, and I started doing it long before that, was that you work with other people and that there is no one person working on it but there are, you know, three or four and a critic becomes as much a part of that design team...

LF: Yeah.

JC: ...and has as much say as the other people – maybe not as much but they...the way in which the project becomes more valuable than the individuals’ efforts. I would say that one of them is the agreement that you’re there. For me, I walked in the door and immediately was in the right place and that happens to a lot of people. So there’s an implicit agreement that you’re there to be part of the experiment...

LF: ...or that you’re part of something larger than yourself.

JC: Yeah, and that you’re going to contribute to it. That if you’re not willing to give up that then...

LF: ...then you shouldn’t be there.

JC: But that’s probably true for architecture as well.

LF: But I think at Sci Arc there’s a real flattening out of hierarchies between instructors, students, you know, staff members which is problematic sometimes but things really...it’s a place where things really do come from the bottom up and the top down. But, you know, if you want to do something at Sci Arc you just do it.

JC: Yeah, you don’t ask for permission.

LF: You really don’t ask for permission. Yeah, you just do it and if somebody yells at you, you suck it up.

JC: You yell back.

LF: You yell back. I think the one thing and I think this is a very minor and obvious silly thing but when I was in first semester at Sci Arc, and I had an architectural education beforehand, but somehow I had not clued into the idea that how you represent things is the thing itself. It’s a full participant in the making of your
project. And I guess all of first year was about learning to see in a different way and I think that’s the largest thing at Sci Arc. It’s so obvious. I don’t know why I had not thought about it.

But just the minor decisions you make about graphics, about what views you choose to draw, about materials that you use, you know, like this whole green theme that I have going on in my thesis, are really important factors and they really shape both how you perceive your project and how everybody else does.

Marianne Ray was part of the core curriculum and she really helped us do that at multiple scales. I mean we had a course called, “Seeing L.A.”, where we explored different types of photography and different views of the city each Saturday. And it was a phenomenal, direct experience, and then she allowed us to directly translate that into the work in studio – what those implications were.

JC: I also think the thing that made Sci Arc original was original – here I go again. The thing that made Sci Arc different that other places, and I don’t know much about other places, but I don’t know much about other places, but there is less inhibition about what was right or wrong or correct. It had much more to do with what’s intuitive, or what’s emerging, or what sort of external things actually exist in a place.

And then probably one of the most critical things about making Sci Arc, Sci Arc is L.A. and the culture of L.A. and the kind of urban experience that you have being in L.A. which is multi-cultural. It’s a different kind of culture than any place I’ve been. And I’m from the East coast.

We were talking about myths earlier. If there was one myth you would want to dispel about Sci Arc what would it be?

JC: It’s all true (everyone laughs).

Yale University

Mike Tower (MT) and Andrew Mazor (AM)

The design thesis at Yale was recently reinstated as an optional course. How and why did this happen?

MT: Grace Zonk had a lot to do with it. When she and I first met we were both post-professional students. We were all together. She and I had spoken about it in a...the desire was when we got there to do a thesis. We looked a little closer at the bulletin and realized there was no structure to do it and we were a little alarmed by that and promised each other to do something about it. Well, Grace did something about it. She approached Peggy Deamer who was the head of our department and through Andrew’s work as well on the curriculum advisory committee, we were able to get the ball rolling on it.

How long did the process take?

MT: From the day we got there through about three-fourths of the year, it finally became real. I wasn’t even planning on doing a thesis.

Was there resistance to the idea of bringing back the design thesis?

AM: No, not really. I remember Alan Plattus saying during the meeting we had that he was really excited to have it back in the school because the last time it happened ten to fifteen years ago, there was a lot of excitement built around the thesis studio.

MT: I think indifference was the largest opposition we could find in the school. That was the only real struggle. And I think that is a very large part of it. It is a big problem in schools that a certain amount of apathy or lethargy approaches academics in interesting ways. It’s not even a new way. Thesis has been around. It has become institutionalized in some places and it was odd to see less enthusiasm from the students as well. I was surprised there were so few people that wanted to do a thesis. But people go to grad school for different reasons. Obviously, my experience was different.

Describe the culture of Yale and the design thesis environment in which you worked.

AM: Well, I think that the thing that separates thesis from studio is the fact that
you can seek outside the school of architecture. It’s almost required but not mandated to look outside the school of architecture to get other outside opinions. I originally looked at a professor who was working on not necessarily similar topics but just having sort of...I guess he was more marginal and had the ability to analyze things that way.

But I think Yale offers the ability and the culture of Yale is that it’s one of pluralism which is, well, what Yale is known for. But you get so many different views of architecture there and no one is afraid to really tell you about them. And I think that’s sort of the fun part of it. And you’ll get all of these different views and you sort of have to weigh through them and figure out what’s gonna happen.

**MT:** The reason I was drawn towards Yale was, I think, more than any other school it had a real investment in defining, participating in, and celebrating American architecture. I’m very interested in that but also just that’s where a lot of my interests lie. I felt that there’d be a certain investment in that. Whether they would always be right, I don’t know. I don’t necessarily agree with a lot of what’s come out of there in terms of the people at Yale defining what architecture is.

And I wanted my chance to get involved with that discussion and tell them what I thought and what I stand on and what that is. They claim...they have turf rights in a way, I think. They claim it. And I disagree on many of those points and I wanted to get involved in that discussion. It’s an open enough place that you can do that. You will not be run out of the school for saying, for disagreeing, with some of the faculty. But at the same time, I think, architecture culture is such an important element to how we practice – to the way we talk, to the work we do.

**How was the design thesis studio organized? Where were you set up?**

**AM:** We were right in the middle of the mix. We had our own little area where...there were only five of us and we had a little area within the studio. It was the advanced third year studios which are all the visiting critics like Greg Lynn, M.J. Long. The building itself, the way everything is set up, is that on one side are the advanced studios and on the other side are the second year studios. We all shared a common computer area and so we were in the mix with everyone else.

**MT:** There was a lot of discussion going on.

**AM:** It’s always curious to see what they’re doing. From the typical studio to the thesis studio which was atypical, it was great. Everybody was talking to everybody else.

**What affect did you have on the other studios around you? Did you raise or change the standards in terms of what others were thinking or making?**

**MT:** I’d love to think so.

**AM:** I think it’s interesting to see who is taking it now. We were talking with Keller before we came up here and we were asking her what’s happening now and the thesis studio is double in size. It’s now ten instead of five. And it’s more, better students that are taking thesis which is...

**MT:** …it’s a wonderful threat to…the school in a way. I think there’s a certain investment in really getting great studio critics. They get amazing people there. And here are a group of students who are paying tuition and saying well, actually, we’d like to do our own work. And it’s not that they don’t appreciate those people but I think they also, well, number one, it ups the stakes for what you do, what you’re trying to say. But it also kind of fills out, I think, the educational experience there really well. Because your whole time there is not doing thesis. You can take those other credits. There’s an opportunity first semester, second year at least for the post-professional program, to take that master option with one of the people who come into teach.