What distinguishes a design thesis studio from a typical design studio?

TH: Well, the way that my studio professor posed the question to us was that instead of thinking...everyone thinks of thesis as, sort of, a culminating project that, sort of, takes all of the skills in design – design skills that you've accumulated over five years and puts them together. But he took a different tact. He said that it is that, of course because it's the point of having a thesis is to, sort of, bring, to tie things together. But he saw it as, sort of, a personal mission statement as to what you wanted to do in architecture or what you thought you wanted to do just starting out in the profession after you left school. So, I sort of approached thesis in that way and so that's why my thesis became just as much about urbanism as it is about architecture because that's something that very much interests me and I think they really can't be taken apart. They're one and the same.

One interesting aspect of design thesis projects at Notre Dame is the emphasis on urbanism. Could you comment on this?

TH: I think a lot of people tend towards that because that's sort of the upbringing through the school is that those matters, the matters larger than yourself and your building are very important to at least address in your design if not literally address in master planning or things like that. We had people who had projects that were in the middle of the woods, people who had projects in large cities, vineyards, so there was a lot of range as to how much you engaged the actual planning of the surrounds. Although, of course, you had to look at things like site constraints and siting of the building which were across the board an issue in thesis but not actually looking at pre-planning areas. That was a choice that some people made that I don't think that others made.

In a lot of projects that was a big component but it wasn’t, the thesis at Notre Dame, it’s still a Bachelor of Architecture and so the component of architecture is first and foremost, the most important indication that you have run through a rigorous both design, siting, and construction study of your building. It is absolutely first and foremost. Then, looking at other issues that surround the building only helps you to be informed as a designer.

What is a design thesis?

TH: Well, I guess it depends how you're defining thesis. I like the idea of finishing, or as my professor pushed us, starting yourself off in a way where you study something in all of its facets very closely. Thesis is a problem statement as much as it is a building.

A building is sort of a process you go through to get at what you were trying to understand about the world around you. And so, I think in that way if a student takes thesis very seriously as an opportunity to explore an issue in their world, a social issue...I mean we all started with social issues or a site issue or a need for a community, things like that. And that is where our intent started.

And then over time it develops into a building. Maybe you’re thinking there’s a need for a library. So right away you’re answer is not an answer but your process is through designing and constructing and building a library. For me, the building came out of the process. I didn’t go into my thesis looking to design a neighborhood center. That’s something that came through study of the site and the needs that I perceived a new community or an urban community has – sort of the ideal situation for setting up an ideal neighborhood.

You've had some time to reflect on your design thesis experience. What advice do you have for other students who are about to embark on their design thesis project?

TH: Well, I guess for me the way you start and the way you end it’s all about choosing something that you’re really interested in. If you’re going to be investing a year or a semester or no matter how long a school decides thesis should be or if they have a final project it should be, it has to be something you really enjoy.
I've really clung to the idea that it is a springboard to what you're going to do next. And I love looking at it in that way and having it presented in that way. I mean it's not much solace at two in the morning one of the first weeks, you know, when you're trying to really look at things.

But by the end, it's not really an end. I liked that idea of thesis is that it's really about starting. And it's about starting in such a way that you choose. Over five years you learned all these different things from professors, from different forums, or different speakers that you've had. Finally, you get to decide how they affect your work and how you come up with an architectural solution or a building that responds to those ideas. And I just think that's the fun of it. And so it has to be fun.

I would say set it up so that if you could see into the future that your drawings are drawings that you like to do – whether it's a model that would be really fun to build, or whether it's...well, I really like doing watercolors. So for me, doing a bunch of watercolor boards, like large elevations, like quarter-scale elevations is a lot of fun. I didn't have much time to paint but it makes you even more rigorous about it. But, just choose something that you're really passionate about, that gets you really fired up. If you're sort of hem-hawing about something, to me it's not really a thesis. It's not really something that comes from you, which is the main difference again between thesis project and a studio project.

So generating everything from the questions...you're asking a question. So picking a question that will sustain you which is a fun exploration, which is something that you've always wanted to do and there's never been...maybe it's a type of construction or something you've always wanted to explore but there's never been the time to do so or a building type that you wanted to design. Through the process it's very hard because so many other things are happening because you're trying to look for a job, you're going to graduate, all these different things are happening especially if you have it in the spring. But in looking back it's all about choosing something that's exciting to you which, again, may not feel that exciting through the process. But that's why the process is the thing because that's where you learn things.

Do you think the design thesis may not be suited to every student?

It's possible. But I think just having the opportunity and some people like they're being forced into an opportunity to have to freely think and be critical about things around you versus just problem solving. It's not just coming up with an answer or a way to deal with the problem. So it's, like, it's taking it a step further. You have to define the issues at the root of why a building is constructed or why a space has changed in the world in general. And so, I think that's the step further that thesis takes.

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

What do you think distinguishes a design thesis project from a typical studio project?

DM: For me, it is a matter of responsibility. The project is self-guided and self-generated and you are responsible for all aspects of the project, not just designing the requirements – I mean not just designing for the requirements but designing the requirements themselves. You are not just making work for a project. You are making the project itself. I think this year for us, the first semester, was more or less designing the project. You have to set the parameters and boundaries and figure out where your field of play is.

CR: And there is nobody to blame but yourself (laughing).

DM: Right, and there is no one to blame. And you can’t, you know, in previous years you could say this is a boring program. This is...they picked a terrible site, but it’s all on you now so...

CR: ...but I think it’s also, I really think the distinction is probably that question...that we were talking about and that process of exploration for a year is a sort of, undetermined goal. I mean obviously there is a stated goal. You have to have a building at the end of our thesis. But I think the less preconceptions you had about where you were going with it, probably you learned from the process of exploring it.
DM: I think the other thing is...and this came up in the critiques of the project...the thesis is about, you know, you’re trying something and it’s...you’re taking a risk. And some of the most successful theses are not successful buildings or necessarily good design, you know. You know you have to try and fail and if that happens then you’ve definitely learned something.

Did you understand that going into the whole process?

CR: Probably not as much.

DM: Not really (laughing). No, I don’t think so.

Are there any specific ideas or ways that the design thesis could be improved? What would you change about it, if anything?

CR: I think that there was talk during the summer, and I don’t know where this came from, but I heard more than one person say well, there are two kinds of theses that you can do. It was almost like, there are two different kinds of theses that you can do and get away with or something. You can have this idea or you can really design a building or you can just design a building, pick a site and a program and that is your thesis.

I don’t know about that conception and I don’t know where it came from, but it seemed to be like a passed down thing. People were aware that they could just pick a site and a program and design a building. It could in some way be discouraged by the way that it is set up from the beginning or even by being more…I think it could be tougher in a lot of ways. I think hard lines could be drawn and it doesn’t have to mean a difference in the way that professors and students interact, but I think when it comes to those points where you hand in that sheet at the beginning, it should be scrutinized. That doesn’t mean you don’t get to do a thesis. You get another shot at it. All of the check points along the way, they weren’t really as important as they were built up to be over five years. Nobody was freaked out about “red light-green light” [a benchmarking point one month before the final thesis project is due]. So I think in that respect that is something could be changed.

Raising the bar in some respects?

DM: I think so.

How would you define the design thesis?

CR: It’s an investigation within certain parameters for yourself.

DM: I think it is too. It’s an investigation, not necessarily an answer to a question. I think it involves questions.

CR: I think if you think about it that way that’s what gives people...it is problematic to think of it as looking for an answer or that you are going to resolve some sort of answer at the end of the year. I think it’s also problematic to think of it as the completion of your education, the climax of five years. I don’t think anybody is going to find an answer. There’s a model of the thesis of an upside down martini glass where you start with this sort of idea. Then you refine it down to something that’s this big so you can study it and the rest of your life it gets that big again.

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

What do you think distinguishes a design thesis from a typical design studio?

AM: First and foremost it is individual research and I think the second thing is there is certainly a nice collaboration between advisor and thesis. I think it is certainly something that I got out of it.

MT: Well, it’s your show. That is what it is essentially. People look at graduate school in a lot of different ways and in that you get all types of views at Yale, for sure. But I didn’t go to go to graduate school, and this may be different when you talk about thesis work at the undergraduate level – I think they’re two completely different things. I didn’t come to graduate school for a particular person to have studio with. Peggy Deamer was a large part of why I decided to go there because
I know her work and I know what she is about. I knew there would be a certain culture or climate that I felt I could grow in. And I wanted the opportunity to really establish or to prove or put to task a lot of my ideas about architecture and about my own work and the place. And so there is a lot to be gained from taking a studio as well with a critic, and I gained a great deal from having the people I did for sure. But when it came down to it I felt like there’s a point where you have to stand alone and say something.

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

How would you define the design thesis?

YE: I understand a design thesis as a larger question that I want to deal with or... a question. In my thesis I was dealing with things that were... that the meaning was much more than the physical meaning, somehow. It had a larger understanding in the world or an emotional meaning, a psychological, or urban – larger than the actual project itself. And then the project tests tectonically or physically a manifestation of these ideas that I’m trying to deal with.

TS: Wow, that is a tough question. I would say... I approached it in terms of having a kind of specific position on something that didn’t begin necessarily with architecture as a physical object. The question for me is then, does my position or my belief have any architectural implications because I could assume a position that has no relation to architecture whatsoever. So beyond that, I think, the answering the question and doing a thesis as a project for one thing whereby it was a bit of a risk in that it was possible that my belief was not going to relate to architecture. As a possibility that was the risk I took but fortunately my faculty thought it was... in the end.

Were there cases where students took that risk and there wasn’t that manifestation of architecture?

TS: Yes, mine was one at the beginning but at the end they took my plan.

Could you describe your thesis?

YE: My thesis, my thesis title was Water as Ground and my question was, how do you inhabit unstable ground? What I was meaning in the larger question was how... my project, my project manifestation, happened to being an inhabitation in the ocean that is not grounding but is treating the water – water and architecture and water and air or architecture that is not relating any solid. But this structure itself is solid, of course, but it was made of soluble materials. There is no grounding into a ground, but the water. I found that basically I am dealing with a much larger question philosophically for me. How in an infinite, in a system of infinities, the ocean has for humans infinite depth? If you are in the middle of it – infinite horizons, everything... infinite in all degrees, three dimensions, how do you look at yourself, how do you find stability in a system of instabilities? How do you face the world? How do you measure your place in the world, in general, in a ground that constantly changes?

That could be a metaphor for a city for the locating a house in the different... we are in a global age so you can start to define what a home is to you and what are the things in your life that stabilizes you and do you need stabilizers? I took that idea of stability and instability as the anchors for my project. And mostly the project was inhabitation. It was a house but it was a community that was divided into stable structures and instable structures – houses that were the columns and the foundation for the whole community. There were others that were constantly moving and changing so the city would never look the same twice. I guess that was my thesis.

TS: My project... well, I took a really fun trip to Brazil just before I came to school (laughing). What prompted my trip... well, I will get to your point. What prompted this trip were... some studies I had done on manifestations of West African nation in the Caribbean and also in South America. So I went to Brazil in terms of to study part of a religion called kind of similar to voodoo in Haiti. I wanted to deal with the ideal of a kind of metaphysical belief system and its relationship to architecture. And I came to the idea which is syncretism. Well, religious syncretism is, to state it briefly, is the merger of different religious belief systems to form a new belief because somehow they have similar structures. Along with idea of religions and not so syncratic religions the idea of syncretism became
interesting to me. So...and that was what I presented, syncretism or trying to make a syncretic architecture.

I was proposing the possibility of syncretic architecture but I had to define it which was good that they asked me to do that. At the beginning it was quite problematic. So I chose a specific site in Brazil which is the state of Pahilia and I identified a social problem there. I didn’t identify it but by just looking at it and doing a lot of research, a lot of reading…that area was geographically defined in terms of different physical geographies. Somewhere there was a coast, there was…and agricultural land, a back land, a desert, a wasteland, and those geographic categories were somehow matched with social categories, moving from what was civilized to what was savage, undefined. It moved from the civilized coast to the savage backlands.

My proposition was that the idea of syncretism can construct a new place within the geography whereby geographic categories and social categories would be obscured to create a new category, a new syncretic category, so there was no longer civilized, primitive. There was just one thing. I chose a site based on specific conditions that arose and I chose a program which was a market. And the market itself was a program dealing with a certain amount of change, a certain amount of obscure differences. And I constructed a market as an ambiguous geography whereby whoever inhabited a market place or the space of the market place will be occupying architectural objectivity – yes.

But at the same time all of them will be on ground, a geographical ground that I picked that was my way, so to speak, that entered into the geography and they would build whatever. They would build upon the architecture, so to speak, a commentary on an idea of building in a post-global context whereby the form was not derived...whereby there was an attempt to consider a form that was not necessary culturally correct in terms of all others, cultures that settled in only one place, but form was derived from the geography. And whatever cultural significance would happen would occur by the people who were living here and already had a specific culture. That’s what concerned me.

What distinguishes a design thesis from a typical design studio?

YE: I think the main distinction is that you have to have a position, not about what problem necessarily that is opposed to you. Within all other design years, I think, the professor leading the design studio has a lot of control on what the design problem is and the structure of the coping with that problem and sometimes even the representation. Well, the representation is usually open and you have some freedom from the university and the design studio as well, but I think the difficulty and the virtue of design thesis is that you’re in charge of a lot to define to yourself. Your defining the question and your suggesting the structure in which you’re dealing with that...question. You have always had professors that will lead you one way or another but I think there is a lot more control and responsibility to this project.

What advice would you give to a student beginning the design thesis process?

YE: Find a question and then not hesitate too much and just try to answer the question as best I can. No, but, I mean, like, just start an initial move and question everything all the time, but I would find an anchor which is something you can always take something from, you know, some kind of a question that would be really helpful and not be afraid to act on it. Then, you can always change your mind but it’s much easier after your first drawing.

TS: Well, I would say to sustain you have to believe. If you don’t have a specific belief at points you have specific things that you can have as a belief. I would say try to draw on that.