

Preparation

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

What kind of preparation is required before you can begin design thesis?

CR: The real physical pragmatic requirement is a sheet that you have to fill out at the end of the summer before you start the fall semester.

What's included on that sheet of paper?

DM: A site, a program, and your approach basically.

CR: But depending on the project itself some of those things become more fluid or less. A lot of your site or your program is the idea of something.

DM: When you come to the beginning of thesis you don't necessarily have to have a program and site and building. But you have to be able to convince your professors that you have a year's worth of work to do, that you are delving into something that will occupy you for a year.

I would say that it's not necessarily a requirement that is stated but it's understood that the professors expect you to have, to be questioning something, or to be searching for something and to not necessarily have an answer but to have a really good question. I think that's the start of a good thesis.

What initial question were you asking in your project?

DM: It changes a lot throughout the course of the project. My investigation started with something, with images. I did a photographic investigation of scaffolding in cities in Europe. I wasn't really sure what it held conceptually or for an actual architecture but I was so fascinated by it. I thought I should get into it.

I did some investigations of that and sort of fell into a site and a program which ended up exploring issues that could more or less be related to scaffolding but weren't really derived from it. The site and program really took over the project from there and it ended up being about dealing with history in the city. So it's kind of...you just kind of follow a lead, I think, and it takes you somewhere. You don't necessarily have to know where you're going from the start.

CR: I think that's a really good way to put it. You follow a lead like that. Maybe I had a really strong preconception of what I was going to do with the project but it definitely didn't go that way. I couldn't have anticipated what it was that I was going to do in terms of architecture, in terms of a physical manifestation.

It's interesting to hear you say 'scaffolding' and you didn't know what you were going to do with it, because I definitely started more within a precedent kind of realm. I spent a lot of the summer reading when I could and I took off work for the last month of the summer and put in ten hours a day sitting in parks reading books and taking notes.

So I felt confident in the ideas, that they had some sort of precedent. Maybe that was helpful and maybe it wasn't because there were certain ideas that I found myself clinging to throughout the process. Different jurors would tell me to throw parts away (laughing).

What was your initial question?

CR: It's really hard for me to say now. I think it started in Europe and it started here way before that. It's about a layering of history and time and its manifestation in a designed manner in an architecture. It's a consciousness of the fluidity of architecture – architecture as a dynamic process that isn't a finished project ever.

You both mentioned that your initial thesis interests grew out of your experience in Europe. Why you were in Europe?

DM: Well, in fourth year we have our semester abroad in Rome at Penn State.



CR: first week process model
urban accretions: transforming project housing



DM: interior study
scaffolding: a law school

We were there in the spring so it was fresh in our minds when we came back over the summer, when we were thinking about thesis.

CR: It probably relates to what your experience was in Europe and different people experienced it in different ways. I really had my eyes open when I was there. I don't know if I necessarily learned anything that I couldn't have learned here but I was really looking whereas some...

DM: ...I know four or five people that told me that their thesis was more or less a continuation of what they were doing in Rome. If not in terms of the idea, it tectonically ends up looking like the same thing. It has a huge impact on you. Once we're here in this context we see everything going on. It's only once you've been taken out of that context that you understand what's important and what you are most passionate about, I think.

Did you do anything else to prepare either outside of school or during those first weeks of design thesis?

DM: My summer was pretty similar to Chris. I was at home for the summer and not doing much. I did a lot of reading on this other thesis which didn't end up being my thesis.

CR: Dan would come up here on the weekends and we would stand out back and barbecue and talk about everything that we were reading.

DM: We talked books all summer. So I mean I had done all that research and when I came here I had this really cool book of photographs and then I had this book of interesting ideas and authors and little things that I had written. When it came to my proposal time one sort of weighed heavier than the other and I really hadn't prepared for the one that I chose. As soon as I finished my thesis I started working on the other one again.

What is the best advice you could give to someone just beginning the design thesis?

DM: The best advice in the beginning is not to take it so damn seriously, I think...

CR: ...to take that attitude that it is an opportunity for you to do a project for a year not that you have to do a project for a year.

DM: I felt for months really unsure of my idea because it was such a whim but if you have the rigor and the drive it will become something. When you start your thesis don't expect to have any idea what it's going to end up like. If you do and you know what it is going to end up like then it probably isn't worth doing. Just find a starting point.

CR: Whenever you hit that point, that failure point, you just have to do something and you just...it can be over intellectualized.

DM: Whatever point you're at you can only see the next fine line or you can see five. You're going to go through a lot of them.

What was the first object, drawing or other form of expression you made to at the beginning of the design thesis?

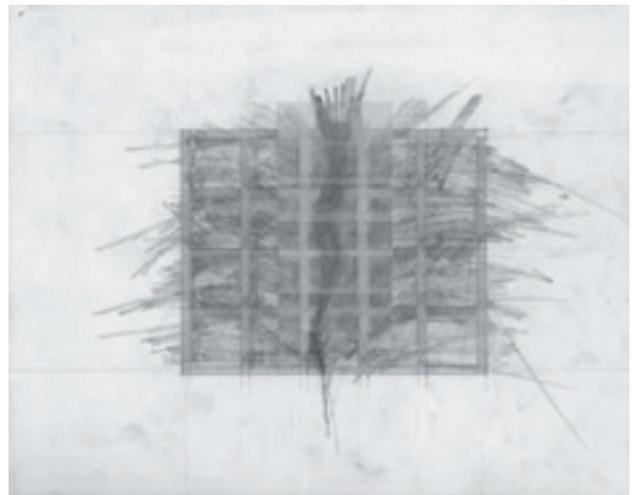
DM: I still have it. It's hilarious. Well, it was just my first attempt to think about what kind of architectural problems might be informed by scaffolding. It was temporary architecture and mobile architecture. I did that more or less for the formality of having a site and possible program written down on paper. It ended up being about something completely different about history and progress.

CR: I did these models trying to represent an architecture that was the disjunctive in the most contrived, planned way that I possibly could have. Looking back on them it had absolutely no...I guess it was really successful because it was so wrong (laughing).

DM: Exactly. I still have the most interesting thing that I did all year which was a casting. I cast a piece of concrete onto the corner of the building and I still have no idea what I did it for or how it affected my project. I mean I'm sure it did but I really couldn't point to it and have a good response about what it was that I got from it, but I had to do it and that was the great thing about thesis. I had two weeks to mess around with concrete on what seemed like a dead end road.



CR: roma veduta by piranesi
urban accretions: transforming project housing



DM: process drawing
scaffolding: a law school

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

How could your professors have better prepared you for the design thesis?

JC: How could the professors have better prepared us? You go ahead.

LF: Well, I was just going to say that I felt very prepared.

JC: How could they have better prepared you?

LF: I think the thesis preparation course could have been....it was very individualized. Several instructors taught it. Jonathon had a very good experience, I think, and mine was sort of lacking. I was sort of left on my own a bit which was fine but I think possibly there could have been a more rigorous structure for the actual development of your thesis investigation.

What do you think that might have included?

LF: Some people, and I kind of tried to do this on my own, one thing that was really helpful is I looked back on my own work throughout school and even before school and made a portfolio that tried to be organized around certain themes or interests in the work that may have been latent, that I might have not actively been engaged in. But I tried to identify trajectories that were running through, crossing the boundaries between studios, between projects, and make a portfolio that way. That was really helpful both in identifying what my interests had been and where the holes were.

The one bit of advice that I got that was incredibly useful was, use your thesis to get at that which...do what you haven't had a chance to do yet. Build on what you've done but really make it a time for growth personally.

And that's one of the reasons why I took on housing because I had never done it and it was something that I had been really interested in and it was one of the reasons why I used the computer because I had never used it before. I was just like, this is my last chance to do this in an environment...

...in a supportive place?

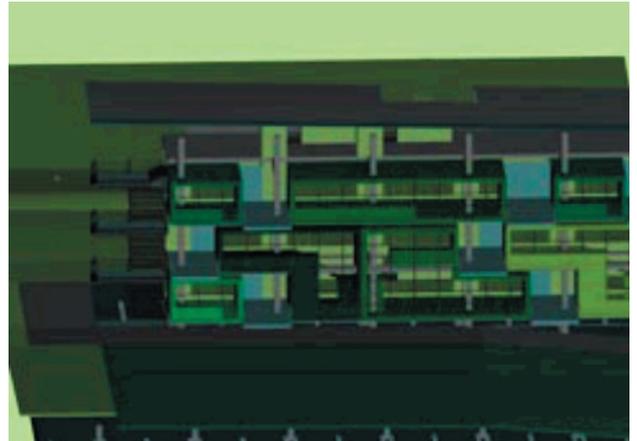
LF: Yeah, that is somewhat safe in a certain sense where I can develop it as a critical tool as well as just a representational tool.

JC: One of the best pieces of advice that I got or that I heard was from Robert Mangurian who used to be the director there, the former head and still teaches there, one of the best professors I had and a real mentor to me. I remember in first year him coming for a guest review with the first year students and saying, well, you have to start building your readers. Save all this stuff because you need to get ready for your thesis. You can start doing your thesis now.

LF: That stressed me out.

JC: What that told me was start as early as you want and you really need to. And so for me the question is, how would architectural education allow me to identify and extrapolate from and critically investigate those issues which I am most passionate about? One of the things that emerged for me was just recognize...listening to myself and recognizing what is it that I really want to do that's deep?

And I think Liz had the same response. Liz has some very deep responses to housing and its relevance to ethics and was very conscious about going towards that just as much as I was conscious about going towards what really drives me about this notion of 'bigness'.



LF: pico ailsso final oblique drawing
challenging the definition of "minimum housing"



JC: west view of final *bigness* model
a theory of bigness: port facility and stadium

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

What did you do to prepare for the design thesis?

AM: The fact that thesis is new at Yale, the structure, that preliminary structure I don't think is there yet. So actually I didn't do that much over the summer prior to it. There was some research done but not a great deal. And then it really just

started full steam ahead when we got into the first semester of the final year.

MT: For me it was a little bit different. I don't know if we had to actually submit something before the summer.

AM: We had discussions with Keller [thesis advisor] who was the...

MT: ...basic preliminary discussions. I put together a reading list. I thought about what I was doing and where I thought I was going and built a reading list from that and spent the summer instead of working, reading and trying to fill out those ideas so that I felt a little more prepared when we got to our, what was essentially a thesis prep course. What I realized was, while it was great that I did it, and it didn't necessarily prepare me completely for actively taking a stand, making a statement, building an argument, you still have to do it, you know. You have to be in that situation to do it. But I did feel kind of prepared in a way by doing those readings.

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

What did you do to prepare for the design thesis?

YE: I think the baggage you come with in a way as much as you try to prepare... you think about things and what I did was I looked through my work and tried to figure out what I'm...what's the line going through the work...like what is really the under-text, the sub-text, I am dealing with. Not the projects themselves but in my project I am dealing with ground and I am dealing with water...so there is urbanity...so looking from that you can find some clues but at the end of the day when I had to find a thesis title...you just have to make the decision.

It was really, in some way, I had one idea that would not leave my head...and I actually was not even sure I liked it. It was just the only thing I could do. It was just, it didn't go away. People were like, that is a crazy topic. Are you sure you want to do this? And I was like, I don't know what I want to do. I don't know what to do. And then you do the research and then what I did was get thirty oceanography books and tried go into depth into what it means and just try to do it as academically and deep as I can that is not predictable, so it doesn't end up being just a gimmick or ideas that are a little too crazy to do but it is just becoming thicker.

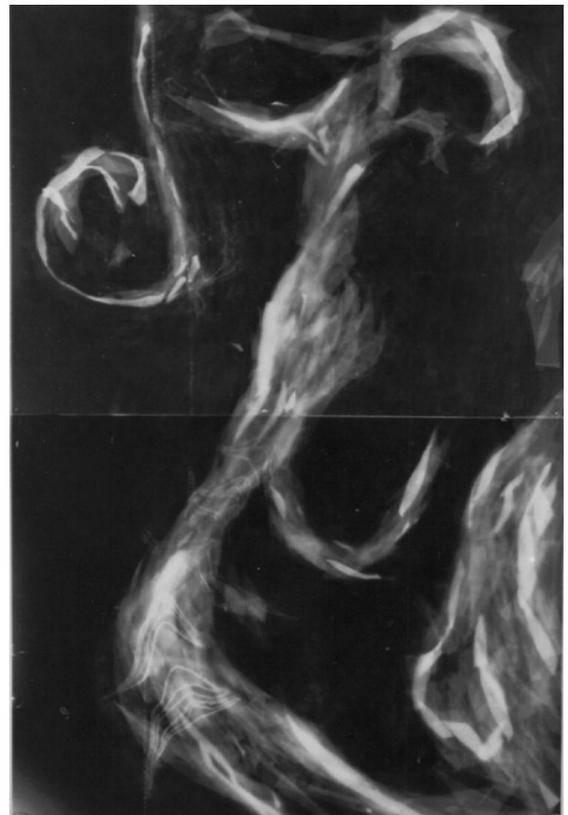
But I think you only have to do that after you choose what you are going to deal with. And that is a decision that has to be out of the blue. I mean out of the blue as coming from me so it's not out of the blue because it is coming from years. I mean I have been studying it five years before thesis. Those five years were my preparation. You have that baggage. You can ignore it if you want to but it's mine.

What advice do you have for the student just beginning design thesis?

TS: Well, my experiences at this school for three or five years have really shown me that the discipline is really not some kind of objective exercise. It's not purely a creative art. The discipline is also to an extent highly political. Not politics necessarily in the context of a government of politics or a kind of...I'm not quite sure how to explain.

Specifically when it comes to a discipline that is theoretical, if there is a very specific theory that people choose to jam into architecture...I have come to realize in some ways I was only able to be specific about a thesis as something that has meaning to me, and I began to identify within the diverse theoretical positions in architecture or the most ideological positions in architecture, one that would suit, one that would be appropriate to, not appropriate, one that would present me with the tools to contemplate the specific to me, to my culture, to my work.

I ignored the specific pretty much and this is purely kind of creative. As an artist it was necessary for me to go through that process and it was really in the fourth year where I had some problems dealing with urban issues that I began to develop a specific direction in what I would be interested in by pursuing a thesis. It was not the question of urbanism that necessarily influenced...I don't think about my interests as a specific urban interests but it was the approach to solving those problems. It kind of...the intellectual tools that they use to deal with those problems helped me understand what my specific interest would be and how I



YE: *current* photogram
water as ground: a habitation

would question it in the context of architecture.

So, I think in a sense one of the most critical things that you can prepare for a thesis of any kind is...I think one has to have a certain level of belief in something to present a thesis. Because it is something you will have to argue, something you will have to defend, so outside the context of the general architectural education. It is a really human application, which in a strange way, the study of architecture can come to understand. I don't know if that makes sense.

YE: Can I add something? Tao said that you need a belief. I think another strong belief that you need to have, and I think I worked on that consciously throughout my fourth year, as a belief in my work or in your own decisions that you take and the strength to actually stand alone and be able to take these decisions. Because when you go into thesis there is no right or wrong – there's no wrong project you can chose. There is no right project you can choose.

You just have to in a way...even if you have ten thousand ideas you chose one and you make it right and you have to believe in the decisions you make and in yourself as a creator, as the author of the thesis. I think it is one of the biggest preparations you can make – just having the strength to just do it but doing it with full conviction and everything that you do and the research, just the strength, just to pull one idea all the way.

University of Notre Dame Tiffany Haile (TH)

What did you do to yourself to prepare for the design thesis?

TH: Well, I worked at U.D.A. the year before I started my fifth year. U.D.A. is Urban Design Associates. It's an urban design firm located in Pittsburgh. It's a firm of architects and urban designers who do more than just building. They look at whole neighborhoods in cities and design and study in a larger context. It's a firm that does work nationally just because there are only so many things you can do in one city. So, it's a national practice where you get to see a lot of different problems, everything from doing neighborhood infill to Hope VI housing to golf course neighborhoods that are on the peaks of hills overlooking the ocean. So there is a great variety of work. And that summer I had an interest in studying urbanism as well as architecture, so that summer I got a taste of what goes on here.

You tested the waters?

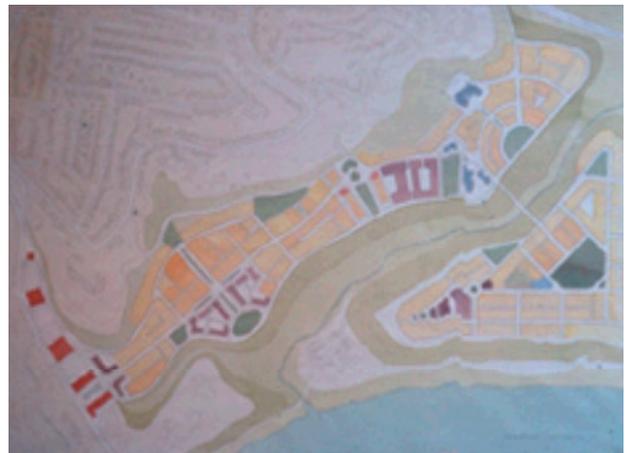
TH: Yes, and in that way that sort of helped formed my thesis and I was interested in looking at a building in a larger context. I had no idea of what that was at the time. So my personal preparation I guess was everyone's. Even though we knew thesis didn't begin until second semester, I think in the back of your mind you are always thinking about it. I had classmates who had known what they were doing for years. They knew since they were freshman and saw the fifth years, like what they wanted to do. And a lot of those people were very building focused because they wanted to study a typology.

And then there were people like myself who really...there were sort of some issues that I wanted to look at but other than that I wasn't totally tied down to a site or building or anything. By the time after I worked there in the summer, by the time thesis came around, like I said, I really wanted to focus on urbanism as well as architecture and how the two came together. It was one of the things I wanted to look at.

Having lived in Pittsburgh for a few months during the summer, and seeing Pittsburgh, I mean, it's a wonderful city and there are a lot of old industrial sites, otherwise known as brownfields, that are everywhere. And they're within the city limits and so there are great opportunities now to clean up and re-stitch neighborhoods. A lot of times those are the sites where things have all fallen apart. I think I was influenced a little bit by living here and seeing those sorts of places. But I wasn't really tied down to what I would do until I had to submit something after Thanksgiving (laughs) right before the semester. So the building came out of the process. Once again, I had trouble defining things. I had trouble handing in the paper. I wasn't quite sure. I knew the issues I wanted to explore but I wanted to talk to my advisors and my critic about how do you go about exploring these things?



YE: wooden model
water as ground: a habitation



TH: final land use plan
urban reclamation: neighborhood masterplan and meeting hall

Do you have a formal thesis prep at Notre Dame?

TH: As I remember, the page that we had to submit was the culmination of our thesis prep. After Thanksgiving up to the end of the semester was thesis prep time. That was when you got very serious about looking into resources, the reality of your site, your city, or even if you were at that point yet. Our first semester project was one project for the entire semester until Thanksgiving. Then after Thanksgiving break it was a formal requirement. You had to submit your one or two pages on thesis and you had to meet with your critic and your advisor. So you sort of had to be rigorous about what you're moving towards in second semester. Though not graded to my knowledge, I can't remember. It was a requirement. You had to submit that before you could go on to the second semester.

Once the proposal was accepted and you had some idea of the issue you wanted to explore, what did you do next?

Well, the first thing which is the usual first thing that architects and engineers and everybody does in the building professions is to go find a map and sort of see where you are. And so the first round of things was just getting a bearing. Once I had picked out the brownfield site I wanted to study, it was just a matter of finding out more about it like learning about its history, the history of the neighborhood that it surrounds, or the neighborhoods, in this case, the history of the city.



TH: site elevation
urban reclamation: neighborhood masterplan and meeting hall