Some think the design thesis is an outdated educational model that doesn’t reflect real practice. Should it be banned as a requirement in architecture schools or should it be altered? Is there value in doing a design thesis?

TS: Just before I answer, can you give me some other reasons?

Some say the design thesis requires a lot of time and resources that could be better spent on more specialized areas of study.

YE: I understand this point of view. I don’t necessarily think the school of architecture should be training to reflect what it gives you only in the real world meaning, like, you start working tomorrow. I think just go into the firm and know how to do everything, that great. But for me, as an individual, the thesis project had further meaning. It clarified a lot of things that I had been thinking about the world, about my work, about…a large amount of issues. And I think, as an architect if I would want to be…I think as a creative architect that would do independent work [and] not necessarily be an employee at the end, I think we should all try and figure out what we believe in. And I think that’s almost the first step before we go. It is like you start. There’s a seed in you, thesis, probably in tune to what you are going to do later and I think you need a seed. I think that seed could really help you. You can measure things relative to it.

And I am not saying I don’t know what I am going to have when and if I am going to have my own office and what kind of things I am going to deal with. They’re probably not going to be these things in the water, but that will help me measure how I see the world, the people I work for and how I see my work and what are my interests and I think that’s important.

TS: Is it that the architecture thesis should not be required? I wish that perhaps that here or the statement itself, I wish I would be a bit more qualified to comment on it. I mean…a thesis is a bit difficult for me to understand, to escape qualitatively. Should I say…I could make a statement and say that any thesis on quantum physics should be…any thesis in a physics course should be banned or a thesis in an anthropological course should be banned. I think thesis is a very specific thing. And it’s necessary to explore problems in a discipline. I mean all disciplines you have, people propose a thesis. Otherwise you…nothing is questioned. Nothing is purposed unless it can be…unless you decide for the end of the exploration of architecture as a discipline. We must have the thesis.

That is on one hand. Now I can argue does the thesis necessarily have to be in a creative setting of an institution as a school? Maybe you could do a thesis in architecture school and you could do a thesis outside of school. Now if that were a position…I mean the purpose of a school as an institution is to foster that kind of questioning because when we leave school we sort of enter the world of work, so to speak. Not everyone [who] would want to work has time for a thesis because the work world is very, very different.

And in a way it’s kind of…I kind of feel a bit obsolete for discussing it. I am trying to see how to phrase it but it just seems…I mean, maybe okay, it shouldn’t be a requirement. Maybe some people would decide to pursue a thesis because they have a specific interest and want to…maybe they want to…maybe that thesis has something to do with proposing something in the particular discipline. And maybe someone else may not want to do a thesis because there is no need to propose anything. Maybe there are some people who want to practice as the discipline is practiced. I mean it really depends.

I would argue for no thesis in architecture school. Maybe in some contexts, in some other kind of social context, there is no need for questioning or opposing. There is a need for production and you don’t want the kind of, that form of questioning to occur. All types of political connotations come into play here.

YE: I think it relates to the question of limits a lot. And architecture is…the true manifestation of architecture usually has limits. You have a client. You have a site. You get a proposed program and within school and other studios you get
from your professors. So the limits are given. Like in most studios except for thesis project you get your limits pre-assigned to you.

I think I learned a...I referenced it before when you asked what thesis is and a thesis project is a limitless architecture. So maybe not like Tao is suggesting, maybe it’s not like any other thesis in any other discipline. I know, it’s opening a lot of barriers. Maybe that relates to the fantasy question, too. So you could fly maybe higher than you would if you had limits and maybe that’s not a bad thing. Maybe we need to fly once in a while. So I think for me that’s the issue that he is raising, that the real world has limits and there is not a reason to have a no limit project.

What did each of you learn from the design thesis experience?

TS: I will go back to C.R. James’s ideas of cricket. When he wrote that book you read this and you swore there was an intense movement towards independence. From evolution and a clear political [position] he was really questioning nature and society and the relationship between that society and mutation and backstage in the context in the society the logic issues in society. And he saw sport as a game and he had a very specific attachment to the game. And this was a kind of artistic attachment and that enabled him to construct a kind of metaphorical universe for understanding the world. So for me, I’ve learned to look at architecture in a context of a very human world. And as specific as the discipline is in terms of its technical dimension, its physicality, its theory, as specific as it is, it is an art also. It is very much a human discipline and it has become, or it is becoming, my way of understanding the world. It is very much like cricket.

YE: For me, it was a very good thing to do. It was very important but I don’t know why yet. I don’t know if I can quantify it. That’s why the question of what it meant is a little blurry but it meant something big. It meant a lot. It kind of, I don’t know what is going to happen, but I am going to see it through. Because I work, I think through work. I do something and then I do nothing. I think that’s how Cooper does that to you. You just, you have to work it out. It still is a project. It’s not invalid as a project. It’s not that we’re just killing time thinking and contemplating. We were drawing and it ends up to be an architectural project that is mine with assistance and professors but it’s on my terms which is nice.
The Pennsylvania State University
Christopher Renn (CR) and Daniel Mayer (DM)

Is the design thesis an outdated educational model that should be banned or radically altered? What value is there in doing a design thesis?

DM: I don’t know. I would hate to see it get banned and I can’t speak for the welfare of architectural education, but just from a personal standpoint, thesis was one of the greatest opportunities that I have had and that I foresee having in the future. It was a year of working on something that I was really interested in and wanted to work on. To me that’s a little self-indulgent but I think it’s an opportunity that I would hate to see taken away.

CR: I think you can make a case for not being ready for it as a fifth year undergraduate but that’s why you learn so much from it because you’re drowning in it. I’m not sure. Like, looking at it now, I could say, you know, if I could start all over I could do so...there’s so much I could do but that’s the point. Like that means you learned something from it, I think. I probably learned a lot more about doing this kind of research than what I actually learned from the research itself.

DM: Yeah, I think that’s probably one of the biggest things that thesis is about. It’s not about the topic of a thesis but the thesis...how to do a project.

CR: An answer, I guess, to your question about eliminating thesis is that I feel now like I would be a lot more prepared say, in five years, to go to a grad school and do a thesis, than if I hadn’t gone through this experience. I questioned a lot of things that I probably wouldn’t have even thought about before.

DM: I think the thing you learn from thesis is how to research, how to investigate, analyze problems, and that applies to architecture and other areas as well...

CR: ...and how to question all of your preconceptions about how to do research and solve problems.

DM: My thesis was like a discovery of complexity of architecture. I like buildings. And I like, you know, I don’t want to have that freedom. I want to have tough...

CR: I want to have all the rules.

DM: Yeah, I want to have all the rules. That’s what my thesis ended up being about was that there were so many rules that I couldn’t possibly follow any of them.

CR: You realize, like, how much you’ve learned in five years, for one thing.

DM: Yeah.

CR: ...things that you didn’t even know you knew or things that you’d never hear youself saying. Like I realized how much I was interested in, you know, materiality and light and, you know, form and things that I sort of de-emphasized for myself in a lot of ways but that really are architecture.

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

Is the design thesis an outdated educational model that should be discontinued or radically altered? What value is there in doing a design thesis?

JC: You’ll find that we’re going to make a strong case for the value of the thesis in architectural education. For us, we’re pretty deeply in agreement that the process of doing a thesis embeds you with that empirical knowledge of how do you rigorously interrogate an investigation and so...

But, I guess what I would be interested in is if not thesis, then what? Like what are the alternatives? Is there a better way to test the architectural education or to allow a relatively young architect to go out in the world? What process is it that would allow them to be actively and critically engaged in what they do for the rest of their lives?

LF: I guess we’re making the argument that you should always be doing your
thesis. That’s kind of what your work should be. It should always be a critical investigation of ideas that manifest itself…

Then what makes it necessary to require a formal design thesis?

LF: I think all design studios should have a thesis throughout their education. The culmination, perhaps, is overstated at schools. But I think what’s important is the thesis is the first time it’s self-directed. And that is, as a professional, you know, you can imagine multiple work environments where if you want to investigate things critically, like you do in a thesis, it’s going to have to come from you. It’s not going to necessarily going to come from your client or from any other source. You will have to create a sort of ethic of research and ethic of critical investigation in your own work, collaborating with other people obviously, but it’s creating that discipline within yourself that I think is so valuable.

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

Some think that the design thesis is an outdated educational model that doesn’t reflect real practice. Should it be discontinued or radically altered?

Is there value in doing a design thesis?

MT: I think perhaps this criticism is what is common in undergraduate programs which is…this is something we’ve talked about. It’s about stakes and how you really, how much you’re really invested in thesis. If everyone is asked to do it, if everyone is required to do it, you are not going to get really interesting work unless you have a really unique group of students. And I’m not saying students are bad, you know, generally. But what I am saying that if it is a requirement, in a way, I agree with him. That would be wonderful if it was banned. Because I would do it all the more, you know. I would be that much more invested in doing it.

AM: I think something that we were trying to succeed in at Yale was the fact of having your own voice and way of articulating your own ideas. I think it is so essential and even in practice. I actually disagree with it so completely, the idea [of discontinuing it]. I think it’s [important] to have a very thorough research done on a specific project which you can then later abstract into other things and take into your own. I mean, I think critically at work even now much more than prior to the thesis.

MT: I want to add something to that too, because this goes back to what research is. It’s a code word sometimes for something else. I am not sure I can define it, but well, I can describe it seeing certain studios like the Biennale studio with Greg Lynn and Raham Rashid and a kind of new or rebirth of the group studio project, whereby the critic comes in and the students work on their studio master’s project. In other words Greg comes in and says I’m thinking about this idea and I want you guys to do the research for me, so to speak, which is in some ways the professionalization of education, architectural education. It just…smacks of it. And I’m not saying that’s necessarily bad but I don’t think anyone is really questioning that, you know. What do the students really feel? What if they don’t wish to do that work? How much really different is it from being assigned to do a museum on campus, you know?

I actually think there is quite a bit of difference. If you look at what the Bienale studio did, in many ways it was successful model, but it led you to question what were those thirty-some odd students saying and doing and now when they leave that environment what do they do? It leads you to question how do they stand on their own? I guess they go work for Greg Lynn or Raham Rashid because that’s what they know.

So we’re in a really interesting position right now and transition in architectural education and I sensed it a little bit at Yale. I think a lot of the work Greg Lynn is doing is incredibly interesting and the structures of the studios are positive and good but I wonder what will happen long term. You know, what kind of people, what kind of architects are there going to be? Are they followers?

AM: I think, just to reiterate, it is essential as part of this the development of a student’s ideas and approach to architecture. You want to have that framework on the side to, and I’ll say it again, to fail but then to get back into it. You want to find out what you’re mistakes are and then you’re able to fix them, let’s say. It’s extremely essential to our development.