Could you talk about the transition between research and design and the translation of this knowledge into a representation of architecture?

**JC:** ...start sooner...start early (both laugh).

**LF:** Well, I think we’ll make the argument for this in the lecture this afternoon is that thinking and making have to be intimately tied. You cannot just think it and make it. You have to think it, make it, and have them develop a reciprocity there and have one inform the other.

And I think students too often in thesis, you know, have this idea and they want to remain true to that and they don’t...and there’s a sense that it’s all from within. It’s all from them. And there’s no, sort of, recognition of exterior forces that start to shape things that are outside yourself either, you know, the colors you use, the materials you use, the people you sit next to, the critics you have, the things you read.

You know, all these other forces are shaping the work that you do. I think that we should capitalize on those and reinforce the good things that happen, even if they are unintentional.

**Does the design thesis at Sci Arc have to result in a building?**

**JC and LF:** No!

**JC:** It has to do with how you investigate and interrogate a set of ideas. And architecture and urban design is what we happen to be exploring. That’s our media but it really has to do with how do you use those things to investigate a set of ideas that are really your interest.

**LF:** I think that’s interesting, though, because I think that the question of building versus ideas doesn’t have to result in architecture. There’s a real ebb and flow of that. I think at Sci Arc originally, we kind of talked about this in the morning at breakfast, there was a real interest in physical building and actually making its need known.

And when we first came to Sci Arc experiencing thesis as first year grads was an amazing event. I mean, it was just like people built out spaces. It was just this huge...just festival almost. I mean, it was a phenomenal experience. And I think it was kind of primarily because most people hadn’t used the computer yet.

And it’s interesting that since we were at Sci Arc the computer really invaded in the studio – not invaded necessarily but virtually everyone uses the computer and thesis this year was very, kind of...people were standing back. I mean, it wasn’t a physical engagement as much as it was, kind of, three years before which I thought was very interesting.

And I think there is less value placed on the resolution of thesis in a building – in a built product. That was one of the reasons that it was very important to me to do a building just in response to that – just as a challenge myself because I hadn’t ever gotten this far in a resolution of a building before. So that for me personally was really important.

**JC:** We saw some excellent theses that didn’t necessarily resolve themselves in something that was built but still were extraordinarily rigorous in their approach to investigating a set of methods or principles.

**LF:** I think all of those theses, your thesis in particular, have an incredible impact on architecture and urbanism and how we think about our environment. I think the ones that couldn’t make that translation or jump were lacking in my opinion. And that’s why your thesis was so successful.
Yale University
Mike Tower (MT) and Andrew Mazor (AM)

Could you tell me how your final thesis work was presented? How did the representation of the work affect the choices you made?

AM: It was up to us to present it however we felt it should be presented.

MT: In the final format some people presented drawings and also video pieces. For example, this girl did a really beautiful set of drawings but also a video that also went along with it that talked more about the temporal issues of her project. It’s hard to say that drawings were on 24” X 36” boards. None of that existed. Obviously, it doesn’t make sense.

AM: Dominique and I had discussions and she had three different sites in Berlin and at one point she was thinking of presenting three different parts of the building on three different parts of the campus. The presentation became part of the thesis itself.

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

What did each of you learn from this experience?

YE: It is going to take me a few years to figure out what I want to take from this or what I learned or am still learning. There are a few dimensions in this project that were very important to me. And usually there would may be a connection between architecture and other things -- architecture and art in my modes of representation, in my struggle for the representation to be its own object. And to get through the representation you get feelings I wanted you to get from something in my object.

But they’re two different things. In a way the drawings were representing something else and they were themselves as well. And they had strengths being objects and drawings and photographs and models. And that was very important. I don’t think I have ever accomplished that before or felt I got that close to this border.

And the fact that you tackle with issues and you allow yourself to say that they are…they’re questioning, philosophical questions that I have about the world. I think that’s a big thing because usually even if I think about these philosophical questions even within a context of a project it’s, kind of like, the introduction and then you go into...maybe not.

I’m trying to think through other projects too. In here almost every move I made or I think a lot of the spaces I imagined and didn’t have time to draw were physiological spaces, spaces where something else happened – something that meant something more to me than just…on other levels. It’s a little more…it is somewhere else. There is another realm and it’s really nice to live in other realms. It was important to me to know that I could live there for two hours or so.

Now the question is what’s next but that, you know, that’s just the next step. Whether I am going to do this again or can I incorporate this idea into other dimensions or projects even if they are regular projects and just question things on different levels as well? But the question will be what I learned after I do it, other things, and then I can see if I am incorporating or how...probably in twenty years I will figure it out.

Could you talk more about this idea of drawing beliefs in relation to the thesis process?

YE: It might but not...it’s not that...it’s not the beliefs. It is draw the world. And everything you do...we had a few professors, everything you do has to be on the drawing. You can’t tell me anything. I don’t hear you. Show me on the drawing. So everything is drawn. So analysis is drawn. So drawings become a world that is not drawn in plans and sections but ideas. And that and maybe in thesis the idea becomes a belief. I think that’s what Tao was...I mean we always draw ideas but then it’s an idea you believe in. I’m not sure if I have one so...for me it’s just questions.
Could you talk about the transition between research and design and the translation of this knowledge into a representation of architecture? Was this more of a seamless process for you or did you experience a real break between the two phases?

TH: (laughs) For me and for a lot of people it was a constant push and pull. Design is this very cyclical process and you find yourself going back to the first map you found somewhere. And something about that map or that piece of information really informs a decision that could be made in March instead of right when you start your thesis. We went from the, sort of, talking and thinking phase into the drawing phase by doing, a sort of, it was kind of an analysis. It wasn't really an analysis drawing. I forget what it was called. But it was sort of, like, a problem statement drawing where you, sort of, were forced to put pen to paper or pencil to paper and, sort of, draw out what you were thinking.

And so that was kind of the leap. And those were...tended to be, sort of, really interesting drawings. And a lot of those drawings never made it to final presentation of thesis, but my critic at least forced us to start because it's so hard. You find all this information and you wonder where to start. Usually it was...for me it was taking a map of probably the greatest scale and starting to look at neighborhoods and street networks and different parts of the city.

At what point in the semester were you asked to do this first analysis drawing?

TH: We were asked to do it the first week we were back. A lot of the thinking had to go on either around studio or over Christmas. The formal thinking began after Thanksgiving when we had to submit our page statement of what we'd be studying the next semester. So that's when it started. Even though you had this month off for break you started thesis before that month off happened. So it was sort of incumbent upon you to think about it in some way. I think some people were more serious about it than others, again. That's something that's affected by other variables throughout the process. But nonetheless, that was when thesis started. So it did get a little bit of a head start.

Could you talk about the requirements for the final thesis review and the decisions you made about the representation of your work?

TH: As we talked, you were required to submit a page for thesis prep at the very beginning. And then after that, it is sort of this mentoring part of architecture culture in general and a great mentoring culture at Notre Dame. You just sort of looked at what did thesis mean physically, like how many boards did it mean, what kind of drawings did it mean? I know even within my own studio, and this might have been the way the studio was run, we all chose what we needed to produce to show our ideas. That was part of the process. You didn't just get a drawing list.

Thesis was about breaking away from someone telling you what the program and the drawing lists are. So it was all about coming up with what you wanted to show. We had people who presented oil paintings with their drawings that were of an idea. We had people present those first idea sketches, process board, things, pieces of trace somehow in a coordinated fashion. There was...models. I mean, there were so many ways to, sort of, go about your problem. I mean, maybe if you built a really excellent model then maybe a section cut or two dropped out. So it was all about what you thought was best for your building. At a certain point we had to come up with a drawing list, how many perspectives of what? Are you going to build a model, are you going to draw an axon, are you going to draw an aerial? What are you going to do? So that was very much curtailed in each person's project.

Could you tell me briefly about the final thesis review and the jury response to your drawings, models — how your ideas were communicated?

TH: Well, I had the opportunity to be chosen out of a hat to go first. That in and of itself was a trip because you don’t want to be last, but first was pretty daunting because you don't know much about it except for reviews you've been to the years before. So for the reviews themselves I think we were given thirty or forty minutes. Of course you had to be set up before the time started. We had three or four jurors including our critic, people from the school that wandered in, professors. The Dean would come and maybe would stay for a few projects sometimes. So we would have this vastly changing panel. We were advised to speak very
little about our projects and to try to set out the problem statement and what we were searching for through the process and to run through the drawings very quickly. At that point the drawings should be clear and they should be presentable so there’s not a question as to leading someone through every single room of your building, especially if it’s a large building of some sort.

So you could gauge where the conversation was going depending on what you’d present because, of course, these people haven’t been with you for however many months you’ve been working on this. So some interesting questions would come from other professors in the school who had been to mid-reviews like, oh did you ever work this and that, and then another conversation would come up. We were encouraged to present what we could in a finite ten to fifteen minutes because forty minutes really isn’t a lot of time to look at a semester of work and a semester of work that you’ve built up to over five years.

So everyone was given a time slot and presented and they weren’t really presented in any sort of order. There was some grouping of projects of type just because when the second person would finish then the larger critique may tail on for a few more minutes and there might be some issues that come up to the crowd to think about. But it was pretty much random selection of our names and just sort of what we were presenting, so the jurors really had to flip back and forth sometimes between a building in the woods to downtown Chicago.

In their presentation here at Penn State one graduate described their final thesis review as a big party and celebration. Another described it as an inquisition. How would you describe your final thesis review at Notre Dame?

TH: I guess I would describe it as a sense of excitement about it. We had three days of thesis reviews. By the third day especially if you presented in one of the first two you showed up in jeans and a t-shirt and you were just sort of there to support your classmates and hear the banter. The first day was very formal and going first on the first day was a very formal thing. But depending on what critics were there each day the atmosphere changed throughout projects. Projects that were more thorough, obviously, there was a more exciting atmosphere about things in comparison to a project that might be leaner on the drawings, things like that.

Maybe Notre Dame is a middle ground between party and inquisition. You had to be accountable for what you drew. I mean there was no question. And it’s a very serious thing in that way. But if you look at it philosophically, what you’ve been doing for months is really a thesis and that’s just merely a presentation of ideas. So it should sort of be a celebration – not only that you finished but that you really looked at something and you looked it through. You stayed the course. You really accomplished something and not just a bunch of drawings and a building that you weren’t really into but something you sort of created yourself. So in that way, I think, by the third day, it was a lot of fun and there were a lot of parties afterwards. But there was a balance between the two.

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

Could you talk about how you made decisions about the representation of your work?

CR: I think that was one of the really interesting things that came out of those last six weeks in our conversations was this notion of representation. We all had this discovery, well maybe not all, but I think that you were in on it. It sort of came to this point where we were like, okay, we’ve done what we’re going to do and now, like, it’s how you represent it that is gonna convince people. And almost at some point the representation became the thesis. You have to draw it right; you have to model it right. It became a lot more important than the architecture, so to speak. It was some sort of revelation about academic architecture.

DM: I know because this year I had the opportunity to critique the younger years, we assume because we sit and stare at our drawings for hours and hours that anyone else who looks at them will understand them only because we made them. And, you know, I sit at other critiques and look at a presentation and if it’s... if there isn’t something instantly there that draws your attention it’s very difficult to critique a project. That has a lot of value in academic architecture. It’s not the same building and the same architecture drawn two different ways. It doesn’t express the same idea even though the building could be inspired by the idea.
CR: I think it is interesting what Dan said about drawing the same exact building two different ways...

DM: ...they're not the same building any more.

CR: When you start reading the Perez Gomez article about the tool of drawing and the different ways of drawing, the way that your tools affect what you are doing if you are drawing in perspective, the results are going to be different. There is a mark of the tools on the product. I don't think the same building drawn two different ways would be the same building. I think the drawing influences.

DM: I think in terms of a profession I don't think it is something to regret at all. I think that's what makes architects more valuable right now than they have been in a long time. Maybe I shouldn't bring up his name but Rem Koolhaas's books are not like his buildings. The buildings are one thing but I think the most interesting thing about his work is the way he represents information. He takes incredibly complex coordinates of time, places, people, and money and makes them visible – makes graphics out of them in really creative ways that are easily understandable. It is a new realm for architects to explore because we know how to represent things, very abstract things, in an accessible way.

Could you describe the final jury and review process and its value to you?

DM: Final reviews are really interesting because throughout the years we always had guest jurors sort of coming and helping with the critiques along with our professors. But this, for the first time in fifth year, we had a jury completely of outsiders, people that none of us had met. They hadn't seen our work all year and we get this sheet of paper that we send to them and they come and listen to five minutes of talk about the project that you have worked on for a year and they give their criticism. I think the whole reason we are talking about representation so much is because it becomes extremely important to represent your ideas when you are dealing with people who have never seen you before, never had any contact with them...

CR: ...which is usually the case...

DM: ...which is usually the case. You're right. It was a new challenge. You couldn't depend on your professor knowing what you meant to draw or trying to say what you had to say and that was different. I think that has benefits and disadvantages as well. In a way it's a judgment of a twenty minute presentation. If you can master representation well enough to convince someone that you've done a year's worth of meaningful work on a project...

CR: ...and they only know what you show them, so you are in control in a certain way. Those jurors were really good. They knew a lot about the sites. They still are limited somewhat by what you present to them.

DM: That was my estimation earlier in the semester previous to the juries. In hindsight I don't think that everyone who deserved recognition was recognized.

CR: No.

DM: I think they somehow knew who has done good work and who hasn't.

CR: But that puts a weird twist in it too – the recognition, the competition, because people had different takes on that.

DM: I don't know how it is in other schools but our thesis project is a competition and it is basically a yearlong competition. I don't think too many people are hung up on the money, but it's very highly esteemed to win the Kossman [thesis] competition at Penn State. It's a big honor.

Do you think the competitive aspect of thesis needs to be reconsidered?

DM: I don't know if the...I think it can be a little disappointing at times.

CR: It lends a certain air of excitement to something. At the same time it might create motives like the way that Dan was talking about representation and the way you talk about the project and the way that it is represented on the wall. Some people are better at it than others and that doesn't mean that they are better thinkers or better architects. Some people are just better at that aspect and that becomes somewhat of an emphasis in terms of how a project is evaluated.

DM: I don't know if that would be any different if it weren't a competition. It's not a competition in the sense that you hand in a drawing and it's a closed jury. We
sit and defend our projects and have a conversation about them. So in a sense I think the actual process that we go through in critiquing the projects isn’t unsimilar to what we do anyway. It’s just with a new jury.

CR: So it probably isn’t even an issue really.

DM: I think the competition definitely creates some tensions in our studio that are unnecessary maybe.

CR: The competition is there regardless of the [Kossman] competition but I don’t think that would lessen any of that.

DM: I’m not sure if there would be much of a different atmosphere if we weren’t competing for a prize – if we were just competing against each other.

During their presentation here at Penn State one graduate described their final thesis review as a big party and celebration. Another described it as an inquisition. How would you describe...

DM: ...an inquisition.

CR: Really? I thought it was much more towards the party atmosphere. I felt really good. I was done. I went second.

DM: Leading up to your presentation it’s pretty intense. I mean the jury was exactly the way it should be in a design school. They are going to ask you the tough questions. They are going to tell you what is missing. I felt like it was tough but that is how it should be.

CR: There was a really supportive – you know we talked about all that competition stuff. I think there was a really supportive attitude throughout the class, especially those last couple of weeks when everybody was killing themselves and also at the competition when it came to the presentation. You know, there was the thing about Janet. One of our students missed her review and you can’t reschedule. So she pinned up and most of the class showed up to watch her present her project even though she couldn’t present to the jury. Maybe it is elements of both. Those last three weeks specifically were the worst weeks of my life and the best weeks of my life. I look back on them with really fond memories. At the time everything hurt and nothing was going right.