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

Is there too much emphasis on originality in the design thesis?

CR: Yes and no.

DM: I am leaning more towards yes. I think there’s a lot of...

CR: ...it depends on your perception of originality.

DM: There’s a lot of things that a student can learn from emulating someone else or approaching the same problem. I think it’s difficult to completely emulate another person’s work unless you are really trying to. Your personal, your self, always comes through somehow in the work.

CR: It’s always easier to find yourself in it when you have a datum to compare it to.

DM: I think it can be dangerous to push students to originality so when people feel pressure to be original and begin making decisions based on, is this original? CR: Everything you do is original and nothing you do is original. So, it’s like what the definition of the thesis is in the masters program when they lay out for you what you need to do. They say you need to generate new knowledge (laughing).

But then there is this explanation of that where it says that could be just changing something about the way we think about a certain thing, just putting something in a new light, changing perspective on something, or looking at it from a different way. So I think originality can be really subtle. It doesn’t have to be...I’ve found, a whole new way to do architecture, you know.

DM: But I think some people are really striving for that.

CR: Oh yeah.

DM: And you get some monsters out there and some Frankenstein architecture (both laugh) that’s driven by, you know, the desire to be, you know, anomalous. There are more important issues in architecture.

Like what?

DM: I enjoy reading art criticism and philosophy and I enjoy all the architectural theory, but I think it’s not the ends it’s the means. What I really enjoy is sitting down with an incredibly complex problem and ripping it apart. And I don’t remember who said it but someone said once that architecture is the art of compromise, and I think that that’s how you prioritize all the different issues and balance them in one thing.

I mean a lot of people in our studio say that they are interested in design, not necessarily architecture. They want to design things and have the freedome to design things well. I realized after years that I am not one of those people.

To what extend do you think the design thesis is a product of one’s own whimsy or fantasy?

CR: I think that is something I thought a lot about and I don’t have an answer for you, but I think that it is to the extent to which you define it yourself. You can define a thesis in such a way that you are making all the parameters and drawing all the lines and you can define a thesis in such a way that it is a complete product of your whimsy or fantasy or whatever you want and learn a lot from it.

I guess when I am talking about whimsy and fantasy I am almost talking about, like – a separation from the rules of reality that govern real architecture. And I think you can also define it in such a way that all those things become very important and you learn a lot from that too. It’s just different. I think you could even
learn a lot from that too. It’s just different. I think you could even answer that question in general. It all is how you define this project and what you set up for yourself the whole way through. You are constantly resetting those things.

DM: My thesis started on a whim. I had a book full of photographs. They were cool and I said, wow, this is really interesting. Maybe this could be a thesis. Following a whim or a fantasy doesn’t necessarily lead you to a fantasy, you know. You know, I’ve always felt the need to have some basis in reality.

So I mean I took that fantasy and applied it to a real site. I chose a site that is completely real. You know, someone is designing a building for it right now with the same program and everything. I think that’s important to give your project credibility. You can work in a different context if you want to say, I’m doing this project to avoid the rules of reality like real estate and marketing, but I think it becomes less accessible to people.

CR: It might just be more catalytic to avoid some of those rules sometimes.

DM: I guess what I should say is not necessarily ignoring those rules or following those rules but addressing them because a lot of projects do acknowledge those harsh realities of architecture.

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

Is there is too much emphasis on originality in the design thesis?

LF: (smiles) I don’t think that emphasis comes from the curriculum or the instructors so much. I think it’s just sort of in the air in general just by definition of what a thesis is, that somehow in scientific work definitely theses are used to question things and to push boundaries.

So I think that automatically translates into an interest in the original. But I think there’s a pretty strong belief at our school among the students and the instructors that you don’t get at that. You get at that through something that is possibly very familiar and not so out there. You get at that through a kind of pushing at the boundaries of things, not by actually going outside and trying to be complex or original at the very beginning. That implication is built up over time by a deeper understanding and inquiry, I think.

Could you give me an example from your thesis that exemplifies this idea?

LF: Maybe. I began looking at housing via furniture and I think there was...people actually discouraged me from being involved in housing, saying that it was a too intractable or entrenched of an issue in which to make the kind of innovation that we all want, the pushing of boundaries that we want to occur during thesis.

Through a close and intense study of furniture, how it operates and how it’s related to architecture, you know something which we use everyday, we’re using it right now, allowed me to rework how the traditional elements of multi-unit housing operate, you know, the core system and how the circulation works, how the units are related to each other. So that kind of close-in investigation actually allowed me to kind of turn around and push outside.

JC: Well, I think, expanding on what Liz said was that you’re not necessarily...first, I think it’s a myth.

LF: Yeah.

JC: I don’t think at Sci Arc...Sci Arc didn’t set out to be original. It’s something that other people saw...

...in every myth, though, there is supposedly an element of truth (everyone laughs).

JC: Well, if there is an element of truth then I think that the originality comes from being the most inclusive that you can or being the most wide-open that you can – the way in which the school is transformed from a place where the investigations have gone from architecture to looking at much larger topics and seeing how they affect architecture.
Is that easier said than done?

LF: Oh yeah.

Is this just so encultured that it is an accepted notion at your school?

JC: I would say at Sci Arc it is easier. One of the things at Sci Arc is they very quickly...well, there is a kind of paradox there, but you look at some very historical precedents, especially twentieth century precedents. But very quickly you start to poke holes in it or you don’t just necessarily get stuck on those, and you start to look at other influences in the world.

Yeah, but I don’t know, the originality, there’s a certain...I mean, for example, with Liz’s thesis, I don’t know of anybody else who looked at furniture as a form of developing an urban context or extrapolating it into an urban context.

But there are so many precedents. It’s really much more of a matter of bringing together all of the different precedents that exist. And so, while Liz didn’t invent furniture and she didn’t invent housing, but looking at bringing the two together and creating a synergy between the two, you know, that happens to be an original idea, but that wasn’t a goal.

My thesis built very specifically on some larger discussions, theoretical discussions, that dealt with some...and the basis of those theoretical discussions have to do with real certain “retroactive topics” or “retroactive manifestos” as in the words of my real precedent.

Recombining to make the new?

JC: Yeah, but also just seeing what kind of intervention, if you make a particular kind of intervention, what do you get out of it and then how do you manipulate that intervention to get something else out of it. Or how do the external influences of that place then affect the intervention that you do?

So the originality of the architecture has to do with that place in the relationship between that place and the kind of intervention that you do, but everything that you do still builds on the shoulders of everything else that’s been done. So it’s not...the basis of it is not necessarily original.

To what extent do you think the thesis should be a product of whimsy or fantasy?

JC: In what way?

I’d like you to interpret what whimsy or fantasy means.

JC: Okay. Well, one interpretation would be that whimsy is in terms of what you actually end up with and the other kind of whimsy being that what you actually end up doing. Like, in other words, it was somewhat whimsical to get to my thesis.

Like I said, it was through finding those passions and in that sense it wasn’t whimsical; it was deeply seeded. But there’s a certain level of the fantastic that exists that you allow to be there because it allows you to expand your thinking about what things are possible. In other words, it is uninhibited.

So if I interpret whimsy to be trivial I would say that none of it was true. No, but if I if I looked at it in terms of being uninhibited then I would say that whimsy was a very good application. Still, however, it has to be believable. You have to make it clear and it has to be...it has to have conviction and in that sense whimsical is great as long as it is convincing and has conviction.

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

Is there too much emphasis on originality in the design thesis?

AM: No!

MT: I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. There is more to it than you’re asking. Many of us, and this is outside of schools as well, you look at a lot of theoretical work that’s kind of exploded over the last ten years or so, and a lot of it is based on self-expression and indulgences, perhaps. But I think really, I don’t
think there is anything wrong with that. I think the issue should be a certain accountability or answerability to your method or to what you produce and where you take that stand. There’s really no person being put to task to actually back up what they’re doing. You just put your work out there and that’s it. What needs to happen is people need to argue more and to discuss what it is that grounds their work and how they got there.

As a graduate student in architecture, who do you think you’re accountable to?

MT: The architectural community – educators, stewards, and hopefully, the public. But a lot of our discussions stay within a very small world.

AM: I think what we present as a thesis we are presenting to other architects. I want to get back to this idea of being original. It’s not – I don’t want it to sound like it’s a how can you be original. For me, a definition of being original is something that you just take a slightly different stance on something. And by looking at it in a skewed way, like I said, like from looking at the margin, you’re approach to it, you know, just by default will be slightly different or original. I don’t think that that’s bad. I think it’s possible.

MT: ...I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being original either. It’s expected. We’re supposed to be. We’re not simply civil servants. Yes, we are professionals but we have a certain responsibility to the work, the people that we produce work for, or the world at large at least. We have an immense responsibility towards the work.

I don’t know if I should use this example or not but I was talking with my boss recently and we were talking about John Hejduk’s work. And the one thing that he said that really impressed her the most is that architecture is a social contract and it was the first time she had ever heard it. I never really thought about it until it came up and when you think about that way of immense….we have a responsibility and it’s not something we should not be afraid of. We are not high priests but the work we do is received by everybody and I think about how that is received.

Do we think of it as an art or do we think of it as a simple function of producing the built environment? I think that’s why we do need to. Think, create a more original work. It needs to be supported but also when you say support you also need to really hold people to task on what it is they do and I think there is a general lack of that. If there is any reaction to the plethora of creative expression, the issue is not with that but with what it is they are doing – what it is they are trying to say.

To what extent do you think the design thesis is a product of whimsy or fantasy?

MT: It’s a large product of fantasy – but it is a fantasy. I’m sure a large part of it comes from the hope of that world – hope of a more harmonious existence with the natural environment, with other people. Maybe I’m using fantasy as too pejorative. I think it is.

AM: I don’t think it is entirely fantasy. When you say fantasy you have to allow, I think, when you’re approaching thesis to have some emphasis – some degree of “no rules” if you will – to approach it in a certain way to allow you the freedom to explore something that you can’t explore outside the university, perhaps. That is something I think is the interesting thing about thesis.

Maybe this is what I got through doing thesis at Yale. There is a sort of balance between this…you make a proposition but the proposition can be the challenge, the fantasy, if you will. The structure of it and what you’re using or what you’re going to be critiquing can be very real.

MT: That’s why I would say what you actually do is not fantasy. It is work. It begins the process I think more than anything. Otherwise, you’d be doing something someone already has done. To begin with the unimaginable, let’s just say, and question it’s possible manifestation is really what gives a new interest in the work.

I think a lot of our hopes and dreams are completely undisciplined. We want everyone to love us. We want all of those sorts of things. What if you take that idea…the idea that you could vision a way of reordering the world, a way of reordering a structure, or a set of materials that could by its effect make positive changes or say something meaningful – to make poetry out of it.
Cooper Union
Yael Erel (YE) and Tao Sule (TS)

To what extent you think the thesis is a product of whimsy or fantasy?

YE: I think that I said before, it is about...for me, there are decisions you make that...maybe the mainly, the starting-point, I think, will always in a way being whimsical. I just chose to do this. This is my choice. After that, I let...I think the thesis has to be founded and structured so it makes sense. Within making sense and the logic and the rational, I don’t think you’re totally out of fantasy. I think you’re still building something...but you’re building...you’re constructing something out of your logic, out of your way of looking, and analyzing the world and creating the world. And that can still be...I don’t believe in jumps, in crazy jumps and things that have no connection to anything else to within. Sometimes you have to, I don’t know, get mixed up but I think things should be founded. So, do you understand what I mean? I think there is a combination in the thesis project that will allow...I think that in the thesis project you cannot be just whimsical all the time. You can’t just choose all dimensions because then you need a structure. You need a logic. You need an idea, a series of ideas that build up. But within that you have freedom to create a world and that is whimsical or fantasy. But I think you should, I think, that is your – our responsibly – to create something that is yours and not in a bad way. Hopefully, it is something else.

TS: If the thesis is a not product of fantasy then I would question its value. I think fantasy is absolutely, absolutely critical, absolutely. In fact, I would argue that an entire project can be a product of pure fantasy. I have to define fantasy. But before that I would say that almost nothing should be a product of whimsy. What appears whimsical isn’t really whimsical.

Fantasy is...there is creative fantasy, there is a kind of rational fantasy, there is intellectual fantasy, which, say for instance, just to use a project as a context, say for instance, I read a book whose subtitle was, The Interpenetration of Civilization, and it was a sociological thesis.

I would argue as intellectual and as intellectually rigorous as his writing was, it was [posing] ideas differently. Fantasy causes you to question, to imagine to – it’s everything. So fantasy should be...substructure. And whimsy – I would question whether it is a necessary component at all.

Some of the most rigorous thinkers that I have been exposed to, they have come up with their positions because they really have, they have fantasy, and they have the mind to see beyond what is in front of them and also to contextualize what is in front of them into that fantasy.

University of Notre Dame
Tiffany Haile (TH)

Is there too much emphasis on originality in the design thesis?

TH: Early on at Notre Dame we were given in the regular studio the same sort of project. This one project, there seemed to be so many aspects of it that were so mandated that I thought to myself, and I think this was one of the first projects we did my sophomore year, how are these buildings not all going to look alike? How is this not going to frustrate that idea of being creative in producing it in some way or another? And to my surprise, of course, was that every building looked different by the time the project was over. And so, that sort of enforced to me really early on that even though I was in a school that was working within the structure of classical architecture, that there’s a lot of variety within that.

And so creativity, I think, in terms of thesis, I think, stems again from the thesis itself like the question or problem statement that you derive. And you can get very creative with the issue that you want to explore. I think that’s where the creativity starts. And if it starts there it can only be fostered in the building. And as far as being creative in the building it’s such a subjective judgment. What I think is sort of innovative might not be innovative to someone else. And what I think is sort of cutting edge, be it technology or...if it’s an idea and it’s not really a measurable entity it’s hard to say, you know, is it original or is it not original?
But I think in the process the idea of coming up with your own project is a very original search. You couldn’t just look over someone else’s paper and write down that you’re going to do that too. It was all about personal exploration. So, in that way, I think that’s where it got started. And that takes different forms for some people.

Could you talk about a specific aspect of your design thesis that you think is original?

TH: Well, I think the idea which you can see happening all over the country now, of taking these underused sites and making them into something, whether you’re weaving them into the city fabric or whether you’re…to me, that in and of itself as a problem was original because no longer is the industry coming back to use that site.

These are problems that you didn’t face before because you didn’t have all these brownfields in all these cities that weren’t going to get bought up by another company that would use the land for the same reason. So, for me, that sort of, at least what I knew about architecture then, was an original idea to begin with, not original but a creative endeavor to reuse things.

I guess within my project, especially in this part of western Pennsylvania, I would look at a new traditional neighborhood as original. There are not a lot of those projects happening at least in western Pennsylvania as a locale. I mean, there are hundreds happening all over the country. But for the values that people hold dear here that are different than in other parts of the country, it’s a new thing to begin with.

My building was a meeting hall. Having a little meeting hall for a neighborhood or for larger communities is a lost art. For me, it’s having a public building dedicated to coming together. You know, we have community centers. We have libraries that usually have conference rooms or things in them. But to have a public place where you could have everything from a town meeting about safety to a wedding reception is something that to me was lost. To me, it was an opportunity to bring something back…to have an actual dedicated area for that would mean that they had as much interest in the public realm as the private realm beyond their little houses. There is somewhere where you could go to meet each other.

So the whole idea of public versus private which is a constant issue in architecture was one of those that I think is a creative way to look at bringing people together. I don’t know that everyone would say that. But I saw it as something I didn’t see a lot of – so maybe trying to figure out what typology that building is or what its form should take or should it be part of the library – who knows? That was part of the exploration.

To what extent do you think the thesis is a product of whimsy or fantasy?

TH: Well, I guess if they’re appropriate in your problem or as a solution or a process that you take to solve the problem or look at the problem, maybe that’s appropriate in some cases. But, I think there has to be some whimsy in your approach just so you’re interested in it. But that doesn’t necessarily need to manifest itself as part of a physical building. So to me, I guess, it would depend on whether you’re being figurative or literal about it.

And there are some things or designs like an amusement park where that is literally an aspect of your design. That’s something you try to physically manifest in your design. But if you don’t have some passion and whimsy about what you’re doing, whether it takes form or not, then it’s going to be a long semester or year (laughs). I don’t know. That’s sort of the way I look at it. I mean, there are good days and bad days but if you don’t have a general interest…if you’re not having fun at all, then you might need to rethink what you want to look at.