

2015

Poster as Design Dialogue

Andreas Luescher

Bowling Green State University, aluesch@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/architecture_pub



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Luescher, Andreas, "Poster as Design Dialogue" (2015). *Architecture and Environmental Design Faculty Publications*. 19.

https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/architecture_pub/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture and Environmental Design at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture and Environmental Design Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Poster as Design Dialogue

Andreas Luescher, Bowling Green State University

Abstract

A fourth-year class in a pre-professional program explored the idea of a visual dialogue emerging from the investigative nature of the properties and variables of individual responses to design studio challenges. All members of a Senior Design Studio collaborated in planning, designing and producing a single poster announcing a public parade of their work. This paper describes the poster, as well as the use of alternative teaching and learning approaches which students learn to broaden their design and architectural repertoire to include more creative, collaborative, intuitive and flexible skills.

Keywords:

Architecture, collage, collaboration, graphic communication, posters, studio culture

Introduction

There is a point in the final semester of Senior Studio, typically about two-thirds of the way through, when the social dynamic of the studio, one in which work process and discussion are closely interconnected throughout the semester, gives way to increasing insularity. Design tutorials, reading discussions, pin-ups and other collaborative review formats become less frequent as students press to complete drawings, models, and a coherent design narrative for presentation to a sizable audience of architects and designers at the final review. One-on-one desk critique between individual students and the studio instructor become the primary source of critical feedback and reflection

(Anthony 1991). Students, feeling the constraint of time, anxiety, and competition for recognition, recede from the social learning space and pursue projects and design practices personally in isolation from others. But the iterative design process calls for multiple, diverse, opportunities of feedback and reflection. What is lost when students work primarily internally focused is the essential structure of the studio learning environment and an essential element of studio pedagogy: the learning that takes place in the relationships between people. In fact, one of the main reasons of the success of studio teaching in design education is often attributed to its social nature.

“Most of us were taught in school to think ourselves as individualist and even encouraged to be iconoclasts. One result of that individualism is that it has accustomed us to think of ourselves as competitors, something more characteristic of a trade than a profession” (Fisher 2001:30)

For the past ten years I have used a collaborative approach to create a senior design studio poster to shake up the insular late-semester atmosphere in the studio and, in doing so, challenge the outcome of individual thesis projects. This project – the development of a Senior Design Studio Poster - represents an alternative approach to appraising each other and ourselves. It focuses on aspects such as creativity, collaboration, capturing emotions, and learning to challenge the traditional modes of thinking (Cuff 1991). The poster is intended to be a tool - a maieutic methodology - that offers students a chance to see themselves and their work in the larger context of their

intellectual and imaginative development and in the larger context of the studio itself (Leigh 2007). Maieutic stands in this context of architecture criticism promote a birth of integral artistic and architectural design image by means of gradual destruction of student's primary beliefs and stereotypes of knowledge. As a result students get a new, more flexible knowledge of the world and of oneself. In other words it serves as witness, scribe, memory, and reflection of the creative impulses which occur between instructors, students, and outside observers (Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 1: Six final poster projects, 2005-2013

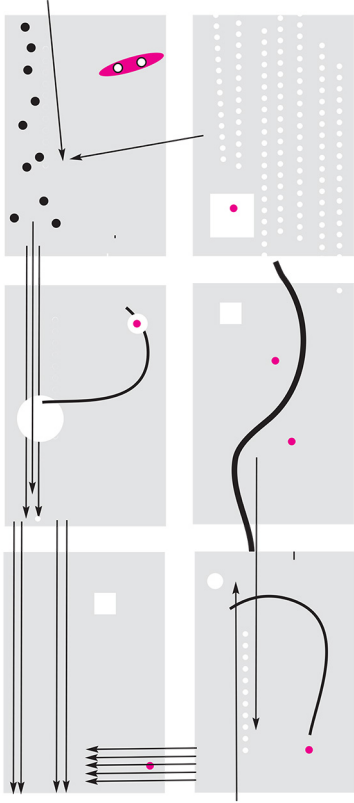


Figure 2: Creative dialogues: A visual linguistic interpretation of the impulses moving in the studio during each poster creation

Stretching the Imagination

The idea arose when I was challenged as a junior faculty to take over a thesis studio. In addition to helping students create their ultimate senior project, I wanted to capture the soul of the studio experience. Something special happens in the studio environment due to the unique group dynamics. One of my goals was to capture this generally unrecognized aspect of this capstone experience and to stitch together the most salient elements of the individual design projects into one coherent overview (Figure 3). My initial aspirations were many, key among them: summarize the group experience arising from the individual senior projects, encourage collaborative learning, and de-emphasize

the technical process of project execution. Finally, I wanted to highlight the proposition that the process of developing or making is an equally valued outcome of art and design education as the product (object or event, Gurel and Basa 2004). The creation of a poster involves the entire class (12 - 15 students) in the development of a three-dimensional assemblage and collage that, when scanned, becomes the visual narrative element of a large-format print poster. Minimal typography was added to convey the date, time, and location of the exhibition (Figure 4).

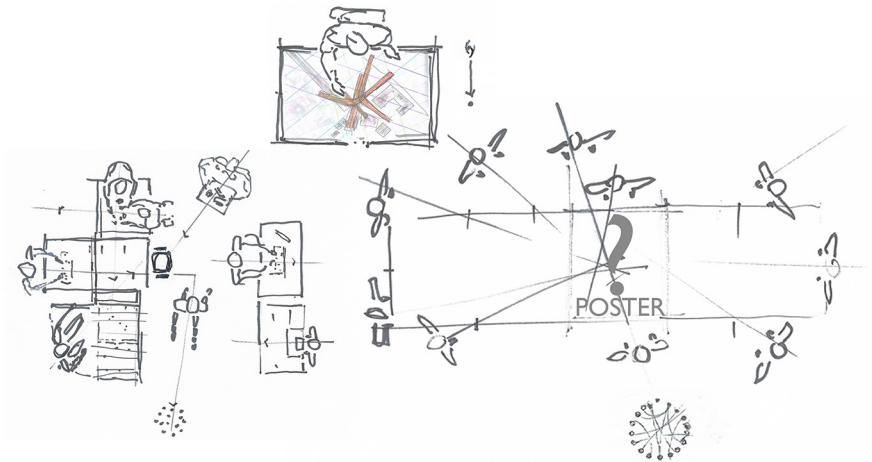


Figure 3: The movement from individually-focused work habits to the interactive environment stimulating the birth of a poster

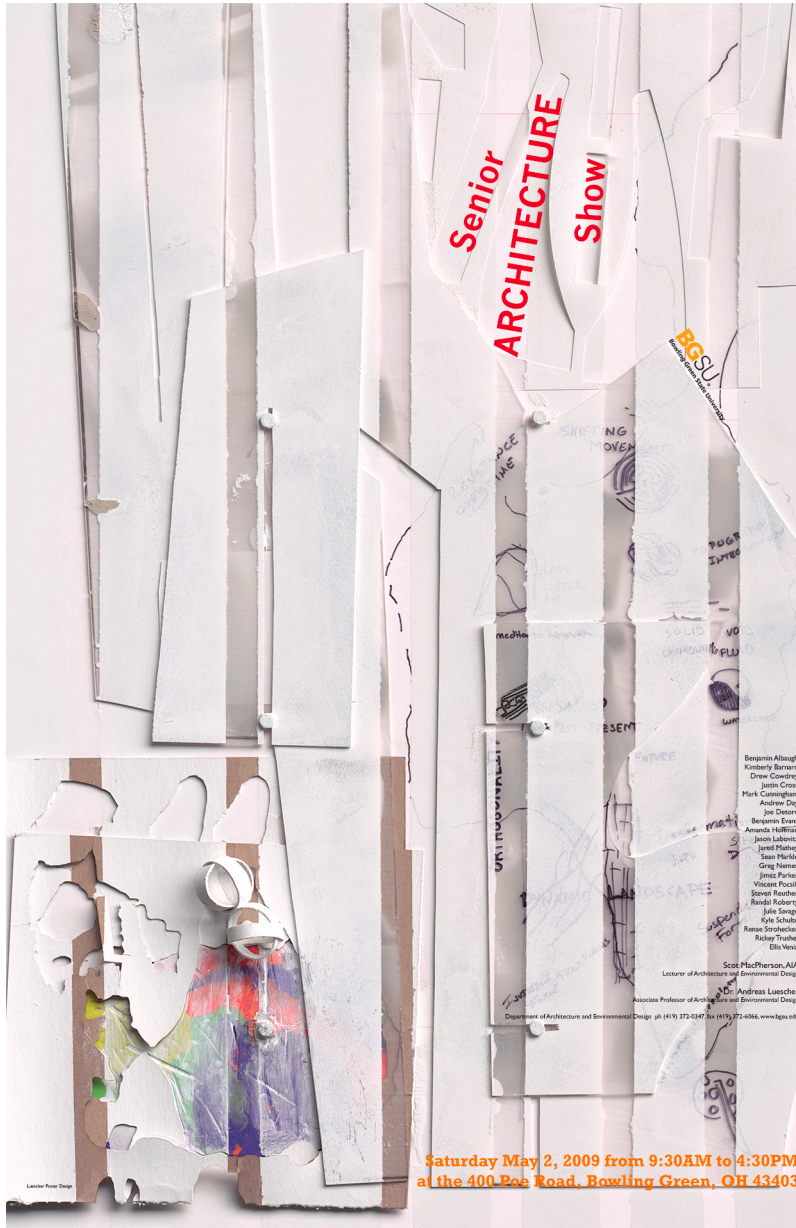


Figure 4: Typography of 2009 poster for the South Bass Island meditation center, Lake Erie, Ohio/USA overlay on top of an assortment of crescent boards, trace, spray paint, sit visit notes, sketches, impressions showing the infinite silence of the place.

The injection of a project calling for participation by all class members late in the semester is can be a hard sell. Students may experience it as adding stress to what is already a stressful situation (finishing thesis projects). However, the poster project, as it

develops through several stages, has the potential to positively affect students when they return to their individual projects by restoring the social component of studio learning. As a brief but drastic shift in attention from the preoccupations of individual work, the poster project opens a space that can be helpful to students whose individual thesis projects need a creative breakthrough to be fully realized (Shavelson 1973). Students were asked to contribute an object: a drawing, an image, a word, a sketch model, anything that serves as a design parti, that is a physical representation of their individual thesis project. They were asked to describe to the group the object in terms of what and how it represents. These partis were serving as raw material that the group used to develop the poster image. The specific technique of assemblage and collage, with its particular approach to shapes, colors, materials, its reliance on intuition and non-linear association, is an ideal vehicle for group discovery and negotiation (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Extract from 2013 poster for a center for contemporary crafts, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania/USA showing numerous sketch models, auto body filler, tire impressions, recycled Andy Warhol bag, toothpicks, paper, photographs, recycled electronic parts, on plywood representing variety and diversity of students thinking.

Birthing a Poster

The poster project is run in one initial two-hour session with the entire class, and loosely scheduled through a number of subsequent phases with a self-selected group of

editorial art team. Initially the entire class, usually fifteen students, and the instructor, gathers around a table large enough to hold a 24" x 36" board (crescent board, foam board, scrap plywood, whatever is available in the studio) on which the poster imagery will develop. The dimensions of the board approximate the dimensions of the finished poster, so the imagery will be scanned at a scale of 1:1 (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Full-size 2012 poster for a performing arts center in Havana, Cuba which students used to practice involving laser-cut foam core, corrugated cardboard, spray paint, stencils, Xeroxes, fragments of print advertising, free hand drawings, house paint, on a cardboard base build on foundation of city grids since the 16th century, the density of the urban population and the recent influx of tourism, color, erosion of facades by sea spray and pounding surf.

Students have been assigned to bring in one object: a drawing, an image, a word, a sketch model, anything that serves as a design parti, that is a physical representation of their own senior project (each year there is an assigned theme around which individual students develop their own thesis projects). Each student gives a short presentation describing their object and the thought behind it's selection. As objects accumulate on the center of the table, they are freely placed and moved, while ideas and notes are kept on white board for review, and drawing materials are at hand.

Initially, for some students this created numerous challenges. They wanted to know *why* they had to participate in a larger project beyond the thesis project. They resisted having time taken away from their individual projects. They didn't understand the need for creating a memory of the studio experience or the value of collaborative learning. This new style of learning created cognitive dissonance with their story that outperforming their peers is the most important value.

Once these initial difficulties were surpassed and they had chosen their objects, students began participating together in creating a representation of how their items could work together to show the spirit of the studio. At this point, the difficulties multiplied. In the beginning of the project, there is no theme, which makes many students uncomfortable. They wanted to *understand* but they couldn't. They wanted to

solve the problem. They wanted to *conquer* the assignment. In this process, however, the poster emerges slowly and collaboratively and has no fixed form or constraints.

Students spent hours arranging their collection of objects, exploring their inter-relationships, discovering new representations and rearranging the objects. They consulted their project journals for rationale and selected materials, components and techniques. In years when students had extreme difficulty selecting objects and struggled to cooperate in a group effort, I attempted to build a unified approach by having them think about everyday objects and their simultaneous banality and importance. Students came up with ideas such as toothbrushes and glasses which could represent their shared experience and create a commonality that everyone can understand (Figure 7). Eventually, the group selected and developed images and ultimately determined a hierarchy of information. Students cropped and occluded individual representations in order to create a visual summary of a group of images while maximizing visible visual information.



Figure 7: Extract from 2008 poster for a study of wellness center, Myvatn, Iceland proving accumulated experience of daily use of toothbrushes as an abstract representation of shifting layers, topographic complexity and translucence, emergence landscape.

Collage technique is described as not only an approach to materials, but a process and an attitude of mind. Collage as a methodology not associated with solving identified problems, but rather discovering new opportunities and ideas. It is an object and a process, a composition of related elements that produce a cohesive interrelated whole. Because collage mines the expressive potential of found elements in unexpected adjacencies it is an ideal medium for enhancing our interest in collective contribution

and shared objective.

The requirements of the poster are outlined in this way: document the ongoing studio culture consisting of a variety of performers . The range of materials available included anything in the studio. The intended audience for poster is the university community the students themselves for whom it will function as a private document. The envisioned outcome of the poster is two-fold: promote the Senior Show exhibition and to preserve an impression of the aesthetic, attitudinal, and technical dynamics of the studio.

Tasks:

- 1) **Initial meeting** (15 students) gathers around a table large enough to hold 24"x36"board.
- 2) **Overview** of project objective and timeline is introduced by professor.
- 3) **Introductions of ideas:** each student briefly presents their object, or parti etc. and answers questions from the students and instructor.
- 4) **Board space** is necessary for the group dynamic so that everyone can participate in the process. This phase of the process, for example, developing the basic layout, require participation and agreement from all of the participants. Critical to the idea is the use of this shared space.
- 5) **Class reflection** occurs on the whiteboard that outline of two or three different initial design concepts for the group to comment on.
- 6) **Various designs** are diagrammed on the board in as much detail as possible in order to get as clear a direction as possible.
- 7) **Self-selection** of volunteers who made up the editorial team goes on to refine and finish the work. Some students are limited by the time needed to finish their own projects, others by their interest in the poster project. Before the entire group disperses they review the alternatives and choose one for development, or combine pieces that they like for a direction to follow.
- 8) **The editorial team** reviews modifies and clarifies one direction for development.
- 9) **Development stage:** The editorial manager(s) sets the team on task and coordinates work, aligning decisions with the agreed upon concept.
- 10) **In-process work** remains accessible in the studio through the next week so all class members can contribute feedback or promote ideas.

- 11) **When assemblage** is finished, it is scanned (high-end flatbed scanner) at a scale of 1:1 and printed with typographic additions.
- 12) **Wrap up:** Open critical discussion with class, and instructor is intended for the maximum degree of participation by the students. What is or is not the best solution is irrelevant: What is important is the discussion of the process and lessons learned.

Design is inherently an interdisciplinary act

Because each studio is different, the Senior Design studio poster is an artistic manifesto (Figure 8). The teaching paradigm is to document and manifest all facets of the studio experience and attempt to recognize a unity of the intellect, emotions, and spirit. It seeks to understand the wholeness and unique patterns of experience happening during the capstone studio class. The course methodology flows from the following principle: get the thought; worry about the grammar later. This attitude helps student learn to process information in new ways.



Figure 8: 2006 Poster emphasized the design of leisure pavilion for the Ribbon Park, Troy Ohio/USA which students used techniques involving play dough, laser-cut models, masking tape, spray paint, stencils on board to represented their partis on a small island within park setting which in turn is set within the (extended) grid of the city.

As the semester progressed and the project developed, students became increasingly comfortable allowing ideas to emerge and considering how those ideas might be used. They gradually loosened their uniform, standard and applied techniques into something without directive. They tapped into a new set of more intuitive, creative and flexible

skills. They engaged in greater intellectual and emotional exploration and reflection. The studio experience began to evolve into something new.

Seniors also experienced that the interrelationship and integration of the various aspects of the graphic design process, with an eye to difficulties and solutions. The similarities between the core processes of architecture and graphic design include visual problem-solving and emphasize methods of translating compiled data into clear, visually dynamic solutions. An architect's primary skill is the judgment to separate what is essential from what is merely important. The same is true of the graphic designer. Both architects and graphic designers must maintain the critical importance of boundaries and interfaces (Aldersey-Williams, 1990).

“Making the connections, both *within* the architectural curriculum and *between* architecture and other disciplines on campus, is, we believe, the single most important challenge confronting architectural programs” (Boyer and Mitgang 1996:85).

After the experience, despite their resistances, students are equipped with a number of new aptitudes. They have learned to process information in a non-directive way. They have begun to question the value of individualization versus collaboration. They can now represent their individual selves in a group self-portrait. They have begun pursuing alternative routes. While these skills will be more or less valuable in different settings

after graduation, students have now been exposed to different ways of ongoing interaction with others and their work.

They have additional skills which can help them in a variety of design and architecture related projects, such as organizing community events or festivals, raising money for projects, or being able to tell a story. They have increased their ability to help clients discern what they need or don't need, rather than simply following directives.

Ultimately, students have moved beyond an intellectual understanding of designing a poster and begun a lifelong process of self-discovery and personal performances.

References

Aldersey-Williams, H. [et al.] 1990. *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse*. New York: Rizzoli.

Anthony, K. 1991. *Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studios*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Boyer, E. and L. Mitgang, 1996. *Building Community: A New Future for Architectural Education and Practice*. Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Cuff, D. 1991. *Architecture: The Story of Practice*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Fisher, T. R. 2001. *In the Scheme of Things: Alternative Thinking on the Practice of Architecture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Leigh, F. 2007. "Platonic Dialogue, Maieutic Method and Critical Thinking." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41 (3): 309-323.

Gurel, M. O. and I. Basa, 2004. "The Status of Graphic Presentation in Interior/Architecture Design Education." *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 23 (2): 192-206.

Shavelson, R. J. 1973. "What is The Basic Teaching Skill." *Journal of Teacher Education*, 24: 144-151.