A search for a personal design vocabulary

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preface

It is interesting to note, now that the trumpets which heralded the year-long efforts of yet another group of thesis students have become silent, that I feel strangely unfulfilled. One would imagine that the joyous relief of having "made it" would allow for a relaxing of one's curiosity - the urge to renew one's perspective. It seems, however, that those who conducted what might be termed an "experimental" thesis (one which does not necessarily assume that a product, a building, an easily understood process or even a degree, for that matter, will result) have called on themselves to perform an arduous task: a lifelong search for aesthetic truth and beauty. The notion of a "lifelong search" implies that an answer will never be reached - quite an unsettling prospect. But is it? Hasn't it always been said that those who continually search for new beginnings and seek new direction live the longest and happiest lives? I feel unfulfilled because, as I say later, my thesis has generated more questions than it has answered. However, I also feel that I now have something to do for the rest of my life. Whether my income is generated by the profession of architecture or by some other means is irrelevant. I now know that to search and collect new ideas and grow and develop in every way I can is the most important task to which I can ever aspire.
I am only now beginning to understand and formulate opinions about the charges I have brought against architecture and its practitioners during the course of this study. I have so many questions, so many complaints and so many disparate views concerning the nebulous world of "design" that it remains difficult to fully realize the goals of my original premise. Thesis begins at one point and reaches another. With the advent of new questions and new realizations along the road, directions must change periodically, and one soon finds himself with a new understanding that was unforeseen at the outset. This thesis has not been a tool for the development of future problem-solving but, more importantly, a chance to find out more about myself, my design ability and my attitudes toward architecture.

I began with the ambitious title "A Search for a Personal Design Vocabulary." The study was designed to look deep inside my personal preferences, beliefs and stylistic idiosyncrasies and find those intrinsic qualities that would allow me to develop an architecture with spirit, personality and quality. I have asked many things: For whom am I to design? How does a cliche become one? What is the best design process? How does one define a
"classic?" Why do certain design elements become assimilated into our society? Are the best architects not architects at all but rather those who simply create without the stylistic preconceptions that we as "professionals" carry with us?

My work has attempted to address these questions and more. I have created several objects that are representative of my personal feelings about architecture and design. My search has resulted in both design growth and maturity and it seems relevant and appropriate that my work is as layered and diverse as my thinking at this point. It is interesting to note that my study has generated more questions than it has answered, and my burgeoning "List of Important Queries" seems to initiate a new member almost daily. Perhaps there can be no end in the search for excellence in design. Like all other things in the world, design must continually evolve. I have concluded that my search must last forever. I am not seeking style, I am seeking spirit - design from within.
thesis proposal

It is assumed by this point that I am to be an architect. I have paid my dues, served my time and fulfilled the obligations necessary to begin this nine-month array of questions, doubts, discoveries and, hopefully, answers that are collectively known as a thesis. Of course, one may begin to ask as I have: "What questions? What exactly is a thesis anyway?" At this point I am not sure how to answer those questions and I'm not entirely sure that I will be able to after nine months. So, here we go.

It has been widely purported that, thus far, my work in school has been quite intuitive, based largely on feeling and spontaneity. I have always been intrigued by the elements that comprise architectural composition. Each architect and designer creates a design vocabulary that is based on a personal set of criteria involving aesthetics, philosophy, imagery, and creativity. That personal vocabulary results from the sum of each individual's personality and the total stimulus of his environment. These influences are used to spur a creative design process that results in a personal design statement. This year, via a process of exploration, synthesis, and application, I intend to discover the elements that comprise my own personal design vocabulary and learn how to apply those
elements toward architecture.

I draw ideas from the sum of everything that has been my education and experience. Much of that information is stored subconsciously and arises during the design process as a "gut" feeling or intuition. Drawing upon everything that I have experienced, I derive, in conjunction with the relevant information of the design problem, design solutions from my personal vocabulary.

As I explore the various elements that compose architecture, I intend to gain a better understanding of my design process, a greater knowledge of composition in general and a solidification of my ideas and discoveries into a format which may be used for future design problems.

The approach to gaining an understanding of my personal design vocabulary will be a three-phased investigation.

phase one fall quarter 1986

"Explorations" A Look into the Elements of Architectural Composition.

The first quarter will consist of an investigation and exploration of various architectural elements via a series of weekly exercises. Each exercise will involve a preset list of "items" that will be studied on the basis of composition and intuition. Each exercise will result in
not necessarily a set of conclusions but rather a series of assessments derived from a personal viewpoint.

phase two winter quarter 1986-1987


The second study will attempt to synthesize the elements investigated during the first phase and relate them to architectural problem solving. A series of archetypes will be studied and each will involve relevant issues of design, such as circulation, structure, shelter and skin. These issues will be resolved through specific predetermined combinations of the elements explored during phase one.

phase three spring quarter 1987

"Solutions" An Application of Conclusions to a Specific Architectural Design Problem.

Phase three will involve coalescing that which has been discovered and concluded during phases one and two and applying the knowledge to a specific architectural problem. The problem and the site will be determined by the thesis chairperson and committee members at the end of phase two.
Phase one began with what was to be a series of exercises that investigated all of the various elements of design composition. I realized rather quickly, however, that my list of "elements" was lacking. I was able to understand a bit more about my personal design intentions, meaning, the certain goals that I strive to maintain and the certain tendencies to manipulate these said elements in a particular way.

I found that there is a certain irony in what I design. And I think that this results from a certain wariness of architectural and design cliches. I get tired of cliches. I get tired of seeing architects use them ad nauseum. So I feel that to avoid cliches, one must be aware of their existence and be able to identify them - and design accordingly. The use of irony, or contradiction if you will, in design can be described as creating that which was not expected. I like my results to surprise me. Without surprise, can there really be growth?

I concluded phase one by creating a series of objects that were architectural in nature but had no function. They were a combination of those design elements that were interesting to me at the time.
Painting
PHASE I
OBJECT
- Achieve the proper balance between analysis and intuition.

- "Uniting opposites in an exciting, vibrant tension that avoids extremism." (Whatever extremism is.)

- Emotion, simply emotion without considering deep analytical philosophy.
Is what I'm doing and what I'm searching for an all-encompassing aesthetic for the world over? I don't think so. I think it's much more personal than that. But should I even be searching for all of this? Won't that lead to a complacency? "Oh, now I have found it!" That complacency would lead to contrived notions, little personal growth and boring design. The search should be everlasting and continuous. Through constant searching, designs will always be fresh and have vitality and richness.
- Does something architectural have to represent some idea and resolve it to be valid? I don't think it has to but a piece of architecture may be enhanced by it. But in an artistic sense, isn't it only responsible to itself? Can't the pure beauty of composition and the pure genius of construction just speak for itself. I believe that many designers create a "concept" or "theme" for their project to make up for what it lacks in pure architectural beauty.
Many feel that a disappointing part of architecture is that it must "work" to be valid. Many feel that if it is purely sculptural and devoid of function, then it cannot truly be called architecture. However, if a designer takes the issue of "working" to heart, then that emotional commitment will be translated and be felt by others.
As a form of my appreciation for that which is analytical, well executed and precise, I create forms.

- Form generated by analytical process is contrived. The same forms intrigue me because I have a feeling for them. The origin of that feeling is unknown and irrelevant; it is simply there. I like a cube not because it has six sides and has many perfect mathematical relationships - I like it because it looks ordered and can bring visual and spatial order to a design. The cube is even more special to me when juxtaposed against an ambiguous form. I simply like it! I can say the same for many other shapes or forms. Sometimes I just start to see a shape in my mind and I use it. For some reason I see it, I like it and I use it.
- The creative person understands those items that are cliches and goes beyond them or uses them to his advantage to do what has not yet been done. However, to be "different" is not necessarily creative. Many who attempt to be different avoid doing it with ideas already available to them. Using accepted ideas and adapting them to your own personality rather than using them literally will result in a truly emotional design.
- Intellectualism is fine if it acts as a catalyst to spur creativity. But intellectualism used as a means to an end or for its own sake will result in nothing.
Two new ideas.

Over the last two or three days, I have discovered something that represents an overwhelming consistency within my design vocabulary. These are the elements of decoration and irony in design.

The only way I know to explain the notion of irony in design is to continually do the unexpected. Isn’t that what creativity is all about? Those who use commonplace elements and cliches create boring design. Look back to those in history who are generally regarded as creative individuals. What they presented was the unexpected. Many times it was just a new perspective or viewpoint on elements that were commonplace. What I have been consciously or unconsciously trying to accomplish through design is create unexpected results - using everyday elements or cliches in new ways.

The elements of composition are already here. They are all around us, everywhere you look. There are no new geometric forms on the horizon or laws of design to refer to. Everything is ready, everything is directly in front of you. It is simply up to the creative individual to grasp these elements and use them.
Phase two was designed to bring the abstractions of phase one together into a workable and more functional form. A series of archetypes were studied and rough designs were made of each based on very simple programmatic criteria. The design studies were categorized under four headings: a house, a church, a bank, and a restaurant. At this time a new interest developed, which was based on a particular form that I have been interested in for a long time. The form does not have any exact dimensions or exact proportional systems; however, it is fairly uniform in appearance. It can be described as a rectangular box, not quite twice as high as it is wide and fairly long. This form was used to some degree on each of the four archetype studies.

During these winter months, different things served as inspiration for the project. Most notably were the small banks of Louis Sullivan and a small, brick house located in downtown Muncie. I was developing a new sense and feel for decoration at this time and my awareness of proportion was becoming more acute. This new growth was subtle but I think very important. I was maturing as an artist. I could feel that because I felt less need to take the broadest strokes possible, and my color palette was becoming more refined.
Phase two was presented as a series of drawings, mostly colored pencil and pencil on a series of 9\"x12\" sheets. Also included were some small sketches on cards and other drawings. The drawings depicted my impressions of possible solutions for the architype studies.
church
church
church
house
house section
bank
restaurant
restaurant section
restaurant
phase three

Phase three was originally designed to bring together that which was studied in phase one and phase two and create a "normal" design project to be critiqued based on "normal" design criteria. It was felt, however, both by myself and my design critic, Arthur Schaller, that it would be more advantageous to further develop that which was begun during phase two, the archetype studies, and turn them into real building designs. Most of the quarter was spent turning the rough drawings into model form. At the end, two final models were developed with one interior model and several large scale drawings added. Also, measured floor plans and sections were drawn to add clarity to the model forms.

The transition from drawing form to model form was important in that new ideas could be added or subtracted at will and a new perspective was gained as the three-dimensional element took shape. The models were constructed generally of painted crescent board, paper, balsa wood and mylar. They were mounted on painted plywood bases. The plywood bases became the "sites" and each project was adjusted in someway to whatever pattern I painted on the base or whatever shape the base had been cut.

I continued to work on my senses of proportion and
color by creating a set of painted cards. These cards were interesting because I would only work on them while I waited for the paint to dry on my models. Any left over paint was used on small 3"x5" or 5"x7" cards. I made it a rule that I could not throw away good paint; I had to use it all. The color combinations on the cards were random and subject to whatever I had been using on the models. Therefore, I was able to experiment with color combinations that I may not have used in another situation. I found a new liking toward metallic paints and prismacolors. These added a new dimension to my personal color catalogue.
bank
restaurant
bank
bank
bank
restaurant
restaurant
sketch
Why is most architecture bad architecture?

Because only so many architects have talent.
Because only so many architects have taste.
Because only so many architects really care about architecture.
Because so many architects are content to simply get the job done.
Because so many are too dependent on another's opinion.
Because so many take the client's words literally.
Because architects don't make enough money.
Because too many clients and architects believe that the profession of architecture is a service only.
Because only so many can really draw.
Because only so many recognize architecture as an art.
Because many care more about the NCAA basketball finals than architecture.
Because so few have the maturity of attitude to create relevant work.
Because so few actively seek new perspective, new input or new direction.
Because too few actively seek to create an individualistic interpretation of their world and let their designs be dictated by the past work of others.
Because cliches are simple to produce and people are intrinsically lazy.
And so on...
conclusions

It has been a spirited year of growth and adjustment, new found vision, awakening and adventure. So many things have entered into the making of this study, so many things have changed me and made an indelible mark on my perspective. I have travelled: two trips to Europe and looks at Madison, Taliesin East, Minneapolis, Cranbrook and Cincinnati. I was fortunate enough to be able to meet and converse with New York artist David Tisdale and London architect Michael Gold. Both provided me with interesting viewpoints that were useful to my work. The experience of having London architects Will Alsop and John Lyall as design professors has had a most profound effect on my thinking and creative spirit. My work this year is a result of these experiences and would have been different had they not occurred. Of course, this is just a partial list of influences - I can't possibly put them all down. I really looked at a lot of things. I just chose those things that were appropriate to my thinking and my goals.

So did I find it? Did I find a Personal Design Vocabulary? Nah! But I found out a lot! I found out some things about myself that I didn't know before - many of which were good, many of which were not. When I look back to this year, I think of how far my thinking has developed since September. I think of how I became more confident in
my work in some ways, saw places to improve in others. I think of how I have matured as a designer and artist and how I have developed a much sharper eye for detail and construction. These are the types of things that have made this year worthwhile and prosperous. I have at no time been particularly concerned with developing a product. I have at no time been particularly concerned with empirical research. My sole focus has been on how to improve my individual perspective on architecture — on what I can contribute to the field honestly and without precedent.

I'm still trying.

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acknowledgment and thanks

To Art Schaller, without whom this project would not have been any good - and whose stamp will probably be found somewhere on every design I ever do in the future.
basically...