Evolution

an architectural thesis
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Credits

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Introduction

Reflecting on the past year, it seems appropriate that the thesis book be organized and written in much the same manner as the work was accomplished. Therefore, this book takes a personal, informal, and perhaps untraditional manner. The text is hand written by the author and much of it is written in the first person. A dialogue begins to appear, as if she is talking to a close friend or sometimes to herself.

The book is divided into three main areas - 'thesis,' 'process,' and 'project.' Thoughts and summations of each topic appear at the end of the book as well as some thoughts for the future. A list of books and articles that might be helpful to others is also provided.

Enjoy.

KLM
Evolution

Thesis

Understanding the user and his needs is the most important factor to a relationship between social and technological issues which leads to a complete design. The human is so complicated, so complex. But can we ever truly 'understand' the human? Perhaps scientifically, but not necessarily psychologically or emotionally. After all architecture cannot be thought of in an entirely scientific way, nor can it be totally emotional. There is a delicate balance, sometimes it is so hard to find that balance. Understanding the balance is necessary to complete design.

It is perhaps of more value to be aware of how important the individual is, how delicate the balance between science and emotions. One must realize the interconnectedness between the tangibles and intangibles. It is much easier to deal only with the tangibles, but the intangibles must not be forgotten or ignored, especially whenever people are involved.

In my original thesis proposal, I proposed to research human behavior/environment as it relates to an office and compile a written guide that could be used by others, as well as being the basis for my project. After struggling and trying to do this research it began to be quite clear that
there simply is no clear cut answer or formula to use in design when you are dealing with human activities, values, and attitudes. The designer must rely on his intuition and instincts. That is not to say that he does not research the user in order to gain a better understanding of user needs and concerns. It simply means that he cannot always or simply predict all of his user's desires.

I have realized that even though there are no pat answers to questions concerning a person's behavior, when designing for that person, you must be intent and go beyond the tangible to understand his needs. The user has to be a guiding element in the back of your mind.

I do not believe that it is possible to create something, whether it is a piece of art, a piece of architecture, or your style of dress, without having your personality or 'self' be expressed in that object or idea. It is a commendable idea to believe that architecture should be altruistic and selfless but nevertheless that is impossible because your 'self' is a part of that architecture.

Many people were opposed to the idea of being my own client. They believed that my thesis project would be too subjective and
I would lose all objectivity. The idea was to be subjective, you can be subjective without being biased. I do not believe that I lost all objectivity. I could not. It was too important to also consider the other users. Perhaps if I had had "real" users it would have been more realistic, but I am dealing with theory, and principles of design rather than buildability, so why not think, imagine, and dream.
Process

Due to our training we are taught to look at things rationally and realistically, so began my intentions for my thesis year. I knew that in my thesis I wanted to explore human behavior as it related to a relatively small scale building project, but I was not sure how to go about it. Here is where logic and the traditional way of executing a project came in. If you do not know much about an issue, you research it, and follow through on the basis of that research. And that is exactly what I proposed to do.

I planned on researching human behavior as it related to an office environment, compiling my research into a booklet, and basing my design project on that information. After reading books and articles on the subject, it became quite clear that this would be an impossible task to achieve in three months. The research itself could take a year and that would be only the beginning.

I had to make a decision, either I could continue on with the research or design a project. I wanted to design, so I had to take that very basic knowledge I had acquired and rely on my instincts and intuition for the rest.
My method for beginning a project has always been to sketch or doodle, and build small sketch models. I think about all the spaces, users, and conflicts... then doodle. These drawings and models cannot be called schematic design because their meanings are not always apparent. I suppose they are manifestations of my subconscious thoughts of how to deal with a particular problem. Sometimes I can see a pattern form that seems to be revealing itself to me, but I don’t always know its meaning. It could be called an artistic or instinctive approach.

Simply because of the time allotted for the thesis, you have time to reflect on your earlier attempts and ideas. I can see that much of my seemingly meaningless drawings can be interpreted in my final design. I have learned a very strong lesson—to trust my instincts. I spent many weeks forcing a form and an idea. I could rationalize it to death, but it still wasn’t right. I kept working and working, trying to make it work. But it was becoming more unsightly. I stepped back and realized what I had done. I had been trying to force some of my original ideas, which were manifested in my early irrational sketches, into forms that were derived from strictly rational thinking. The two did not meet and I reverted back
to my original sketches. But now there was a difference. I could understand what certain forms and spaces were trying to be. It felt like a great weight had been lifted. I felt good about what I was doing and things began to fall into place. From that point I could then continue to build on what I had started, and my design began to make sense. Since then, conflicts have seemed minor compared to that frustration and helplessness I had felt earlier.

Now whenever I feel the urge to doodle or sculpt or paint, I just do it. I do not even necessarily think about what I am doing, I just do it. I recently did a quick watercolor (simply because I felt I needed to try something different) and many of the colors used are colors that would be seen in the glass block wall in my project. I trust my instincts!
stage
spotlight
actors
audience
curtain
Project

The project was seen as a tool with which to implement my thesis ideas. I chose to design an office environment because of its intriguing qualities. Many people spend the majority of their waking hours in an office; yet too often the office is looked upon as a place to go to do work and nothing more.

People do not have the same type of attitude or pride for the office as they do for the home. The home is seen as a possession and extension of themselves, and the office can be seen as an extension of the group as a whole, or as an extension of the person or persons in control. Both office types can work equally well depending on the individuals involved.

It is interesting to me that people do not seem to care about, notice, or realize their working environments, except perhaps their own immediate workspace. This seems to be true from not only their vantage point of working in that environment, but also from the images and impressions that outsiders have of that working environment. Why is this so? Is it simply because they try to remove themselves from the environment, almost to the point of ignoring it, is it because they feel that they have no con-
trol over their environments (all the
decisions are made by someone else),
is it that their environment is not im-
portant to them, or is it that they do
not realize their environments are impor-
tant and that it can make a difference
in their lives. Perhaps it is a combina-
tion of these ideas. No matter what the
reason, it is important to remember
that this type of attitude does exist.

I chose to design an architect's office.
I was most familiar with this type of
office and felt comfortable relying on
my instincts and experiences. It is also
interesting to note that architects are
most likely to realize and appreciate
their working environments, in terms of
functional and aesthetic qualities.

When choosing a client for the project,
I became my own client. In so
doing, I did not, as the designer,
allow myself to be influenced by a
real client. I thought it more impor-
tant for my thinking to be theoretical
rather than practical. That is not to
say that this project is not feasible
because it is based on theory, but
that practicality and buildability are
secondary concerns.
Even though I became the client, in theory, I did not necessarily design the project with myself solely in mind. I tried to see it from the standpoint of all the users. I saw the office as an extension of the group as a whole, rather than the extension of the sole proprietor. The office was a place where I, as the boss, felt comfortable, my employees felt comfortable; and my guests and colleagues could also feel comfortable.

I wanted to deal with a relatively small scale project in order to reach some level of detail. Because the project's program was open-ended, I had to make decisions such as site location and building siting, type of work and employees needed for that work, spatial requirements, and the number of employees.

The issue of site selection was not to choose a site and then design a building for that site, but the question was what type of site would be the best for this building. The building was for the most part designed from the inside out. The building needed to stand by itself, as an object. The idea of the "shell" seemed to be appropriate.
The working environment became an object in the building shell and the building became an object in the shelter of the landscape. Early in the design process, I toyed with the idea of the office being inside the shell of an existing building. But the exterior needed to stand on its own and be of the same vocabulary as the interior. The site began to emerge as a clearing within the shell or envelope of dense woods. The access to the site became the hard edge which completed the shell.

The location of the site is a purely subjective decision. With such a general site description, the project could be located virtually anywhere. And perhaps that is due to the nature of this problem - the idea that there is no pat answer; the answer comes from personal preference. I prefer that my office be located in Austin, Texas. Perhaps in the future I would prefer another location. But Austin is a beautiful city, a wonderful envelope in which to place my project. The building is sympathetic to the climatic conditions found in Austin (large overhangs to shield against direct sun from the south and west, diffused
skylights to take advantage of the bright sunlight, and operable windows to allow for natural ventilation whenever possible.

The office became a primarily design-oriented architectural firm that could do, not only large scale work, but also small projects. Interiors, furniture and furnishings were also done but major engineering and technical work such as structural and mechanical was subcontracted. The architects were grouped according to their work but were not segregated from the whole. The number of employees was determined to be between twenty-five and thirty-five people.

During the design process a break or distinction began to be made between where the design and production of the design took place, and where the managing of the firm and its support elements took place. Some type of physical separation seemed appropriate. A vertical separation was investigated first. From a psychological and emotional standpoint, it was not feasible to have one group literally dominating another. Horizontal separation was
investigated next. Because there were only two main areas to be separated, this could only be done by creating a barrier. The barrier could be either a solid, a void, or a combination of the two. The void created too much physical distance between the two parts. This was detrimental to the idea of the office being an extension of the "group", therefore the idea of 'void' was dismissed. The barrier was then seen as a combination of solid and void; it took the form of a wall.

The wall was not a straight line dividing employees from management but a line of give and take - an undulating line. A wall that is definitely there and yet a wall that is mysterious. The wall itself is glass block with a transparent skylight running its entire length. The wall is always in a state of change due to your vantage point and the sun's intensity and position. The wall became the separator - not a solid but translucent, it appears to be permeable - it reflects and refracts light so as to hint at what is on the other side. There are only a few select places where you can catch a glimpse through the wall, and that
is where you can physically penetrate the wall.

The light qualities give the wall animation and life. The mood and color is constantly changing with the movement of the sun. The intensity and feeling changes from morning until late afternoon, just as the mood and atmosphere in the office changes during the day. The morning is bright and energetic but as the day progresses and afternoon arrives, things begin to slow down and finally stop in the late afternoon as the sun begins to set.

The space dividers in the office are thought of as screens. These screens are solid but do not completely enclose a space. The space is implied. The offices are not completely enclosed but do permit a sense of privacy.

The design area is defined by two large areas. One area is defined by a circular raised platform which compositionally completes the end of the wall. The other design area is the orthogonal space defined by the two outside walls, the glass block wall and the raised platform.
The same kinds of work can be done in both areas. The design group or team size would be the determining factor for placement of a certain team. Both areas are also defined by overhead horizontal screens. These screens which would be free-form light gauge wire mesh would diffuse the sunlight from the skylights above. These screens would also give the ceiling plane a certain amount of animation and feeling of movement, as well as being an ambient light source for the drafting areas.

The architects' work areas are defined by their furniture pieces. Each piece acts as a screen to enclose each work space. The furniture pieces have been designed in the same vocabulary as the building. Each piece is basically composed in the same manner - metal tube frame on which interchangeable screens are placed with the functional elements (drafting surface, lateral file, computer table top, etc.) hanging from the screen or structure. The spaces can be arranged by each architect or draftsman to suit his own needs. For example, it may be necessary for a draftsman to have two drafting surfaces, but someone else might need only one drafting
surface and a word processor. The furniture arrangement has the ability to change as the office evolves and changes.

The main thought deals with emotion, and feelings, and growth — evolution. There is never a final solution. To quote a fellow classmate, Alan Kirkpatrick, who said it so eloquently, "Architecture is a profession in which ideas are born, not discovered. The essence which creates architecture is not the idea, but the evolution of the idea."
Conclusions

Thoughts on thesis

To me, the "thesis" is just a premise. Simply a reason for exploration. The final year of education as an undergraduate is not simply a "thesis"—stating a problem and through argument, reaching a conclusion. It is not as straightforward or pragmatic as it appears. How can it be? It is a part of you... it is an exploration of yourself.

Not only is your project evolving, but your personal beliefs, ideas and philosophies are evolving as well. The two are inseparable, both affecting each other, not always in a positive way, yet usually strengthening the other.

I am grateful to have been involved with people who have given me the chance to come to these realizations. Not only to 'realize', but to actually implement the ideas. To know that the project is not the most important thing, but that growing and strengthening your ideas is of the greatest importance.
Thoughts on process

My process is the most individual part of my thesis year. I have taken a rather unorthodox approach and made it work for me. I have let my instincts and intuition take over and make most of my decisions.

This approach certainly has its disadvantages. You can work and work on an idea and when you think you've got all the pragmatic problems worked out and it works functionally, there is something missing. You are not sure what it is, you just know it is not right. How do you resolve it? You keep doodling and thinking and talking and eventually you discover what was missing. You usually knew the solution all the time, you just didn't realize it. Then it all seems so simple. The real problem with this technique is that you cannot control it. It just happens. You cannot always be at leisure with your time, but I am convinced that your first instincts are usually the best.
Thoughts for the future

This thesis year has been a time of exploration, expression and evolution. I have explored new ways of thinking about things, and consequently find I can express myself more freely. I have seen my work and ideas evolve over the past year to the point where I can begin to understand myself as a designer and have more confidence in my work.

I have come to realize that nothing is ever truly complete. It is always in a state of change. This year has been an evolution... building, changing and growing. The end of the year is not a conclusion... it is a stopping point, for now. A place to stop and reflect and draw conclusions.

So what is next? I think I have gained the confidence in my work to continue on the path that I have begun. I will continue to explore and refine the process, now having a clearer understanding of what I am doing, how I think and feel about what I am doing, and how it can work for me in the future.

I have confidence. I trust my instincts.
Bibliography

Some readings that may be helpful


