

Making Time for an Intermezzo

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There comes a point in every semester of a Design Studio, usually about two-thirds of the way through, when the naturally social dynamic of the studio culture, one in which work process and discussion are closely interconnected throughout the semester, give way to insularity. Under pressure to complete drawings, models, and a coherent design narrative for presentation to a sizable audience of architects and designers at the final review, students feel the constraints of time, anxiety, and the competition for recognition. This urgency can hamper creativity, causing design ruts for some students, or a premature closure of design development for others. I find that the lives of the students, and thus, the lives of their work, can both benefit, at this point, from a brief, organized, disruption. For that moment, just a moment, the designs the students have been working on can be put aside. It is now time to complete another work, to create a story within a story. Each member of the studio shares his/her perspective regarding his/her unique studio experience with the whole group, first orally, then graphically. The final outcome takes the form of a poster which combines the stories that capture the generally unrecognized aspects of a studio experience: a stitching together of the most salient elements of the individual design projects into one coherent narrative. The break can't last long, though, otherwise the narrative flow would trip and fall. This intermezzo offers a snapshot, a time-lapse view even, of the interactive environment of a studio. This design intermission attempts to borrow something from each project that can be used to create something new- in this case, a team poster. This paper examines that moment, that controlled disruption, to gain insight into the soul of the design studio. This paper also explores this break in order to highlight the diverse, differential relationship between a studio environment and the students' senses, to determine somatically what arouses the students' design thinking and promotes their design investigations.¹

A Visual Play as Intermezzo

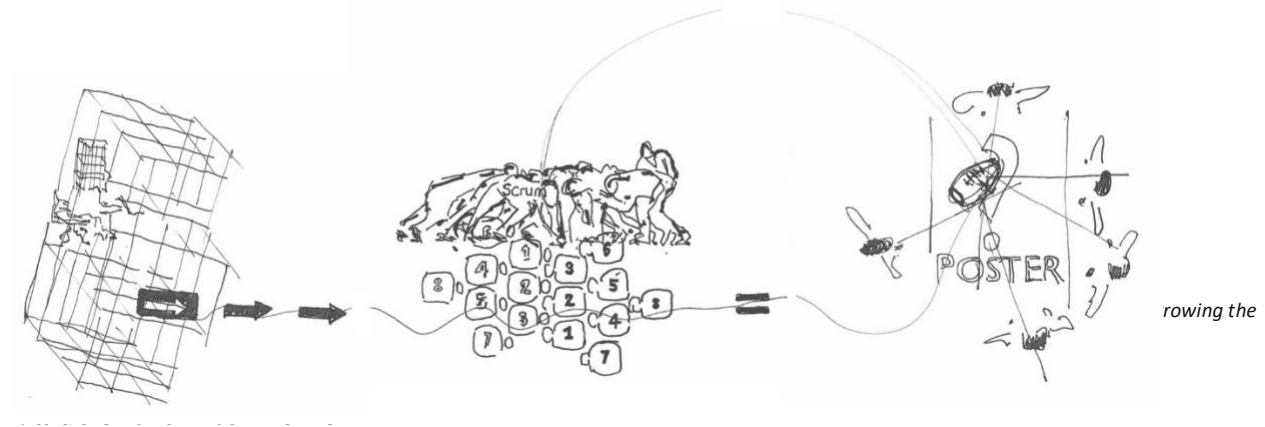
"The public is rarely permitted to take a peep behind the scenes," wrote Edgar Allan Poe.²

An intermezzo is a short dramatic, musical, or other form of entertainment of light character, introduced between the acts of a drama or opera. In the case of this paper, intermezzo is being used to capture and visualize aspects such as creativity, collaboration, emotions, and learning to challenge the traditional modes of design thinking. It is different from the traditional understanding of an intermezzo since all students, as well as guests, are part of this process to gain insight into the soul of the design studio - the core hands-on experience in the architectural setting. Something special happens in the studio environment due to the unique group dynamics. This intermezzo tries to borrow something from each student project that can be used to create something new, visual play for example, as the intermezzo. The aspirations for this intermezzo are many, but the key elements are: to summarize the group experience arising from individual projects, to encourage collaborative learning, and to de-emphasize the technical process of project execution. The intermezzo is a tool- an heuristic methodology-that offers students a chance to see themselves and their work in the larger context of their intellectual and imaginative development in a design studio. The intermezzo is, therefore, a maieutic and hermeneutic device – a form of intellectual midwifery that brings complex ideas into clear consciousness through interpretation. Maieutic, in the context of architecture criticism, promotes a birth of integral artistic and architectural design images by means of gradual

¹ Andreas Luescher "Poster as Design Dialogue," *Journal of Communication Design*, vol. 3, no. 1, (2015), 80-92.

² John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Group, 1934), 80.

destruction of student's primary beliefs and stereotypes of knowledge.³ As a result students obtain a new, more flexible knowledge of the world and of themselves. This process serves as a witness, a scribe, a memory, and a reflection of the creative impulses which occur between instructors, students, and outside observers (Figure 1).



The intermezzo in the Senior Design Studio is part of the gestalt of the semester's work. Just as gestalt is a qualitative and impressionistic expression of the part to the whole, the intermezzo creates a space for discovery of the relationship in the parti that launches a group dynamic with individuals co-authoring a single visual essay.⁴ The intermezzo's function is not merely to represent information or to promote one's work; indeed, it often propels students toward new endeavors which, given time, eventually evolve or overlap in intellectual exploration and reflection. The intermezzo's essential lesson is not its overt message, but rather what the process of putting it together tells us about the Senior Design Studio, also known as Thesis Studio, a pre-professional architectural design program.

The intermezzo is a visual representation of the activities in Senior Studio (Figure 2). It documents the interaction, conflicts and discussions that occur throughout the semester as students improve their design responses to an assignment. In this course, students develop ideational, creative and methodological strategies for problem solving. Each intermezzo encapsulates the development of an aesthetic and a position by the seniors as they work through their semester-long studio projects. The result of these intermezzos is a record of a creative passage, providing proof that the greatest pleasure is often connected to the making, not to the end product.

The value of teaching strategies, organization, design, and evaluation of an evolutionary document seems obvious. The intermezzo provides a bridge between the students and the world of art and design by offering them the chance to see their work and themselves in the broader context of the profession. The posters also make an important contribution to the Architecture and Environmental Design Program's image-building campaign.

Donald Kunze's essay, "Mysteriously Meant" explained his grasp of the intermezzo and its resulting poster as a medium for storytelling.

"Thus, it is not clear that the posters in this assignment are or should be regarded as primarily about interpretation. It may be, that like their

³ Fiona Leigh, "Platonic Dialogue, Maieutic Method and Critical Thinking," *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2007), 309-323. Maya G. Smolina, "Maieutic Means of Criticism," *Journal of Siberian Federal University*, 2 (2009), 120-130.

⁴ The first meaning of the French verb *partir*—'se separer de quelqu'un ou d'un lieu' (to part from someone or from some place)—promulgated *le parti* as a noun representing a second meaning viz 'Conception d'ensemble une oeuvre architectural ou picturale': an overall architectural or pictorial concept.

predecessors — the hefty historical heritage of the creation of enigmatic images designed to inspire, accompany, or introduce other work — they are of the species *Emblemata*, and that their logic is the same as that employed by Andrea Alciato and Otto Vænius, the same as that attributed to the Egyptians in their formation of divinatory hieroglyphs, the same as the signs of nature read as auspices in cultures around the world. It is true that this prophetic use of images can be subject to what we generally call ‘interpretation’, but that attribution would reduce this universal cultural practice to the kind of fortune-telling that occurs in tents at county fairs.”⁵

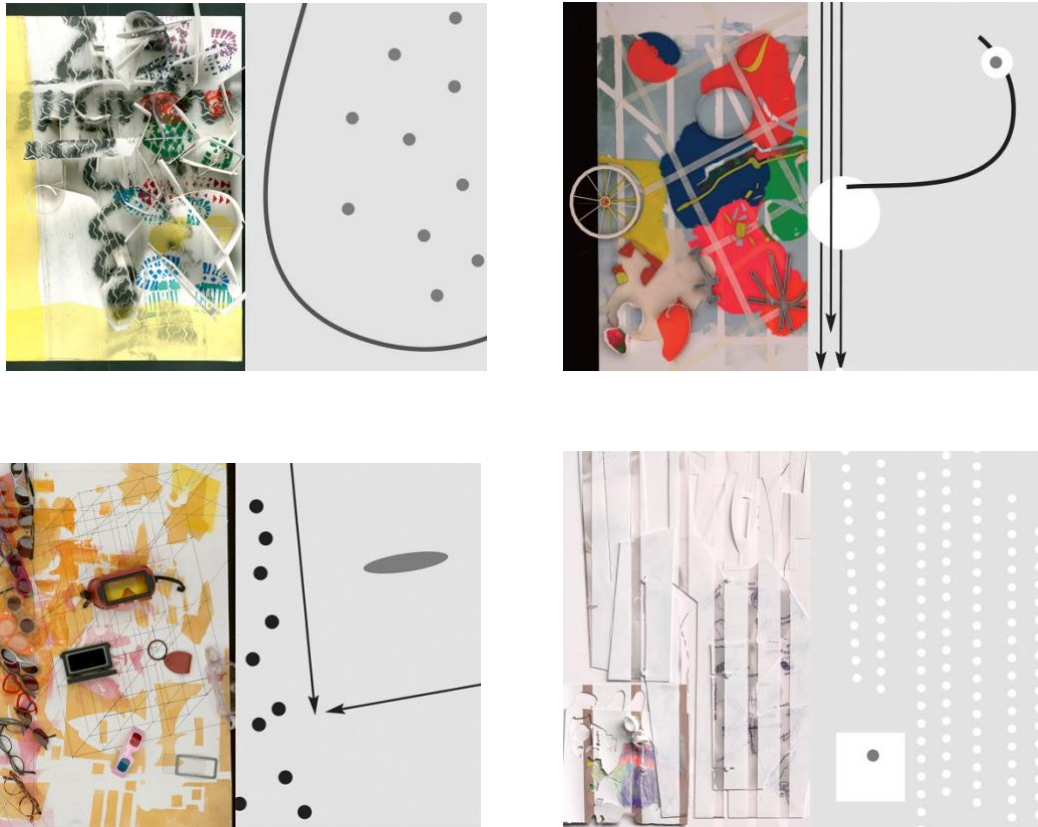


Fig. 2 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009 Exhibition posters juxtaposing the creative end products and the diagrams of the course methodology, which flows from the following principle: get the thought; worry about the grammar later. Source: author.

Creation of Intermezzo

Timing the intermezzo late in the semester is intentional in order to change the pace of the class and create a different momentum. It also serves to shift students’ energies from being internally focused to becoming more attuned with one another. The poster acts similarly to the musical notes one would re-arrange during an improvisational intermezzo and needs to function at two levels simultaneously: as a catalogue of images of individual projects, and as an evocation of the meta-environment of the Senior Design Studio from which the individual projects emerged. Students were asked to organize a mass of details, make the ideas accessible, and fit

⁵ Donald Kunze, “Mysteriously Meant,” in *Design Epilogues*, ed. Andreas Luescher (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 2014).

them into a vertical marquee of 24 by 36 inches. Toward this end, participants used a pattern of aesthetic and artistic innovations that have proven beneficial: collage (to add) and *Etrécissements* (to reduce).⁶

Initially, students were simply instructed to bring in one small object such as a drawing, image, or other representation of their senior project. For some students, this created numerous challenges. They wanted to know *why* they had to participate in a larger project beyond their thesis project. They resisted having time taken away from their individual work. 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 belief that outperforming their peers is the most important value.

Once these initial difficulties were surpassed and they had chosen their objects, the 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 poster creation, 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. 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.

Because each studio is different, the Senior Design studio poster is an artistic manifesto (Figure 3). 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 principle "first discover the intellectual stimulation, and second, be less concerned about the linguistic notion". This attitude helps students learn to process information in artistic ways.

Tool of the Intermezzo

Collage technique is described as not only an approach to materials, but a process and an attitude of mind. Collage as a methodology is not associated with solving identified problems, but rather discovering new opportunities and ideas.⁷ 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 the studio's interest in collective contribution and shared objective. Using collage techniques as tool of intermezzo allows the students to compose new narratives, dialogues, juxtapositions, and to remix them, which provides a unique insight into the design studio. It is also a synthetic entity which casts new roles and meanings to the individual parts. Its parts lead double-lives mixing hierarchal and popular references of the student's engagement while offering a dynamic, inventive connection to both cultural value and

⁶ Collage is an additive method of visual poetry, whereas **Etrécissements** are a **reductive method first employed by** Marcel Mariën in the 1950s. The results are achieved by cutting away parts of images to encourage a new image, using a pair of scissors or any other sharp manipulative instrument.

⁷ Jennifer A. E. Shields, *Collage and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

pedagogical approach within the design studio setting. The intermezzo poster also help to strengthen students concepts as well as their parti in the design.

In practical terms, the requirement of a poster as a compositional note of the intermezzo is to document the ongoing studio culture which consists of a variety of performers. The range of materials available is anything in the studio. The intended audience for the poster is the university community, and 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 preserve an impression of the aesthetic, attitudinal, and technical dynamics of the studio. In the end, the posters acting as the intermezzo of the Senior Design Studio attest to the continued awareness of the tradition of the “know thyself” motto, as it was passed down by the Surrealists and Dadaists. Here, the use of the picture plane is not a window opening on to an illusory virtual space, but rather is a multi-layered thickness of artifacts, tracings, pass-codes, and stains which emerged from the flow of layering, stacking, patterning, and stencil marking during the musical compositional act of the studio performers.

Acknowledgments

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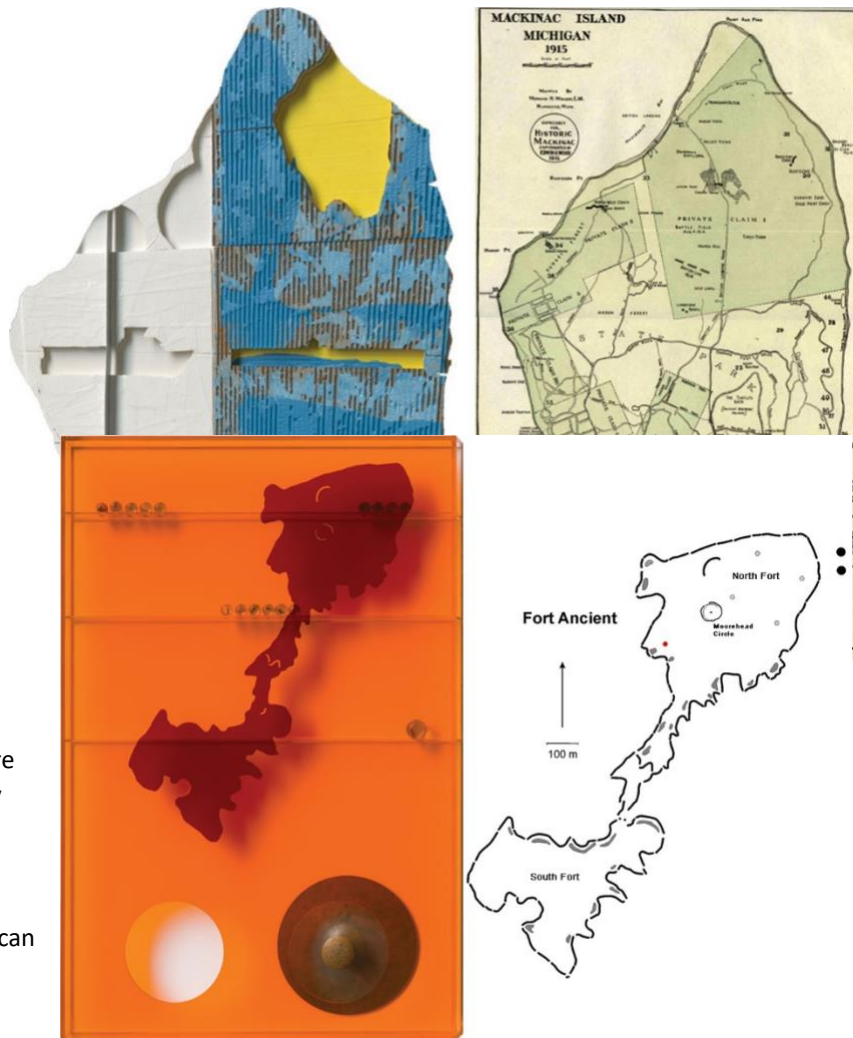


Fig. 3 2016 and 2017 Exhibition posters juxtaposing the innovative end products and the site maps. Source: author.

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