

# Psychoanalytic Understanding of Unsaturated Questions and the Analytic Field in the Design Process

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**In architecture, a teaching relationship is based on one person being devoted to the growth in the other. By looking at the discipline of psychoanalysis and the relationship between psychoanalyst and analysand we are better able to understand how particular aspects of teaching methods and the working relationship between student and teacher might be enriched.**

**The exchange between analyst and analysand is a journey of discovery aimed at increasing self-awareness and acquiring the ability to become autonomously self-aware. The analogies between this model and the quest to find best methods to guide the emerging designer hold much potential. By looking at the concept of unsaturated questions and the analytic field we see how they might inform the design studio process and working alignment. An unsaturated question is an invitation by the analyst for the analysand to reflect and imagine without suggesting any direction they should take - neither stating that something is true nor validating its correctness. In the design studio, the instructor's unsaturated question fosters a designer's mind, stimulating inquiry but also delaying certainty, relying on the student to find answers from within. We see clinicians advocate in different ways for expanding the analysand's thinking, imagining, and feeling. In our students, we in turn see how to expand the same capacities as well as self-observation via an appreciation for process knowledge. In this technique, the therapist must wait for new ideas to emerge. It is essential that the analyst (or teacher) watch, listen, wait, and not be seduced into "working too hard" for, or in lieu of, the patient (or student) doing this themselves. By looking at unsaturated questions and the analytic field we are offered a model for interactions with emerging designers to equip them to think analytically and creatively and seek their unique, authentic voice.**

In architecture, as in many other disciplines, a teaching or mentoring relationship is based on one person being devoted to the growth in the other. By looking at the discipline of psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic dyad – the relationship between psychoanalyst and analysand – we are better able to understand how particular aspects of teaching methods and the working

relationship between student and teacher might be enriched. The dialogue and exchange between analyst and analysand is a journey of discovery aimed at increasing self-awareness and acquiring the skills and ability to become autonomously self-aware. The analogies between this relational model and the quest to find the best methods to guide the emerging designer hold much potential. By looking at the psychoanalytic concept of the unsaturated question and the analytic field, we see how they might inform the design studio process and working alignment between student and instructor.

## THE UNSATURATED QUESTION

In psychoanalysis, "saturated" refers to comments that likely have an agenda and are filled with the theoretical preconceptions of the analyst, whereas "unsaturated" avoids foreclosure and leaves open the possibility for the patient to choose their own path. In this technique, the therapist must wait for new ideas to emerge. It is essential that the analyst (or teacher) watch, listen, wait, and not be seduced into "working too hard" for, or in lieu of, the patient (or student) doing this themselves. Definitive, highly saturated questioning and interpretations are more likely to close off thinking rather than aiding in plasticity of thinking.

In his book, *Creating a Psychoanalytic Mind*, Fred Busch describes the unsaturated question as an invitation by the analyst for the analysand to reflect and imagine rather than seek a definitive answer. It's an attempt to bring new connections to the patient's mind, without suggesting any direction they should take, neither stating that something is true nor validating its correctness. The analyst speculates with the patient as to whether both can observe the same phenomena, allowing the patient to openly muse wherever their mind takes them. Busch calls these questions "unsaturated," borrowing from Antonio Ferro's concept of unsaturated interpretations. Analogously, in the design studio, the instructor's unsaturated question fosters a designer's mind, inquiring but also delaying certainty, while relying on the student to find answers from within. This approach expands on existing teaching, learning, and mentoring methods and emphasizes the development of each student's unique and individual creative approach to architectural design.

Questions of any kind demand answers, yet answering too soon tends to shut down the ongoing process of curiosity and searching. Finding answers stimulates concrete, rational thinking, whereas analysis and design attempt to stimulate associative, playful, creative, even irrational thinking. Unsaturated questions, interpretations, and thinking invite one to reflect, and even ask more questions, rather than answer. Antonio Ferro wrote extensively on the unsaturated interpretation, calling to mind the way we might make an interpretation at a desk crit of one of our student's projects. "Ferro describes unsaturated interpretations as a 'polysemous event' that permits opening up of meaning and narrative development. He says new thoughts need unsaturated space and possibility to oscillate, as there is always the risk,... of advancing 'stopper' interpretations that impede the development of thought."<sup>1</sup>

Busch writes that an analyst will work in an unsaturated fashion "while analyzing resistances to help free the analysand's mind, and aiming our interventions to what is preconsciously available. Using these methods leads to focus on the analysand's mind as the source of insight, rather than the analyst's."<sup>2</sup> Like Busch who asks, "I wonder if you've noticed...." or "From what you're saying I wonder if you're suggesting."<sup>3</sup> In the design studio we do this, too. It's tempting to tell the student what the student has on their mind *from my point of view*, instead of *helping them see what is on their own mind*. It can be a subtle difference. I have a tendency to articulate for the student what I think they are doing through assessing and analyzing their project—to solve problems and make the project better, especially if they're struggling. But a better way of working is to initially withhold and not say what I think the designer is thinking or imagining. What Busch describes is a "way of working where interventions are less *saturated* so that the patient is freer to choose which path he is ready to follow. I also try to *wonder* with the patient, indicating that listening to oneself is about *imagining and not defined realities*. The *plasticity of unconscious thinking* makes definitive, highly saturated interpretations more likely to close off thinking."<sup>4</sup> In working this way, the student (or analysand) has a better chance of understanding the specific content and connections of their associations. Similarly, an analyst might convey to an analysand that the work before them is about wondering and reflecting, not just coming up with an answer/solution.

If the student is able to notice something I've pointed out in their project, but without suggesting a solution, I leave it up to them to identify which part, if any, they are able to think about or address. It allows the student's mind to roam in any direction it chooses, and helps us see together what they are most interested in and available for elaboration. Like the analyst, we don't just want to help our students to *know*, but to help them to *know how to know*. It's not the specific knowledge that we impart that is key, but the extent to which we can clear the student's way to give them freedom of access to their own mind and creative self. Listening, then, is foundational to what we do as teachers. Generally, psychoanalytic listening involves acts of receptivity,

engagement, and imagination. Psychoanalyst Fred Griffin, who has written about creative analytic listening, speaks of instances of deep unconscious-to-unconscious attunement between analyst and analysand. Carefully verbal listening and attending to what the student has made in drawings and models can create this kind of attunement. It's in bringing together the conceptual and the experiential that, as teachers, we might become mindful of the manner in which we can move as couple to better attune and understand the student and their work.<sup>5</sup> An effort to fine-tune listening goes beyond empathic listening where one is made to feel understood, but to impact the capacity for a student to deeply access parts of their creative self.<sup>6</sup>

### THE ANALYTIC FIELD

The analysand-analyst dyad co-create a field. In the consulting room they communicate about something and become a "we" and an affective world, or an ambience emerges. This is an analytic *field*. The field becomes a "something more than," a non-linear imaginative mode of that is inquiring and creative.<sup>7</sup> The couple, for us the teacher and student, are a unit in the field. A field theory emerging from Italy and developed by Antonio Ferro and Giuseppe Civitarese emphasized the alpha function of the field and ultimately that of the analysand, formulated as expanding the analysand's thinking, dreaming, and feeling.<sup>8</sup> Scientists have found that attunement between two people can create a sense of safety, opening our perceptual system, creating a receptive state of the mind, and a qualitative sense of reflective awareness.<sup>9</sup>

Civitaresse describes in a beautifully analogously way what we do as teachers alongside our design students when he writes, "On the stage of the setting patient and analyst interpret—also as spectators and critics—roles from a script that both take part in writing in the very moment they act it, each drawing from his own life. The plot unfolds against the backdrop of the patient's story (of his actual reality) and *alludes* to it—in a relationship of reciprocal involvement...."<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalysts Baranger and Baranger first wrote of the field as their object of observation since both patient and analyst take part in the same dynamic process, they recognize the individuals that are involved in the field, the field that they themselves produce and in which they are immersed. The field takes the form of a third element with independent qualities and dynamics.<sup>11</sup> As teachers we might believe, as psychoanalyst Hans Loewald did, that a relationship is a highly developed form of psychic dialogue and interaction in which two or more people interact, thus the field has a nutritive action on individuals and on the relationships that take place.<sup>12</sup> Thomas Ogden's definition of the intersubjective analytic third, as the result of the exchange of the analyst's and analysand's states of reverie, in which the analytic process "involves the partial giving over of one's separate individuality to a third subject, a subject that is neither analyst nor analysand, but a third subjectivity that is unconsciously generated by the analytic pair."<sup>13</sup> We might think of our teacher-student relationship, and even the work produced, as a similar kind of "third."

"The 'field' is made up of the conjunction of spatial and temporal structures and what is called the 'unconscious fantasy of the dyad.' This fantasy does not have as its origins in the sum of the elements of the patient and analyst, rather, 'It is something that is created *between* the two of them, within the single unit that make up during the session, something radically different from what each of them is separately."<sup>14</sup> In this way, parts of the patient and parts of the analyst become intertwined. For us teachers working with design studio students, perhaps the design project itself can be thought of as the "third" object, the material manifestation of this joining together, securely and firmly rooted in the student's hidden multi-personal structures, influenced by the field itself where we reside with our own multi-personal structures that are hidden to our students, and often to us. Beautifully, the field is determined by both student and teacher (with conscious and unconscious affects), but the student becomes the locus of the field that continually narrates the evolutions and transformations of the field itself.<sup>15</sup> The unsaturated field enabled the co-construction to live on in continuous and various transformations<sup>16</sup> for the teacher-student dyad. The flux and change that occurs after a successful studio semester ends, is enormous.

The growth of mind, and the growth of our students as designers, can be thought of as increasing their (and our) range of access to the psychic possibilities available to us via interpersonal field processes. We are ceaselessly embedded in a field of mutual influence. Donnel Stern writes how new thought is possible when the field is relatively free (unsaturated) to develop spontaneously, that is for us, when reciprocal influences can unfold with a reasonable degree of comfort.<sup>17</sup> In a session, and in a desk crit, a wide range of modalities takes place. These include listening, talking, puzzling, feeling, thinking, imagining, observing, attending, and generally undirected experiencing.<sup>18</sup> The field itself is a central focus of the analyst's attention. In the teacher student dyad, the architectural project, or the work itself is the *subject* of the coming together, but the field and its complexity also exists. Some of the tools used in field theory (and other psychoanalytic models) between analyst and analysand include free association, narrative derivatives, detailed inquiry, listening to listening, the dream function of the sessions, the casting of characters and reverie.<sup>19</sup>

A word about what happens in the immediacy of desk crit between professor and student. The student's ideas, desires, and dreams—in either the narrow or derived sense—and the architecture instructor's reverie mark the zenith and nadir of the work. Reverie stands for the capacity to receive the student's pre-verbal (early design sketches, for instance) and verbal communications. "Waking dream thought receives and elaborates perceptive and emotional stimuli 'live' and gives an immediate account of them, filtered by the rhetorical mechanisms of dreaming on the fore of narrative derivatives."<sup>20</sup> The meeting of the two minds becomes essential, with one perhaps less able to symbolize, the other ready to make his dreaming capacities

available. Civitarese writes that we can think of therapy as a series of consecutive symbolic transformations from more elementary to more complex forms, interwoven, as in poetry, with emotions, sensorially and feelings, that aim to produce new meanings and increase narrative competence. This does not clothe the patient in the analyst's truths, but helps him to develop his own creativity by building his own constructions. It's useful to notice how we do the same in teaching: two minds and a series of consecutive transformations where the teacher dreams the student's dream and helps them to make it fuller, more resolute, more themselves as they carry it out.<sup>21</sup>

Relatedly, field analysts might argue for the significance of the atmosphere in the analytic setting (the dyad itself), and even perhaps in comparison to insight.<sup>22</sup> Empathy (the capacity to feel, imagine, and sense the experience of the other person) and the relationship between the teacher and the student and how the student carries those interactions and experiences with them after the studio, is likely under-appreciated in the arc of the student's trajectory in school and beyond. Rather than conveying to our students that insight comes from outside themselves, from others, we convey that insight comes from what is on the student's mind, "*metabolized, translated and recorded by an empathic listener*"<sup>23</sup>

### WAKING DREAM, DELIBERATION, AND INTERPRETATION

The architect Louis Kahn believed in the influence of the interior life of a designer and the power that could be drawn from it to create the physical, material world. As James Williamson explains in his book *Kahn at Penn: Transformative Teacher of Architecture*, Kahn understood well the relationship between creativity and the unconscious. In his own teaching, Williamson writes of striving to improve access to the creative power of the unconscious by his students of architecture. One of his pedagogical strategies includes the use of metaphor, myth, and fable to gain access to intuitive ways of knowing.<sup>24</sup> As Williamson states, "Perhaps the most important lessons for today are to be found in Kahn's emphasis on questioning, on inquiring into the essence of things, on finding one's own way...." This rich source of insight from the student with the *questioning, not answering* aid of the instructors is what the unsaturated questions and an empathic instructor will foster. This looking to myth, fable and metaphor is in many ways analogous to accessing the waking dream and making it a part of the teacher student encounter at the desk. We need to help our students enter a world of their own, not unlike the mental state of daydreaming or what Ogden (2007) called a waking dream.<sup>25</sup>

Research in the biological and neurosciences show that our experiences of architecture and the material world are grounded in the deep and unconscious layers of our mental life. "Alvar Aalto wrote about 'an extended Rationalism,' and urged architects to expand rational methods even to the psychological (Aalto used the terms 'neurophysiology' and 'psychophysical field') and mental areas."<sup>26</sup> We have all had the experience of

having an emotional encounter with a building or place before we have intellectually understood it. Relatedly, in his book, *The Hidden Spring*, Mark Solms asks the question, “Do you have to be aware of what you are perceiving and learning in order to perceive and learn it?” Scientific evidence overwhelmingly shows that we are unaware of most of what we perceive and learn. Most of what our mind does can be done unconsciously, and neuroscience today concludes that the brain performs a wide range of mental functions that do not enter consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

But what about the expertise the professor brings to the desk critique? Ideally, we can engage in an interchange that gives preference to the student’s agency without forgoing the expertise and necessary “intervention” of the professional instructor. Delaying the expert’s point of view allows the student to come to their own resolution or perhaps a kind of confluence or converging of the work. It is in this context that unsaturated questions become a way of showing genuine interest in the student’s development as a designer while understanding and utilizing the power of careful, respectful listening. In any creative endeavor, there is a time for spontaneity and a time for deliberation. Judgements must be consciously measured considering what we know about architecture as a discipline and profession. I have found that sometimes, the more factual, tangible, direct, and real I am with an interpretation of a student’s project, the freer and more spontaneous they can be. It’s as though a student might need a more “saturated field” where there is a “right” and a “wrong,” at least *temporarily*, to allow freedom to exist within that frame. Opportunities for creativity and spontaneity may follow within that process. As a practicing architect, I am content to shift the “field” following the student’s lead towards the realities and constraints of construction and building.

“In the language of psychodynamic psychotherapy, an explicit inference about the working of the dynamic unconscious is called an *interpretation*. An interpretation that refers to the forgotten or repressed past is called a *reconstruction*. Knowledge about the unconscious gained through interpretation is called *insight*. The topographic model of the mind proposes that insight is useful to patients because when wishes, feelings, thoughts, and memories are made conscious, they become subject to secondary-process thinking rather than to primary-process thinking. In other words, when conscious, they become subject to rational assessment and judgement.”<sup>28</sup> This is analogous to the way we might think about working with a student in the studio. We help them work through unconscious or preconscious desires that manifest in their projects while helping them interpret for themselves the meaning of those efforts. While many analysts work with a patient to reconstruct the past, we don’t do this explicitly, except in allowing the way that the past lives *within us* to influence the way we think and feel, and to impact our work. Insight is achieved in many ways. I find it especially gratifying when a student merges wishes, feelings, and thoughts through interpretation, reconstruction, and insight into a project that is rationally and plausibly realized. Exemplary buildings and design

projects embody both secondary and primary process thinking. In psychoanalytic theory, primary process is an unconscious mental activity in which there is free, uninhibited flow of psychic energy from one idea to another. This mental process operates without regard for logic or reality, is dominated by the pleasure principle, and provides hallucinatory fulfillment of wishes. For some, primary-process thinking is associated with the id and is childlike, dreamy, fantastical, and illogical. It is focused on immediate wish fulfillment and instant gratification. Likewise, for some, secondary-process thinking is associated with the ego and is logical and more sophisticated. It is causal and consistent with real-world thinking. In secondary-process thinking, concern is focused on the environment and consequences rather than the satisfaction of only the self, as in primary-process thinking.

Juhani Pallasmaa writes of the empathic imagination when he argues, “It is impossible to think that a deeply emotive and subconscious work, such as Alvar Aalto’s Villa Mairea,...or Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute could arise from teamwork. They have to be the result of a singular emotive, synthesizing, and empathic imagination. These ideas have evidently been incubated in a singular personality.”<sup>29</sup> He goes on to say that collective imagination is possible through tradition, which is a form of collective imagination, and if psychoanalysis identifies collective psyche and memory, why not collective imagination, with the suppression of the ego?<sup>30</sup> This is an important question that our students will need to answer. I have noticed that those students who have a strong empathic imagination are also sometimes the best collaborators and leaders who can synthesize complexity while holding a collective vision.

## CONCLUSION

By looking at the psychoanalytic dyad, and especially at unsaturated questions and the analytic field, we are offered a model for interactions with emerging designers that equip them to think analytically and creatively and to seek their unique and authentic voice. By looking at the work of analytic theorists and clinicians, we might better understand how we can help our students expand their own design questions and work effectively with others, much like the field created between student and teacher. Analysts advocate in different ways for expanding the analyst’s thinking, dreaming, and feeling. In turn, we see how to expand the capacity for these through an appreciation for process knowledge in our students.

“We are all born with a sense of what to do. Within our own singular limits, we know instinctively that, given a sufficient opportunity to put this instinct into practice, we know what to do almost instantaneously, if what we do is true to our singularity...A great building must, in my opinion, begin with the unmeasurable and go through the measurable in the process of design, but must again in the end be unmeasurable.”

--Louis Kahn, *The Notebooks and Drawings of Louis Kahn*<sup>31</sup>

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**ENDNOTES**

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4. Ibid, 14.
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6. Ibid, 9.
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8. Ibid, 19.
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19. Ibid, 111.
20. Civitarese, "Fire at the Theatre: (Un)Reality of/in the Transference and Interpretation," 1307.
21. Ibid, 1306.
22. Busch, *Creating a Psychoanalytic Mind*, 18.
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30. Ibid, 79.
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