Exercising the Everyday: A Pedagogical Approach

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Early architectural education is often introduced through concepts couched in abstract, formal strategies. This approach requires a large conceptual leap for beginning design students, causing difficulty in grasping concepts and transitioning into design education. As an alternative pedagogical approach, this paper considers the everyday as a basis for conceptual development and skill building in beginning design. It argues that pedagogy based on a familiarity with the everyday human experience in the built environment leverages intrinsic knowledge and makes design a more accessible practice.

This paper outlines the application of the everyday as a pedagogical approach in first-year undergraduate seminar courses. In these courses, students develop both an understanding of design concepts and digital workflows through representational exercises. Exercises are framed around concepts and processes of architects and artists concerned with the everyday. Work like that of Allan Wexler or Rachel Whiteread outlines a methodology for students to use observation or transformation to find new readings of everyday forms and spaces. In addition to design processes and workflows defined by the everyday, exercises use objects and spaces familiar to students as inputs to explore abstract design concepts such as composition, scale, and positive/negative relationships. Using the everyday as a constant, students learn new variables such as representational strategies, digital tools, and design concepts through these exercises.

In today's educational context of increasingly virtual or hybrid modalities, students are removed from physical settings that facilitate creative acts and spend more time at home, facing the dominant presence of the everyday. This paper discusses how pedagogy focused on the everyday can serve as an equalizer, allowing students to incorporate personal experiences into their beginning design education and find comfort with the familiar at a time when everything is new.

INTRODUCTION: THE EVERYDAY AS A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Many students entering architectural education are making a transition from traditional educational models. As beginning design students, they feel a dissonance between previous learning experiences and design education which is based in hands-on learning, conceptual thinking, and iterative design processes. Abstract concepts and foundational design principles are introduced early to break students of traditional, expected lines of thinking, and the complex, yet more familiar dialogue between people, objects, and the built environment is reserved for upper-level curriculum.

The disconnect between traditional educational models and the abstract conceptual thinking of design education creates a difficult transition for beginning design students. Many are overwhelmed by the amount and complexity of new information, likening the experience to learning a foreign language. The difficult transition for beginning design students provides an opportunity to conceive of a pedagogy that bridges previous experiences with new ones in the design profession. As a response to the challenges of beginning design students, the everyday is used to structure a pedagogical approach. This approach helps to bridge the everyday with the abstract, making foundational design concepts and practices more accessible. An architecture of the everyday and a pedagogy based in it encourages students to see possibility in what they already know and "[i]t celebrates potential for inventiveness with the ordinary".[1]

This pedagogical approach is executed through a methodology formulated around workflows and inputs based in the everyday. Design processes of artists, designers, and architects working with the everyday are studied and similarly applied by students. Using precedent concerned with the everyday exposes students to unfamiliar practices while providing an opening through recognizable objects and space. In addition to workflows that make use of the everyday, personal objects and familiar spaces serve as inputs for students to explore abstract concepts and representation skills. This approach forces students to observe the immediate world around them and integrate design education into daily life. It engages with experiential learning methods and employs similar techniques of hand-drawing from observation

– where students spend time seeing and interpreting the familiar. For students, "there is a poetry and consolation in the repetition of familiar things."[2] Using a palatable point of reference in lieu of abstracted geometries as a starting point, students can focus on building new skills and developing conceptual understanding while grounded in known objects, spaces, and experiences.

METHODOLOGY: STRUCTURING THE EVERYDAY

The implementation of the everyday as a pedagogical approach is deployed in first-year seminar courses – both in the fall and spring semesters – that run concurrently with first-year design studios. These courses are the only required courses in the architecture program within the first two semesters other than studio and are, therefore, tightly coordinated with the studio curriculum. The seminar courses center on design thinking – including foundational design concepts and theories – as well as representation techniques. The courses also support the concurrent studio curriculum through the contextualization of concepts using precedent and the development of skills. Representation or visual communication skills in these courses are focused on digital workflows, reserving analog and hybrid methods for the concurrent studio courses. The theoretical basis of both courses is aligned, and projects are coordinated – based in similar concepts and precedents while deviating in methodology and medium.

To incorporate both design thinking and representation skills, the seminar courses integrate lecture-based and project-based approaches. Lectures serve to introduce and demonstrate application of design concepts through terminology, definitions, diagrams, and precedents. Precedents include a range of disciplines including art, furniture design, interior design, architecture, and environments. This range allows for the opportunity to discuss foundational concepts across scales and focus on similarities in design process across disciplines. The projects are structured to correspond to concepts presented in lectures. They provide students an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of concepts through direct application while simultaneously introducing digital workflows and representation skills.

The methodology behind the everyday as a pedagogical approach is embedded in the structure of the course projects. Projects are structured based on three components: design concepts, workflow, and representation skills. Projects are introduced through design concepts – such as solid void relationships, spatial composition, human scale, proportioning, transformation, etc. – that are to be applied through a prescribed workflow. The workflows consist of inputs, processes, and outputs and establish a rigorous design methodology based in digital processes and tools. The workflows are based on the practices of designers and artists dealing with the subject of the everyday. In the projects, their processes are transferred to digital methods. In addition to the workflows being based on practices engaging with the everyday, everyday spaces and objects serve as the inputs for the projects. Spaces and objects familiar to the students are observed, documented, diagrammed, or translated using the established digital workflow. Through engaging with the prescribed design methods, students develop representation skills – such as an understanding of drawing types, drawing scale, line weight and type, composition, layering, etc. – as well as literacy with digital tools and processes. An emphasis on design concepts and processes in addition to visual representation places less emphasis on the final product and more on theories and workflows that could be applied to future work.

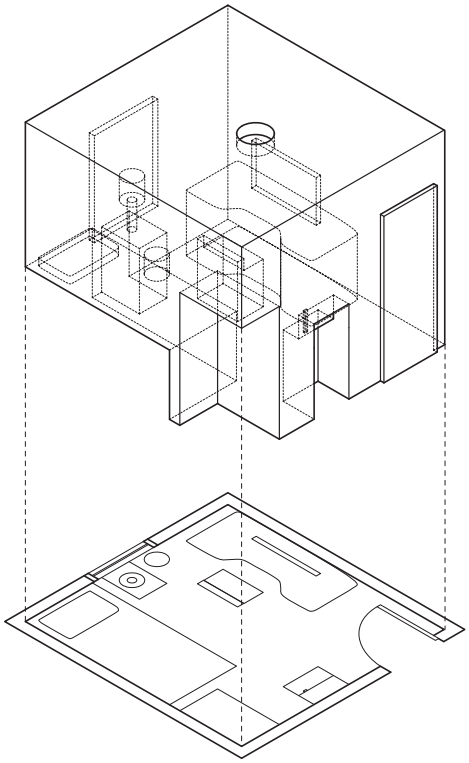

Figure 1. *Casting Mass.* Student work by Cael Fisher.

Projects are structured with consideration of completion within one to two weeks' time, resulting in the production of approximately eight projects in a semester-long course. The short time frame encourages immediate application of learned concepts and quick visual responses. Instead of developing work iteratively, as is done in the concurrent studios, students approach projects as exercises that incrementally build knowledge and skills. Concepts and digital processes are carried over from one project to the next, allowing students to demonstrate continued improvement.

The intent behind the project methodology is to create a link between design theory and representation through a subject of the everyday. Examples of how this methodology is applied through specific projects or exercises are described in the subsequent

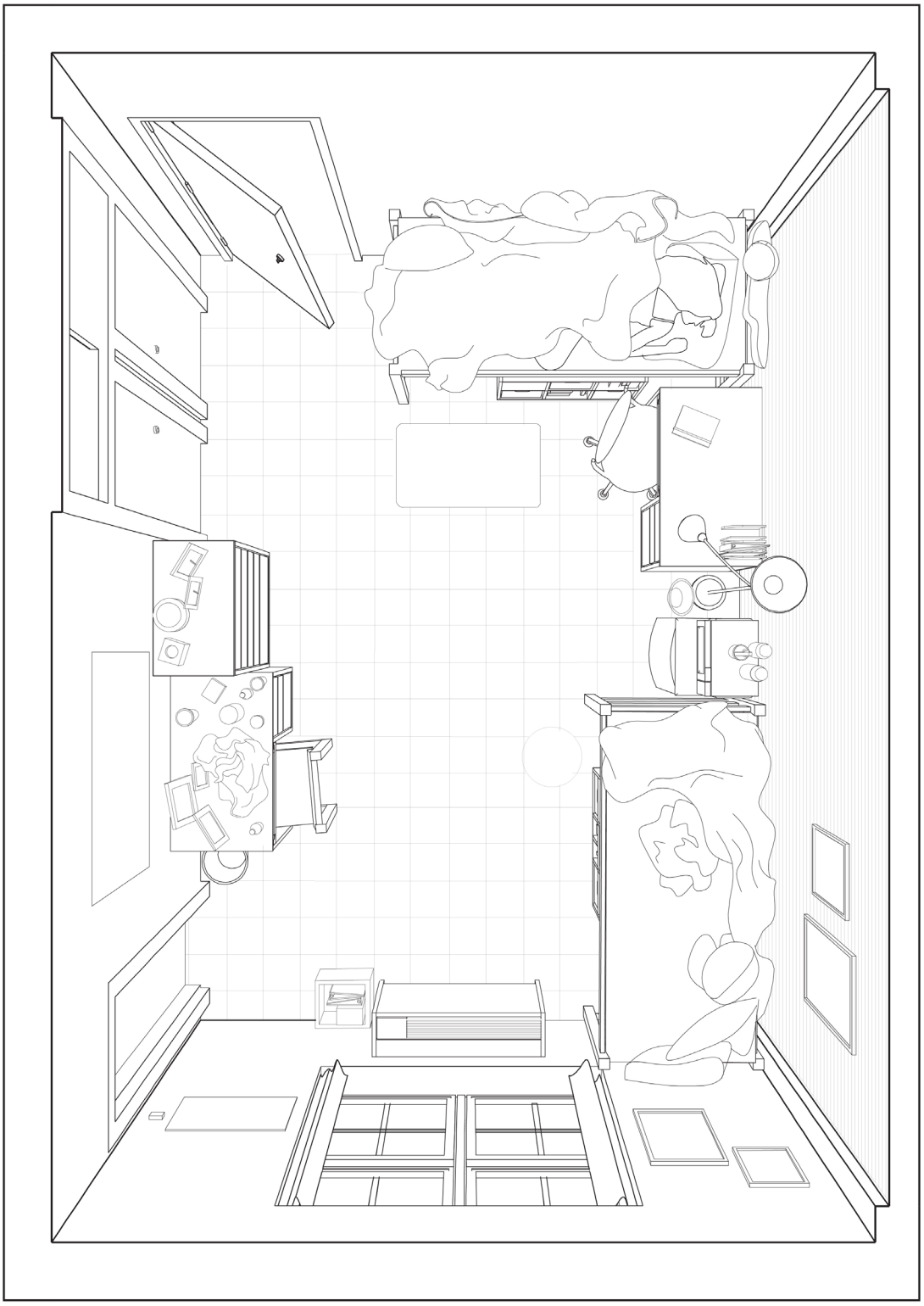

Figure 2. *Lived Spaces*. Student work by Tatum DeBardeleben.

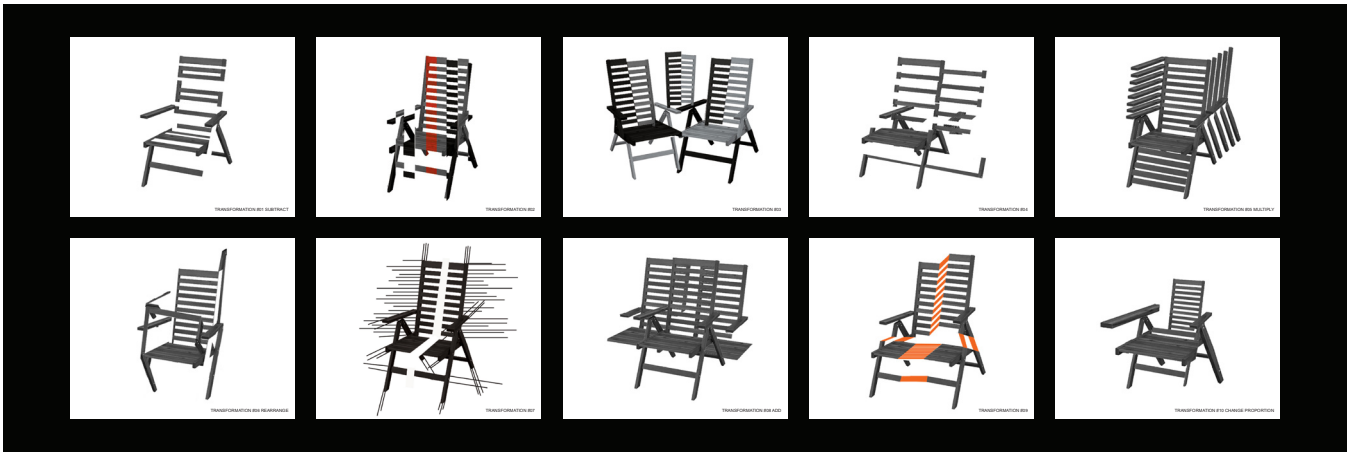

Figure 3. *Object Transformations*. Student work by Will Langston.

sections. Projects are categorized based on similarities in their relationship with the everyday, including precedent, workflow, and input type.

REDEFINING FAMILIAR SPACES

Incorporation of the everyday allows students to familiarize themselves with known spaces and objects through observation and documentation. The act of documenting these objects and spaces integrates daily life and exercises in design and engages in methods of haptic learning. The documentation process involves the act of translation, where familiar spaces and objects are measured or photographed and then transferred into digital space through constructed line work. The process of transference requires interpretation – from three-dimensional space to two-dimensional drawing.

In the exercises *Casting Mass* and *Lived Spaces*, the student dorm room or bedroom is the familiar subject of focus. The dorm room or bedroom is a private space with which students are intimately familiar. It serves as an existing condition students can document through sketches, measurements, and photographs. In the project *Casting Mass*, the dorm room or bedroom serves as the basis for understanding spatial relationships and solid void conditions. The project is based on concepts and workflows that align with the work of artist Rachel Whiteread. Like Whiteread's process of casting negative space, students take existing conditions – their dorm rooms or bedrooms – and inverse the formal and spatial conditions. Through this process, students read their spaces as solid objects and make connections about solid void relationships as Whiteread did when completing her piece Ghost:

> When we finally put the piece up, I realized what I had created. There was the door in front of me, and a light switch, back to front, and I just thought to myself: 'I'm the wall. That's what I've done. I've become the wall.'[3]

What is space becomes mass and what is mass becomes space – allowing for new readings and understandings of the familiar condition. In addition to its conceptual basis, this project also engages a digital workflow that mirrors Whiteread's casting process. Existing conditions are documented, drafted in two dimensions, extruded into three dimensions, and then serve as the formwork for a digital cast. The digital cast inverts the conditions of the original room – giving students a new reading of a familiar space. The purpose of this exercise is to learn practice-based skills such as drafting, digital modeling, and 3D printing while simultaneously building an understanding of relationships between positive and negative space.

Similarly, in *Lived Spaces* the dorm room or bedroom and objects within it serve as the primary input. In the exercise, students document their space, closely translating accurate and real conditions. Exercises in focused observation and seeing result in an expression of the imperfect and disorganized. Instead of relying on assumptions about how a bedroom should be drawn, students document and translate every detail including misaligned objects, wrinkled bedding, and piles of clothing. This approach of training students to truly see the spaces around them – a common objective in hand drawing – is achieved using digital processes in this exercise. Here, the workflow and product are inspired by the drawings of Atelier Bow Wow – where all information including architectural elements, objects, and materials are communicated through use of line and imperfect conditions are articulated to express a personal narrative. The result is a one-point plan perspective that incorporates hybrid techniques of three-dimensional modeling and two-dimensional drawing as well as orthographic and perspective drawing types. In addition to digital skills learned through this exercise, students observe, read, and translate spatial conditions and gain the ability to express spatial narratives through conventional drawing methods.

TRANSFORMING OBJECTS AND ENVIRONMENTS

While Whiteread and Atelier Bow Wow provide workflows for beginning design students to redefine familiar spaces through observation and transference, alternate applications of the everyday establish processes for generating new formal and

spatial relationships. Through manipulation of known objects and environments, students transform recognizable inputs into unfamiliar outputs – as is common practice in the work of artist Allan Wexler. "[Wexler's] work confronts us with the unknowability of even the simplest aspects of our daily lives."[4] Deploying Wexler's approach, the unknown emerges through processing the known and students question formal and spatial qualities of the familiar.

Wexler's piece *54 Studies for Chair Transformations* serves as inspiration for the exercise *Object Transformations*. Referring to the piece, Wexler describes:

> I drew an axonometric drawing of the Stefan chair and made fifty-four photocopies. Consciously, I forced myself to see the copies as lines on pages rather than representations of chairs. With pencil, knife, paper, and glue, the images were augmented, dissected, wrinkled, spliced, cut, and collaged.[5]

Like Wexler, students use manipulation techniques to transform a known object – an Ikea chair – to reveal new form. Unlike Wexler, students use digital in lieu of analog methods. This approach allows students to quickly question formal qualities of designed objects and move past preconceived ideas of function and form. To complete the exercise, students use copies of a digital image of a selected Ikea chair as the input and create multiple manipulations that defy typical chair conventions. The duplicated images are digitally cut, rearranged, multiplied, stretched, etc. to create new forms and compositions. Due to the chair's familiarity and simplicity, students find the act of transformation accessible and are not hesitant to experiment with both formal arrangements and digital tools. In the exercise, students utilize the chair as a vehicle to explore foundational design concepts such as composition, hierarchy, proportioning, visual weight, and dynamism in lieu of considering the design of the chair itself.

In the exercises *Elevational Environments* and *Planar Patterns*, transformation occurs not through manipulation of everyday objects themselves, but through a shift in how objects and elements within environments relate to one another. Based on the approach of sculptor Louise Nevelson, whose work consists of layered compositions of objects and fragments within an ordered framework, *Elevational Environments* asks students to digitally collage objects, figures, and volumes of various scales within a singular setting. Students select objects that are their personal belongings or regularly encountered in their daily routines to create an environment reflective of their own experiences. They even include themselves and a friend as scale figures within the environment. While objects and figures are required to be to scale relative to one another and they must be positioned according to gravity, their arrangement within the environment does not have to be representative of realistic conditions. This often results in expressive, almost surreal environments that evoke a sense of play, furthering student engagement. The environments are drawn in elevation and objects are arranged with consideration of communicating depth. The primary goals of the exercise are to teach compositional strategies and elevation construction – including orthographic projection, drawing convention, line weight, and scale. Students almost unknowingly become invested in these learning objectives through their engagement and amusement with constructing a personalized environment.

Similarly, *Planar Patterns* – based on the work of artist Leon Ferrari – uses known symbols for architectural elements and objects to create absurd, maze-like spatial compositions in plan. Students use walls to construct a matrix of spaces ordered within a grid and populate the spaces with entourage such as furniture, trees, or cars. While the objects are identifiable, their positioning in the spaces is encouraged to favor the overall composition over realism. Cars are placed within enclosed rooms or furniture is densified eliminating the possibility of occupancy, for example.

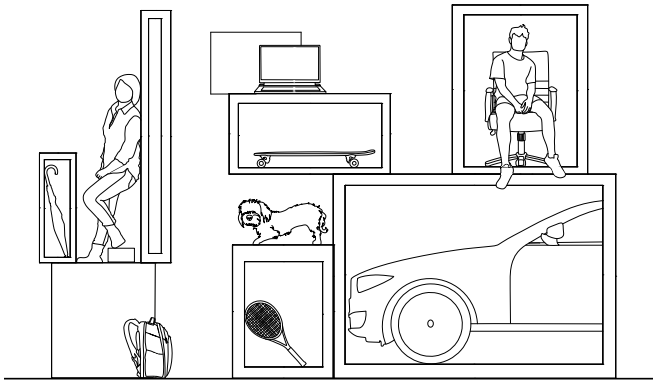

Figure 4. *Elevational Environments.* Student work by Julie DePetris.

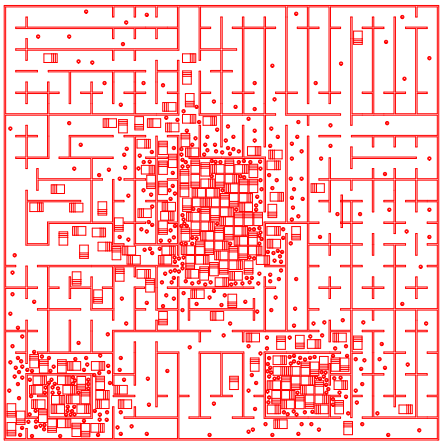

Figure 5. *Planar Patterns*. Student work by Will Sutton.

Instead, the focus is on compositional strategies and generating new relationships through formal exploration. Walls and objects are used as abstract elements in the creation of a cohesive composition. Like in *Elevational Environments*, *Planar Patterns* uses a traditional orthographic drawing type – plan – and conventions to get at abstract ideas of compositional strategies, proportioning systems, hierarchy, and visual weight.

These exercises use familiar inputs processed through a workflow based in transformation to generate unexpected outputs. Objects are transformed to create new form or rearranged to create new relationships or environments. Often students inexperienced with the design process try to work towards a predetermined result while also striving to create something new and different. The process of transforming the familiar, in lieu of abstracted geometries, distances students from the ability to predetermine outcomes and allows them to express their individualism while engaging with learning objectives based in design concepts and conventions.

DIAGRAMMING DOMESTIC PATTERNS

As described by Bernard Tschumi in reference to *The Manhattan Transcripts*, "[a]rchitecture is not simply about space and form, but also about event, action, and what happens in space."[6] Applying this approach to the everyday, mundane human behavior can serve as a basis of study and analysis to inform architectural environments. Within behavior or action, dynamic conditions are implied. The documentation and study of these conditions build an understanding of the relationship between space and time. This posits a challenge for students to think about both spatial implications and representation techniques of the fourth dimension. Through diagrammatic studies of behaviors within familiar settings, students develop an understanding of the built environment as a fluid condition dependent on a constant dialogue between people and their surroundings.

To understand the relationship between behavior and space, students study Sarah Wigglesworth's drawing 'The Disorder of the Dining Table, where the formal results of a dinner party are documented over the course of the evening. This inspires student's own analysis of everyday rituals performed in familiar architectural spaces in the exercise *Domestic Rituals*. Routines or rituals that are documented through the exercise are selected by students and are often reflective of their lived experiences. Students first document their rituals through stop-motion photography and then interpret distinct moments into drawings that, although two-dimensional and static, are composed to express change over time. Some variations of this exercise reanimate the two-dimensional drawings to communicate a distilled version of the ritual in motion. Others remain in two dimensions and emphasize the beginning, middle, and end points of the ritual. Like Wigglesworth's drawing series, the resulting images use overlap, transparency, and line weight to communicate layers of information associated with different moments in time. The intent of this exercise is to observe the interaction between people and their environments in real time and communicate the spatial implications of these interactions.

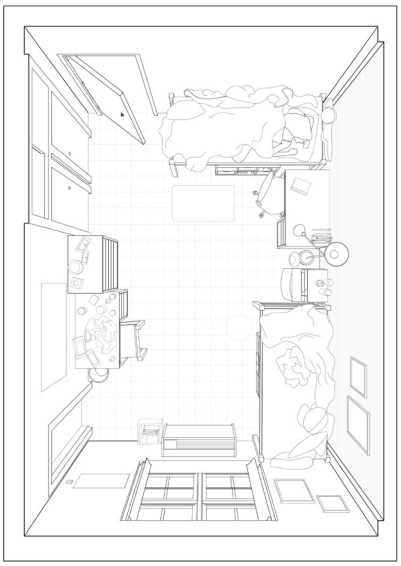

Figure 6. *Domestic Rituals*: *Folding Laundry*. Student work by Kaylee Wesolowski.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

Through these exercises, a pedagogical approach is framed based on the everyday. In lieu of students conceiving of architecture as static representations of abstract concepts and geometries, this methodology asks students to study and document the built environment as a fluid condition that is dependent on a constant dialogue between people and their environment. Application of this methodology occurs through workflows and inputs based in the everyday, encouraging students to draw connections between themselves, their experiences, and their practice of design. The use of the everyday provides a familiar reference point for students when introducing new concepts and theories.

One hesitancy with introducing the everyday into beginning design curriculum may stem from the concern that students can rely too heavily on what they know and not consider new possibilities within design or new ways of thinking. However, controlled use of the everyday allows students to connect to their work and make it their own while simultaneously engaging

in rigorous processes. It establishes a framework for students to play within and allows students to make their work feel personal and unique without eliminating all constraints. Incorporation of personal objects and behaviors provides a more lighthearted approach to techniques couched in convention and tradition. Everyday inputs are used as elements to compose, order, or transform – functioning similarly to abstract elements such as points, lines, and planes. Here, design concepts and theories are still explored but through abstraction of the known instead of abstraction of the abstract. The everyday becomes a vehicle for both communicating abstract concepts and expressing a student's personal identity – and learning objectives couched in demonstrating understanding and application of abstract design concepts and foundational principles of design are still achieved. The familiar provides comfort to students at a time of newness and transition – eliminating one unknown variable so that unfamiliar design concepts and representation skills can still be emphasized.

In recent years, the difficult transition into design education for students has become even more challenging due to the increase in virtual or hybrid modalities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. These modalities isolated beginning design students, making them feel alone navigating the unfamiliar landscape of design education. Students were physically removed from studio settings and forced to complete their design education in personal, domestic spaces where the quotidian became a primary focus. Although this approach was in development before the pandemic, the introduction to remote learning highlighted an opportunity to further incorporate the everyday into beginning design pedagogy. In a virtual environment where instructors cannot control or curate the physical setting, students can pull inspiration and information from what is around them and from what they know. This approach reinforces the idea that design is not removed from daily life, making it more accessible.

In a similar way that virtual or hybrid modalities serve as an equalizer – providing access to education regardless of location, transportation, or domestic responsibility – the everyday can level the playing field for incoming students without previous access to designed spaces or design education. The use of familiar spaces and objects as a pedagogical tool allows students to find comfort in the known and draw connections to the unknown. By observing and translating the familiar, students also begin to question its validity and appropriateness as a design response. For students, the process of acknowledging and working with the everyday places it at the forefront and brings it into consideration for future design work. An architecture and pedagogy based in the everyday can "acknowledge the needs of many rather than a few"[7] and can create honest relationships between people and the built environment which in turn makes design a more inclusive practice.

ENDNOTES

1. Deborah Berke, "Thoughts on the Everyday," in *Architecture of the Everyday*, ed. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 223.
2. Berke, "Thoughts on the Everyday," 224.
3. Rachel Whiteread, "If Walls Could Talk: An Interview with Rachel Whiteread," interview by Craig Houser, Guggenheim, April, 18, 2001, transcript, http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/whiteread/interview2.html.
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6. "The Manhattan Transcripts," Bernard Tschumi Architects, accessed October 1, 2023, www.tschumi.com/projects/18/#.
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