

Ordinary Unfamiliarity: Foundation Pedagogy through the Critique of the Everyday

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“Evidently, a new nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored. . . .”

– Walter Benjamin, *“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”*

“Sometimes when you arrive new to a place, you can really see it.”

– Brian Eno, *composer*

This paper describes a new foundation course sequence developed at the University of Cincinnati. In this year, we proceed from two principles of instruction: first, we direct the focus of work away from conventional architectural topics and use analogy to awaken native critical insight; second, we postpone traditional “design” activity by strictly emphasizing observation skills and critical analysis. We delay design activity until the first quarter of the second year, in preparation for which we organize first-year studio workshops around short iterative exercises that capitalize on the students’ familiarity with the everyday world. We then structure these problems to render the everyday world in unfamiliar terms. This oscillation between the ordinary and the unfamiliar greatly intensifies the analogical resonance between everyday experience and the production of buildings. The result is greater confidence in critical thinking earlier in the student’s academic career.

Everybody understands food. The first quarter in our new four-quarter foundation sequence employs cuisine as the overarching theme of studio activity. Cuisine allows us to comfortably shift the locus of activity from the shelter to the dining room, where we use the table as our point of departure. The table opens to view commonplace relationships between artifacts and

habits-social formations, decorum, ritual, and the universe of the meal. We begin the quarter with a visual analysis based on the film “Babette’s Feast”; we end the quarter with the systematic disassembly of a large kitchen appliance. Throughout, we enrich analysis and observation with films, field trips, readings, and object-oriented exercises that extend exploration beyond cuisine.

Following cuisine, the second quarter shifts to investigations of “body ethics” and “composition.” The topic of cuisine sets the table for our methodology and encourages a lateral interdisciplinary approach to studio investigations. The second quarter follows the first with a focus on the everyday and develops an aptitude for structured “play” as a means to investigate. Short, iterative exercises with rotating team participation attempt to prepare students for a critical thought process that will contribute positively to their forthcoming practice opportunities with cooperative education.

The author’s aim in this paper is to present and evaluate what we’ve learned in these first two quarters of work and examine implications for the new foundation curriculum which has taken its present form through ongoing conversations between foundation studio professors.¹

POSTPONING TRADITIONAL BUILDING AND INTERIOR DESIGN EXPERIENCES: INTENTIONS

Traditional design has been deferred to second year immersion studio in our new revised curriculum. We arm students with a repertoire of tools that facilitate an interrogative approach to

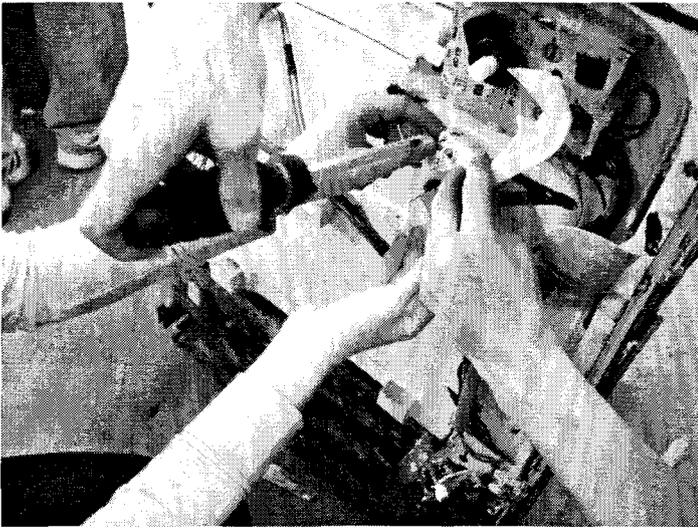


Fig. 1. Student team disassembling a dishwasher.

design problems. Architectural history, terminology, and theoretical jargon are intentionally avoided. Further, the primacy of the design studio over other courses is challenged. By delaying typical architectural production in the foundation curriculum, students can address focused, germane design problems. These new exercises are short, iterative, and manageable, and are addressed through arranged encounters with everyday experiences. They amplify students' environmental awareness, expose them to a variety of art disciplines, encourage the idea of "play" as a serious step in the creative process, and sharpen critical thinking skills by finding opportunities for study outside the traditional architectural field. We intentionally postpone student attempts to define architecture and gently nudge them to think more critically about what they see around them. Similarly stated by Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till, "The everyday was always there, and we, like everyone else, were always immersed in it."² Our aim is to activate students' powers of observation.

The three quarter progression of foundation studios is comprised of courses in linear sequence: quarter one-inquiry and disassembly, quarter two-body ethics and composition, and quarter three-transformation. Each segment relies on subject matter at the periphery of architecture and interior design, encouraging critical thinking before students engage disciplinary production.

In addition to powers of observation and creativity, we endeavor to develop teamwork, communication, drawing, computer, and critical thinking skills in the first year curriculum. Our hope is that students fundamentally versed in these basic skills will be prepared to critically engage future design problems. First year iterative exercises unfold as a type of architectural calisthenics. Students confront, examine, analyze, and critique their own everyday experiences such as eating food, climbing a stair, or listening to music.

THE CONDITIONS OF THE SECOND EXERCISE(S):

Before we examine our offering to the predicament of the first quarter, cuisine, it is useful to consider the conditions of the second quarter, four exercises within which we are presently immersed. We will work our way backwards in this paper to the start of the first quarter. The real fruits of our labor are beginning to manifest themselves in these second quarter exercises, as it has taken some time to wrestle through the first quarter set of exercises and convince students, as we are convinced, that they are preparing for a career in architecture and/or interior design. We are also inextricably linked in serial production from one exercise to the next. Thus, the seeds of the beginning are manifest in the fruits of the following set of exercises.

We begin the second quarter of instruction with the residue of parts (and ideas) created from dismantling and documenting large-scale kitchen appliances. Although the theme of the course has moved to "body ethics" and "composition" from "inquiry" and "disassembly" the spirit of the methodology is exactly the same: students find opportunities for exploration outside of the traditional disciplinary realms of architecture and interior design and grapple with experiences of the everyday rendered quite unfamiliar. Where the first quarter deploys cuisine as a stimulus for uncovering students' native understandings of the everyday through inquiry and analysis, the second quarter investigates issues of the body, music, and composition.

ROBOTS DESCENDING A STAIRCASE: BODY ETHICS

"Body ethics" is examined through the study of bodies in sequence as they traverse the main artery through the College of DAAP. As the designer of this main stair/review space, in addition to our college building expansion, we naturally turn to Peter Eisenman for inspiration on the topic of the body. He holds that "architecture maintains a presence through an *affective* relationship to the physical experience of the body."³ Our intention with the "robots" exercise was to create over one hundred *affected* robotic bodies engaging the main stair artery of our college. These bodies of "robots descending a staircase" are created from composite representations of selected major kitchen appliance parts that the students disassembled at the end of the first quarter.

Students produce abstract portraits of their studio partners drawn from poses along the main arterial stair. They translate the formal characteristics and functional connotations of mechanical objects to similarly purposed parts of the body. Translation of alien parts to human form serves the dual function of introducing students to proportion, scale, and joinery and encourages them to contemplate their own bodies

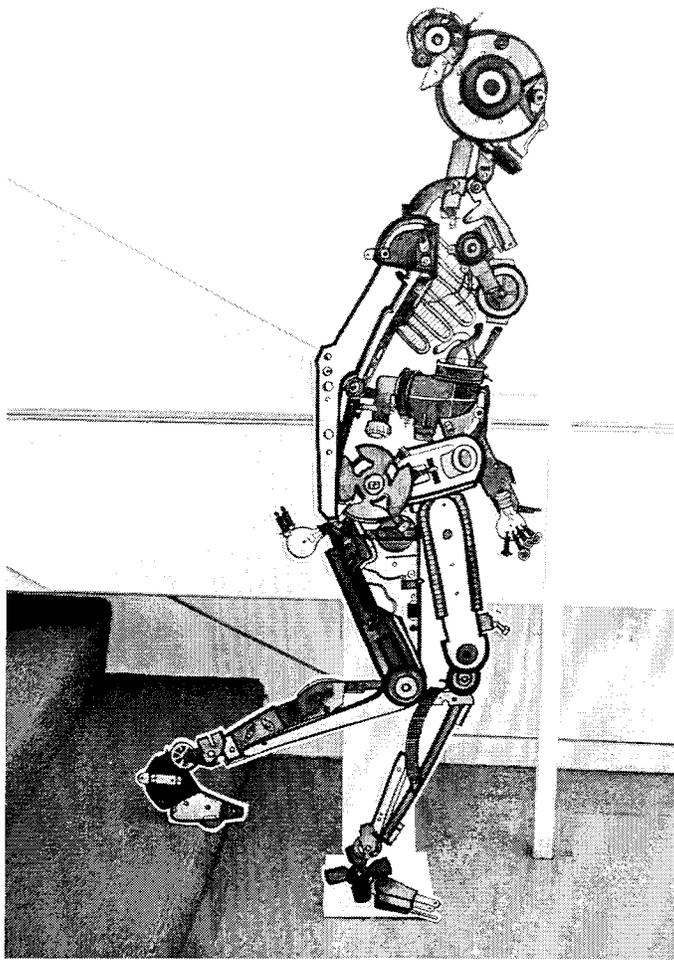


Fig. 2. Completed robot descending the staircase.

in relationship to inanimate, built form. Additionally, the exercise opens questions of body-to-building relationships. The final “robots” are mounted to rigid boards, crafted as freestanding objects, set up along the main stair of the college in a final celebratory exhibition, allowing “real” student bodies to mingle with “robotic” ones.

Parallel to this first exercise, drawing and computer skills courses reinforce body themes. In drawing skills, figure-drawing exercises develop students’ freehand abilities in charcoal and chalk, maintaining the body as a primary topic of investigation. The computer skills course reinterprets the “robots” exercise in three-dimensional modeling and is posted on the web. By inscribing the body in different mediums, repetitively, students begin to intuit its physical, dimensional realities and tune-in to the relevance of the everyday experiences of their own bodies.

MACHINES FOR MAKING MUSIC: SOUND, MUSIC, NOTATION, AND COMPOSITION

We transition from body to composition with a lecture from allied artists in dance and music on the subject of composition



Fig. 3. Students performing reassembled dishwasher instruments.

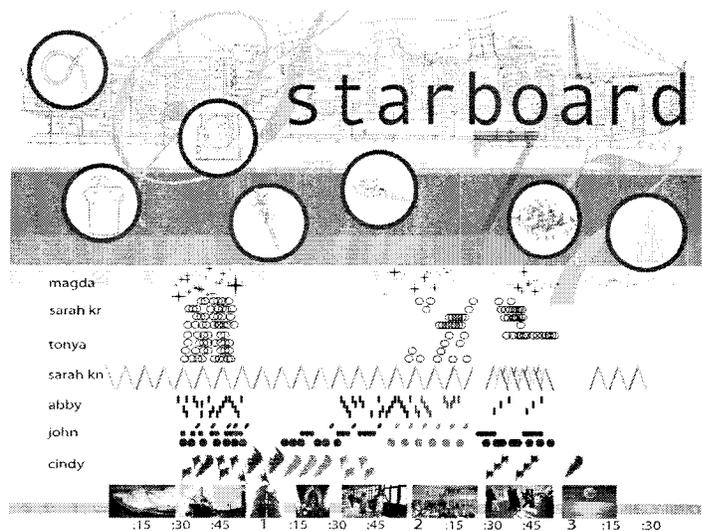


Fig. 4. Abstract notation of musical composition.

in their respective fields. Students also watch “Stomp” in order to reinforce the idea that indeed musical compositions might be constructed from the detritus of the industrial era. As counterpoint to “Stomp,” we show them the Bauhaus dances created by Oskar Schlemmer,⁴ which offers a much different interpretation about the design and aesthetic potentials resulting from the effects of the industrial age, albeit nearly eighty years ago. Recycling old appliance parts one final time, students create their own instruments and musical compositions directly from the dissected pieces. Physically, students bend, cut, fold, weld, and attach a variety of materials and reassemble them to transform their original function. Experientially, they blow into, pound on, and strum across physical material to impact space

sonically. A phenomenological, rather than strictly visual relationship between the body and its environment is uncovered. The instruments amplify the body as prosthetic extensions performed in front of a live audience. After one and a half weeks of practice, the students perform an ensemble composition at a festive all-school evening event. Students also examine the ideas of composition from the perspective of performance, spatial relationships, and music. In addition to the performances, ensembles are responsible for the invention of notational representations of their compositions.

Drawing and Computer skills course work are aligned with studio intentions. In drawing skills, still-life drawing is introduced to run parallel with making instruments. Where figure drawing emphasizes improvisation and immediacy through the gesture, still-life drawing focuses on extended work that encourages a detailed, studied understanding of an object's subtleties. Students learn to draw in a different way with the same medium. Similarly, the computer skills course encourages detailed studies of materiality through rendering or "dressing up" the digitally represented mechanical bodies, and rendering robots with Photoshop playing the actual musical instruments in particular two-dimensional image manipulated scenes.

CIAO! : COMINGS AND GOINGS

The third set of Winter Quarter exercises is designed to uncover social and psychological dynamics between multiple bodies through the analysis of everyday occurrences. In the first of two short projects, students analyze a photograph of people in a social event. Drawing on overlaid tracing paper, they dissect the photograph by isolating hand positions, body postures, object locations, physical setting, eye contact, verbal dialogue, and unspoken interactions. They speculate, in narrative format, on the psychological and sensory conditions only visually evident through the frozen time of a snapshot. The second, related exercise, asks students to analyze a space in which the rituals of greeting and leave taking occur. They observe a small group of people involved in an exchange of "hello's" or "goodbye's". A twenty-second record of the activity is made, through recorded audio and video techniques, detailed note taking, and sketching. The students once again are offered a new perspective on everyday experience through careful observation. Both of these exercises attempt to uncover the relationship between social interaction, psychological disposition, and environment and offer another dimension of observing the body in space.

The drawing skills course supports this phase of studio work with environmental drawing exercises, such as transposing a photograph of a three-dimensional environment to a drawing at a different scale using an overlaid grid. The computer skills course continues the discussion of everyday social settings by creating a narrative. Students compose storyboards of three-dimensional FormZ modeled scenes starring their already

created robots, along with three of their peers' robots. Different points of view and gesture are frozen from three-dimensional digital models to create the storyboard narrative layouts.

MUSICAL STAIRS: COMPOSITIONS

We end our second quarter, with a turn towards full scale and looking forward to "transformation" synthesis exercises in the last quarter. This prepares students for full immersion during the sophomore year. Until now, students have drawn the body, played the body, and analyzed the body. Now they create a composition that directly relates to "the body." These compositions, or "musical stairs" are situated between object and environment. Small teams of students are assigned one of eighteen predetermined plots in a public plaza on campus inside which they build a stair. The stair can be no higher than thirty inches and cannot extend beyond the boundaries of the assigned footprint. Each stair is composed in conjunction with those adjacent to it, so that people walking through the plaza might encounter them without difficulties. The stair is less functional and more confrontational; it disrupts the everyday movement through the plaza, and it becomes a device for play, as each tread generates a musical note when depressed by foot. Collectively the individual musical stairs form a type of giant xylophone.

The objectives to this project are three-fold. First, it introduces students to a very basic typology without any predisposition towards the expected image of that type. Second, the project extends the theme of musical performance and composition and relates these directly with bodies in space. The stair pieces are essentially large cousins of the earlier machines for making music project. In this case of the stairs, however, they are played as improvisational pieces created by random student traffic, as typical everyday "stairs" are at once rendered unfamiliar. Lastly, the exercise initiates full-scale design and construction without overextending the capabilities of inexperienced first year students. Issues of craft, joinery, cutting, finishing, and precision are addressed in a project where standard building materials are the media. Structured play extends to scale of building material, as students interrogate typical construction methodology to use common materials in uncommon ways. Unlikely juxtaposition is cited as a platform for innovation and improvisation.

STARTING WITH BABETTE'S FEAST: THE PREDICAMENT OF THE FIRST EXERCISE(S)

Projects such as "Robots Descending a Stair" and "Machines for Making Music" evolve from a set of iterative exercises in the first quarter, thematically driven by the principles of "inquiry" and "disassembly" and revolving around the topic of cuisine.

These principles are always presented through exercises that postpone architectural production. We believe a peripheral relationship with design is fundamental to a confidence-building experience for young, often shy, and insecure students. While maybe not comfortable discussing theoretical readings or analyzing complex buildings, most students are at home talking about movies, restaurants, and magazines. These become the vehicles for rigorous exploration.

“Inquiry” is approached through the analysis of sites. By “sites,” we mean everyday environments experienced through field trips. We sustain a critical discussion of place around comparative documentary student presentations that incorporate critical site analyses. “Disassembly” is pursued through the analysis of objects. We focus on the critical disassembly of complex objects from three points of view: physical, textual, and graphic.

The film “Babette’s Feast” introduces cuisine. Viewing it is the first activity on the first day of class for the eager first year students. Afterwards, they are immediately plunged into a drawing exercise where we ask them to recall particular scenes from the movie in as much detail as possible. They try to record names of characters, location and orientation of objects, and changes that unfold over time. This proves to be a surprisingly frustrating endeavor. We also ask them to draw only with a *Pentel Sign Pen*, which, at first, inscribes only fat, awkward lines, and compounds initial frustrations. With practice, however, lines emerge that are deliberate, conscientious, and intuitively immediate. At that moment, focus is on the translation between memory and paper, not pen and paper. As students scour their memory for the detail and minutia of the film, their hands remain loose and supple across the paper. Specificity in thinking is paired against lightness and dexterity in technique. The assignment resonates, because it calls into play like never before students’ native abilities to observe and record. It forces them to struggle with their dormant capacities to relate memory to critical thought: to apply form to the formless. The “critique” of these initial sketches prepares students for ongoing observations, analyses, and critique of the everyday.

Students then watch the film a second time and again construct drawings from memory. This time, however, they are observant and critical. A palpable lesson in critical analysis snaps into focus as they can now communicate the details of the film in a way they never could before. By unfolding in this way, the exercise encourages students to discover meaning and purpose through their own questions and observations. They acquire a new disposition: there are no right answers. Students are pressed to be interrogative from day one. Each exercise sets the table for asking through doing and produces work that is inquisitive, not declarative.

PULLING DESIGN OFF-THE-SHELF

In the next inquiry exercise, we ask students to analyze one of a number of popular off-the-shelf home magazines, such as: *Martha Stewart Living*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Nest*, *Dwell*, *Wallpaper*, and others. Students investigate cuisine and dining articles in relationship to the magazine’s graphic theme, writing style, and editorial tone. They present their findings graphically on boards alongside an article hypothetically written for the magazine. While focus is still primarily on inquiry, this project alludes to the cut, and the theme of disassembly to come later in the quarter. The magazine’s front cover, for example, is scanned into the computer and “cut” into its constituent parts. Title, secondary text, color, imagery, foreground, and background are isolated. Students begin to understand why one graphic composition appeals to them, while another does not.

Once students have a beat on the compositional mood of their magazines, they write and graphically compose an article in its style. At its foundation, this is an exercise in dismantling and rebuilding. Like “Babette’s Feast”, students mentally and physically dissect a composition they previously considered only holistically. A movie is now the aggregate of carefully choreographed sounds and images, painstakingly edited to present the illusion of cohesion. A magazine is understood similarly. The cut is proposed as a means of asking questions.

MEALS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

We hold that a varied, open-eyed disposition toward students’ surrounding everyday environments is fundamental to their growth as designers. The following exercise, “Sixty Restaurants,” requires students visit a range of establishments from chains to local dives, from greasy spoons to four-star bistros. They observe both the physical environment and its food. They sketch in journals, produce hard-line documentation, take photographs, and interview employees. Ultimately, they write an “Arts and Entertainment” review of the restaurant. The goal here is simple—lessons can be learned from any place, at any time. We encourage students to survey their surroundings and develop a mental and physical backlog of successful environments. Everyday experience is prioritized.

CUTTING APART, COLLAGE: KITCHEN UTENSILS

In a rapid change of pace, students next purchase inexpensive kitchen utensils. *Cutting* becomes a sub-theme gleaned through the filter of cuisine. In a pair of exercises involving kitchen utensils, we introduce *the cut* as both a material operation and a representational practice. First, students construct six elevations of their utensils at double scale using images from their home magazines in the technique of collage. Images are transferred

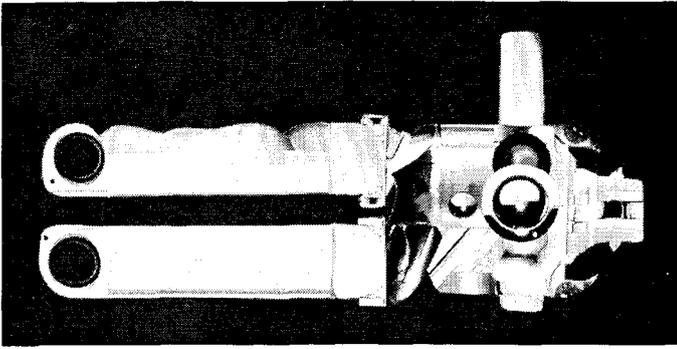


Fig. 5. Can-opener collage.

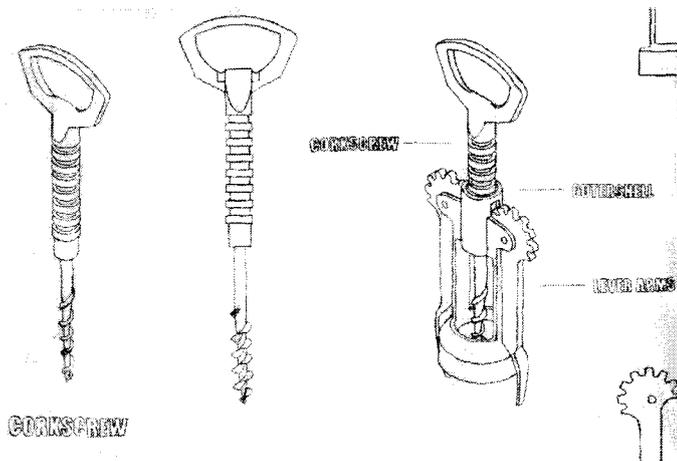


Fig. 6. Corkscrew disassembled and represented.

that approximate variations in light, surface textures, hues, and values. Students pay careful attention to subtle changes in lighting and color across the width of a can opener's white handle, for example, and match those variations to similar shades from the magazine. Ben Nicholson hinted at the power of this method by stating, "the two [fragments] are spliced together in such a way that the net result is greater than the sum of the parts."⁵ Our aim is for students to achieve this "greater net result." While labor intensive and surprisingly difficult, this exercise yields rich, novel, and hyper-real imagery. Students surprise themselves, consequently boosting their self-esteem and self-confidence.

We then engage students in another act of cutting, only this time through the actual physical disassembly of their utensils and the production of a graphic taxonomy of the resultant components. This yields a series of traditional plan, section, elevation, and axonometric drawings. Throughout first year, in fact, the theme of disassembling and reassembling extends into a wealth of interconnected exercises, from three-dimensional disassembly (utensils, large kitchen appliances) to two-dimensional representations (utensil collages and documentation, appliance documentation, robot representations) and back to three-dimensional reconfigurations (musical instruments). We

familiarize students with germane sub-themes, like *cutting*, by way of marginal studies that instigate questions and reveal previously concealed relationships.

HOT, WET, AND COLD: DISASSEMBLING LARGE-SCALE KITCHEN APPLIANCES

The utensil exercises prompt the disassembly of large-scale kitchen appliances. We assign teams of students a kitchen

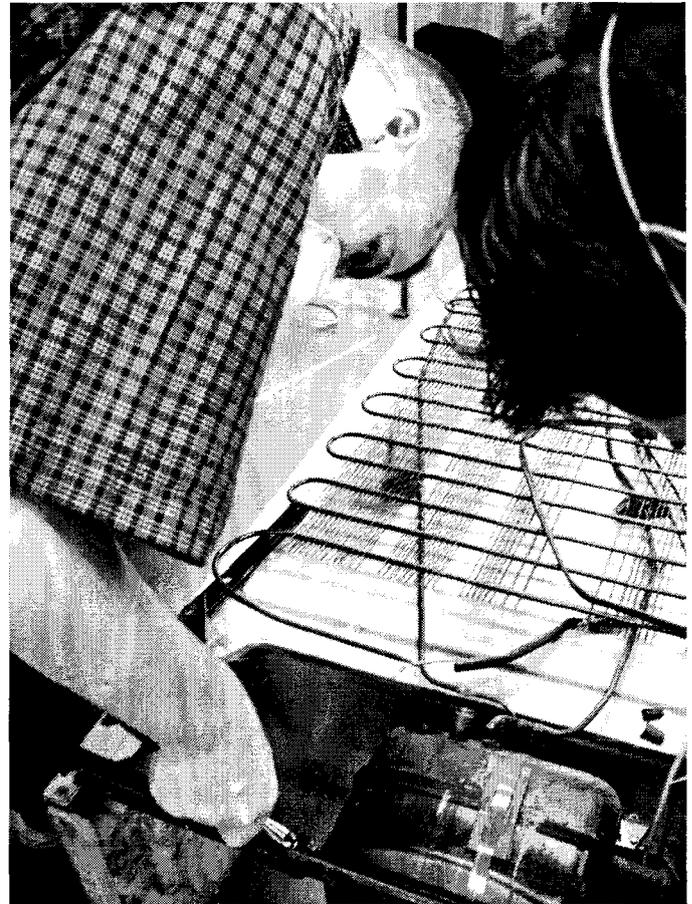


Fig. 7. Student disassembling a refrigerator.

appliance—a stove, refrigerator, or dishwasher, and present them with the task of disassembling and documenting it, similar to the utensil project. This added complexity infuses the project with some new dimensions. First, closely coordinated teamwork encourages students to consider design work as a team-based effort. Second, the increased complexity better prepares students for the layered, multifaceted systems the architect and interior designer must coordinate in the production of buildings and interiors.

Subsequent to this rather overwhelming technical exercise, students end the quarter with a loose, gestural project. They isolate a system from their appliances and diagram it from the

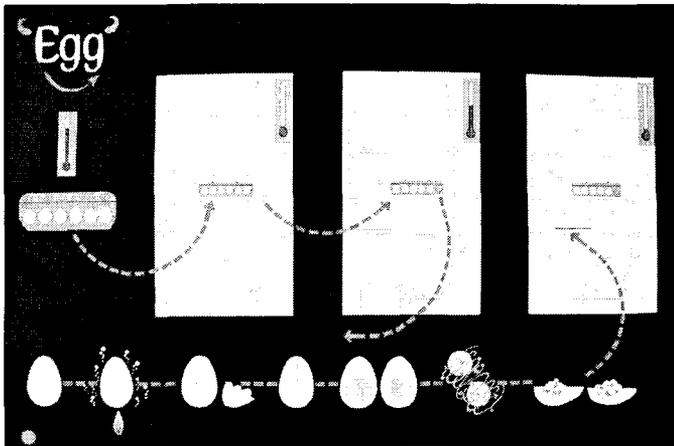


Fig. 8. Diagram of the movement of an egg in time and space.

perspective of an egg. We ask students to reflect on how their system facilitates the egg's storage, cooking, or disposal. This project nourishes an understanding of complex objects as accumulations of systems. It translates systems organization from everyday objects to buildings, bringing into focus earlier emphasis on parts-to-whole relationships. Additionally, diagramming the path of an egg leaves room for interpretation, personality, and humor. Structured "play" is encouraged. Throughout first year, in fact, exercises pair serious, rigorous architectural principles against the light-hearted, familiar, sometimes funny aspects of everyday experience. We encourage students to carry this disposition throughout their academic careers.

AIMS AND RESULTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR NEW FOUNDATION CURRICULUM

The students seem to find the foundation studio experience awkward at first. They struggle with the relevance of its

exercises and are overwhelmed by the enormity of its scope. Some had conceived of an education in which they would be designing buildings from day one, not going out to dinner and viewing films. With time, reassurance, and discussion, however, the pace of first year gains momentum and students become less guarded. They open to the idea that design involves structured play that can be simultaneously rigorous and fun. Students learn to trust the iterative exercises, their instructors, and most importantly their own instincts. Soon, exercises are seen not as a postponement, but rather as a fundamental basis for the establishment of a design language that prioritizes concept over style, "we" over "I", and questions over statements. By arriving at a new language through common objects and everyday experience, students speak of their work with confidence. They grow to become self-critical, but not insecure. They understand the vastness of what an architect or interior designer must know; yet they are not overwhelmed by it. The repetitive, iterative nature of exercises in the foundation curriculum allows students to nimbly oscillate between material and concept, large scale and fine detail, and the unfamiliar and ordinary of everyday objects and experiences.

NOTES/REFERENCES:

- ¹ Our documentation of this foundation studio paper began with the crafting of an abstract with the significant contributions of Daniel Friedman. The content of the foundation studio was developed through contributions of foundation studio professors Daniel Friedman, Kevin Klinger, James Postell, David Saile, David Lee Smith, Marc Swackhamer, and Melanie Swick.
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- ⁴ *Man and Mask: Oskar Schlemmer and the Bauhaus stage* [video recording]. Northbrook, IL: Anthony Roland Films, 1977.
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