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> The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented,* as a sort of monstrosity.
> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

> The university is literally the space of the thesis.
> Mark Wigley, "Prosthetic Theory"

The future of the thesis is the thesis of *the future*. Therefore, if the thesis indeed *has* a future, then inquiry into whether the future has a thesis—that is to say, confrontations with teleological valences, redemptive possibilities or traces of alterity within architecture—is a worthwhile enterprise, accompanying students on their journey through "thesis prep" and beyond.

Instead of positioning the architectural thesis primarily as either a culminating design endeavor, an opportunity to inculcate the skill of architectural programming, or the chance to find and hone a personal vision or voice, another possibility is available: that of imparting an undergraduate or graduate level fluency, and a nascent expertise, in futurology. This is proposed here as a means to reframe professional architectural education as just that—education, primarily of a cosmopolitan contemporary citizen, judicious and engaged as regards the ways of the world. This is distinct from the mere training of the specialized professional ready to await overdetermined employment "possibilities" that usually amount to a deployment within globalized systems of economic, political or cultural capitalization. For education's futures are at stake, both in the sense of insuring the ongoing value of the free pursuit of knowledge and the latent pluralities, and future anteriors, of worlds yet to come.

It is significant to recollect that the two overlapping or competing goals just mentioned—*education* and *training*—have long been topics of debate within the ACSA, as well as among American architectural educators, AIA membership and leadership, and the NCARB. However, this debate has rarely been tied directly to the architectural thesis, largely because the thesis has never been a curricular component *required* in order for a school to receive accreditation. As this panel graciously presented an opportunity for linking the architectural thesis to this debate, in what follows we will briefly sketch out an immodest proposal regarding the thesis, in four disparate yet interlocking sections.

1. A PAST FOR THE FUTURE(S)?

For at least the last few decades, a basic assumption underlying contemporary architectural education is that the thesis is, at heart, theoretical. It has been tacitly understood that in order for a design project to have a thesis, it needs to explicitly cite evidence as ammunition toward the mounting of an argument. Whether the facts assembled entail historical precedents, cultural practices, architectural theory, technological breakthroughs, computing innovations, or otherwise, a gesture is made towards some sort of knowledge other than merely the knowledge of design. Yet how did this gesture come to be essential, whether consciously or unconsciously, within the guise of the architectural thesis?

The presence of the design thesis as an entity in architectural education owes its origins to the instituting, within the university context, of standardized practices for reproducing society's ranks of architects *and* architectural educators. Earlier, the university environment had codified something like a thesis, primarily in the form of a dissertation or disquisition, an entity (almost always a text) for determining that students had ascended to a rank at which they were capable of training others, and hence no longer were students themselves. The thesis thus marked the end of someone's existence as a student while also foreshadowing his—and later, her—immanent re-birth as a teacher. When, in the 1940s and 1950s, the GI Bill markedly increased the volume of architecture students, architectural education emulated the esteemed tradition of the thesis as a way of producing future teachers, as well as guaranteeing rigorous standards for that training. Completion of a concluding project up to that time, however, bestowed on its author not emergence as a teacher but instead a different kind of rebirth—primarily as a professional, or at least a proto-professional.

This was largely due to ongoing efforts toward a codified practice of licensure, first begun around 1900 but only coordinated nationally, on the part of schools, the government and professional associations, in the early postwar era. It is important to remember that by then the thesis had been utilized for over half a decade, yet was largely considered an opportunity for synthesis of earlier instructional modalities, rather than the framing of original scholastic research. Furthermore, the architectural thesis was modeled on two existing "rites of passage": the premiated (i.e., judged) culminating design projects found in instruction at the French Ecole des Beaux Arts, which had been adopted by many American schools at the turn of the 20th century, and the older practice of introducing design, in the guise of a speculative project, late in curricular sequences, which was the mainstay of the technical (engineering) training upon which the earliest American architecture programs were based. In both cases, implied pedagogical assumptions regarding design were embedded in the particular practices adopted.

When thesis became ubiquitous in American education, though, its value was inherently linked to design—despite the ensuing emergence of entirely new "modern" pedagogical practices, largely linked to the Bauhaus and its *Vorkurs*—but also to another, decidedly non-design social value. The thesis became symbolic of (as well as the means to accomplish) a status shift inculcated in the student, who inhabited an academic system made up of an increasingly wide variety of subject positions, including design critics, full-time and adjunct professors, as well as graduate and doctoral students. The thesis in effect became a way of differentiating, or rather registering distinctions, among those graduates who could, should and did go on to become teachers of architects. While the academic subject positions just listed may have been virtually indistinguishable from one another outside of the academy—that is, in the profession, where all were basically architects (or more clearly but also more generally, *designers*)—the increasing need for an impartial, hence democratic, distinguishing among such students was also registered. This was because there previously was no explicit hierarchy as to what kind of a professional architect or designer could advise a thesis, thereby assisting in the production of architects as an activity simultaneously coordinated with the profession *and* the academy. The founding of the ACSA, in the second decade of the last century, marked the beginning of this coordination process, which advanced in fits and starts up to the end of WWII. The movement described here culminated in the 1970s, in what Stanford Anderson and Mark Jarzombek have both described as the accelerated academicization of architectural education. This acceleration owed a great deal of its impetus to developments in the 1960s, whereby a doctrinaire modernism, as well as the aligned and similarly unself-conscious modernist pedagogical practices that accompanied it, began to be significantly questioned.

This brief historical survey is provided to highlight two points. First, predicaments involving the architectural thesis have in the past reflected changing concern with the *future* of architectural education. And second, nowadays the futures of the student trained to be an architect are—and have been, since approximately the 1950s—intimately bound up with the fortunes of the profession's relationship to academic professionalization. In the last fifty years, there has been a nearly irrevocable yoking together of the profession of architecture and the profession of architecture education. The latter has become more cutthroat than the former, with far more intense competition for far fewer jobs and resources at the academic level, due to the overall shift everywhere in the university to a faculty leaning highly on adjuncts. In short, the profession's stakes in transformations to the modern research university—involving changing student/teacher ratios, the high price of tuition paid by future professionals, and the tendency of many individuals found in the university environment to espouse far more conservative political agendas than were common in the 1960s and 1970s—can be seen as colluding with university practices that put an emphasis on the bottom line.

The current possibilities of and for thesis, then, increasingly gesture to an outside (or beyond) of design knowledge, that is to say, its marketability. This in turn suggests a newfound need to teach students to situate knowledge of design within or alongside knowledge in general—what can be loosely called a de-differentiation of professional knowledge. If the preliminary design studios of core and comprehensive studio introduce and develop design skills, then thesis has a need to be about the particulars whereby the student can make a leap from design knowledge to a kind of holistic knowledge that is not professional per se but common, i.e., common to others.

The thesis thus stands as an interface, both dividing and connecting design knowledge to other knowledge forms and practices, and thus, as a relay between the discipline and the profession, as well as bonding agent allowing the architect as a subject to reach out and connect with other subjects with agency. For the student, the future of design knowledge is now; thesis is perhaps the best venue to begin understanding this, not by navel gazing at design knowledge but instead by arguing against the walling off of professional values from the world at large.

2: DESIGN RESEARCH VS. RESEARCH ON DESIGN(S)

Yet perhaps a new state of anxiety about the thesis, suggested by the very event of this panel at an annual ACSA convention, reflects not doubt about design's status but instead a need for interrogation of *methodological* futures for theses. At least since the 1950s, this type of question has generally been relegated, within professional architectural education, primarily to the history courses required by accrediting bodies. Through this, the design thesis largely came to be buttressed by arguments about the history of design (usually involving precedent) but not by arguments about historicity, meaning design's connections to the vicissitudes of its grounds for legibility.

Historicity as such entails a dialectical struggle between *temporality*, understood as time's epistemological parameters, and *teleology*, understood as time's metaphysical limits. The possibilities for knowledge at one moment in time are hence doubly determined, dependent upon both recent and past developments in a particular field *and* the more general understanding of knowledge's propensity to change. This is certainly true in design, for to feel that what one is doing is right, or good, or just, anticipates a teleological thrust that is beyond the scope of any theory of design. Yet if to practice design implicitly rests upon such a theory, or belief that design is based on sound methods and principles, this in turn instrumentalize such a theory and thereby ideologizes it. Another way of stating this is that design generally is understood as entailing forms and concepts, and is thus largely not thought of as arguing something; yet what an argument ultimately supports is a thesis, as in a claim, a point, a position or a lesson.

What if this double-bind become precisely *the* primary focus of thesis, thus freeing it from becoming within professional education the primary location for relating historical research and textual argumentation to design? Let us not forget that it is primarily those with higher degrees—almost always Ph.D.s, and usually historians—who have been entrusted with the responsibility of guaranteeing in the student the types of argumentative skills necessary to marshal research, articulate assumptions and wrestle prose toward the putting forth of, well, theses. Significantly, an architectural Ph.D. first appeared in America within the history of architecture, itself a branch of art historical studies located in the humanities division of the university. It was not until the 1950s that non-architectural history Ph.D.s first appeared beyond the humanities, within architecture schools; and it was not until the 1970s that such degrees began to be pursued on a regular basis, often offered not by a humanities faculty but by an architecture school. This has exacerbated the situation just described, namely the devalution of questions linking design's historicity to history (and theory).

Significantly, the very practice of instruction in "thesis prep," through which textual and evidentiary armatures tend to be foregrounded—in order that design may logically follow, in the future—largely repeats or reifies established rather than projective possibilities. But should it? It is instructive to recollect that in American architecture schools prior to the 1940s and the start of the postwar era, *history* and *theory* were nearly synonymous, often conflated with a third concern, that of composition or theory of design. All three were introduced prior to the undertaking of culminating design activity, and were included amongst a number of distinct areas of study (representation, structures, technology, professional practice), which together contributed to the future emergence of an architect from the shell of a former student. Though today these three concerns—history, theory and design methodologies—are increasingly divided off from one another as realms of knowledge, the logic of their triangulation contains within it an implicit assumption of disciplinary order. However, in each potential relationship (history-theory, theory-design methodologies, design methodologies-history), important intellectual experiences that are formative for professional subjectivity are exercised, whether that professional be a professional architectural educator or architect. In each of these pairings, possibilities for architecture's futures are fashioned, expressed and tested, often not merely implicitly but materially, through and by design. It is in the gaps created by the pairings that space exists for the future architect to appear, as much as in the standard sequence of core design studios, comprehensive studio, and thesis.

These gaps could be treated as the grounding paradigms for a later thesis. Welcoming danger into the gaps between these terms, into the very inhabitation of such gaps on the part of students *and* faculty, would conclude curricular sequences with an opening onto educational experiences that also could point toward where the future would directly intersect architecture, points where the question of the future *as a project* would be made to (re)appear. From this point of view, the question of the future having a thesis is decidedly not a question solely of or for the humanities (from a discipline such as history)—or even the sciences, entailing evolution, revolution or solution—but instead a question of education's very *spatial* nature. Rather than end education—or be seen as *the* ends of education—the question of *theses* as the question of the future appears as a student prepares to leave the academy precisely because, like other sorts of economic *futures*, the economy of the academic milieu depends upon *other* environments for its sustainability.

Why couldn't the primary ethical function of the thesis—an ethos of thesis—be the explicit articulation of an activity that has remained latent within the previous four years of undergraduate (or three years of graduate) professional education: how, precisely, can one design a research project or experiment? Such an articulation would render the student an expert in design—for they have all along been actively designing their own future, their becoming an architect—while also generating a healthy skepticism about applying this expertise to particular problems, say improving the world, adjudicating social dilemmas, and even instituting new forms of practice?

3: THE END(S) OF THESIS?

Consider a recent entry on the schoolblog of the architecture website, Archinect, posted under the title "the end of thesis?" by Tim (of SCi-Arc) and recalling a lecture by Sylvia Lavin on the (non)future of the architectural thesis:

> (lavin's) main argument was (and i'm paraphrasing) that within the current state of the profession today, given its highly collaborative and non-authoritative nature, there is no longer any relevance for personal theses. she likened the thesis student to an american tourist who expects everyone to speak english wherever they go, which may have been acceptable in the recent past, but today people need to "speak the fucking language", meaning the more and more that a student delves into the highly-nuanced, bottomless abyss that is thesis, the more and more they lose their ability to communicate with the outside world and the profession at large, thus losing their relevance in discourse overall.

The "outside world" invoked by Lavin is, indeed, precisely what's at stake in the thesis. But we note how, in her remarks, at least as reported by Tim, "the world" is quickly followed by, and swallowed up in, "the profession"—and one can wonder whether a disinterest or disinclination in distinguishing between these two domains leads almost automatically to a disinterest in the thesis. Lavin's expressed desire to "communicate" with the "outside world" is poignant, to be sure. And her assumption of clearly defined boundaries separating the inside of architecture from the various political, economic, social, cultural and historical forces and objects that supposedly lie comfortably far beyond architecture renders those forces and objects indisputably exotic destinations for refreshing, even enlightening jaunts undertaken by the well-prepared student—the one, that is, who rests secure in her knowledge that architecture is what it is what it is what it is… and is not a "bottomless abyss," the exploration of which supposedly leading to a loss of "relevance." (We also cannot avoid noting how, here, an attempt to privilege the "non-authoritative" nature of architecture leads to a paradigmatically authoritarian speech-act: the command to students to "speak the fucking language").

And yet… We find Lavin's metaphor of the architectural thesis student as a traveler to be a most useful one. Let us cite, then, the following distinction between two types of travelers, drawn from Tom Cohen's Ideology and Inscription:

There are, perhaps, two types of travelers—those who want to know the language of their destination [the people who "need to 'speak the fucking language'," in Lavin's excitingly vulgar words], to maintain the illusion of communication (mostly commercial), and those who are not determined by the latter need, but who, in the process, locate themselves in a certain nexus of 'translation' in which their own words, sounds, gestures operate on the same plane as alien ones, in the open, without special contents or interior. It is only at the latter point that certain questions can be posed—once the pretense of retrieved meaning, or 'experience,' is suspended.

While, as Lavin argues, the first type of traveler doesn't need a thesis to plan her itinerary, the second type of traveler is involved in a journey that, in the context of the university, may only be accommodated through the thesis. The suspension of "retrieved meaning" in favor of an encounter with the unprecedented may be, in fact, a precise description of any thesis worth making: architectural, academic or of any other sort.

4: DESIGN AS (A) DIVISION

This suspension, moreover, ought to be maintained not only within the thesis; it should also obtain beyond the thesis, when considering the possible natures of and futures for the thesis. The problem of the architectural thesis ought not, therefore, to be solved by looking to extant models from other disciplines for defining or testing theses, nor by reifying codified architectural ideologies or imaginaries into models for the thesis: both methods yield versions of the same rather than provoking the necessary difference upon which the future depends. And yet, no method ought to be considered either right or wrong from the get-go. What belongs to architecture? If this question is to be fully open (and opened), then no method is adequate to answer it. What is necessary, rather, is maintaining an opening—a space and time we want to identity with the thesis.

It is not insignificant here that professional architectural education is inherently split or divided internally; for it is precisely such a split that encompasses and allows for traffic, or even intercourse, between architecture and all that lies beyond it. As Mark Wigley made clear in an article on the original 19th century housing of architectural education in the university in America, this welcoming constituted an addition or a graft—a prosthetic, if you will—at first onto the sciences but immediately after onto the humanities. This prosthesis (importantly, from pro-thesis, literally a linguistic prefix that fails to alter the base meaning of a word) served to institute design as a division or department within the university yet did not succeed in dividing it off from either art or science. Rather, it marked the invention and intervention of this institution—design, or more clearly design as knowledge within architectural education—as an activity that united a divided discipline, while simultaneously securing a split between profession and discipline. At this time, design was the culminating experience for the architectural student, introduced in the final year—following the model of German technical education—and through the thesis.

Deconstructive literary scholar Peggy Kamuf has further argued that literature, unlike various sciences, entails a kind of perpetual division that challenges the university as an institution, necessitating a constant reevaluation of that institution's goals.

In her description, the split between literary and practical writing (e.g., the difference between poetry or fiction and prose) is of an entirely different order than the intramural and extramural criteria (scientific validity and moral legitimacy) that determine what is proper to science within the university and beyond it, within society. Literature largely institutes the academic environment as a theoretical realm apart from "practical" concerns, but by doing so this implicitly puts literary knowledge to a practical use, as a kind of think tank for the real world.

So, too, design within architecture education. For the logic of design studios both guarantees architecture education as a practical institution distinct from the profession and serves as its link, since the trained architecture student can subsequently find work as a designer beyond the academy. Design arguably constitutes a division similar to literature, for although one might see it as practical from the position of the architectural profession, from the viewpoint of the discipline it is far more polemical (which is to say fictional), potentially both utopian and transgressive, exerting a similar threat to society's spatial order that literature poses to rational writing. No doubt the idea that design is akin to literature may raise heckles from the ranks of architecture professionals, yet this should not come as particularly far-fetched to architectural educators. The very belief that an architectural discipline exists—that a creative potential for innovation lies at the heart of design's very history—turns out to have been the grounding assumption upon which the university education of architects rested in America, rather than through pupilage.

Yet the division of which Kamuf speaks, in its capacity to question the very purposes of the university, springs from the fact that literature can be taught yet it also teaches, meaning it instructs, as in directs in the ways of the human subject and citizen. Much as the culture wars of the 1990s—the direct object of Kamuf's reflections—raised questions about what type of literature should be taught and fueled debates about the moral legitimacy of America's system of higher education, questions about what type of design legitimizes thesis—seen as the primary context for original research on the part of the architecture student within their education—in turn implicate the designs education has on future generations and the world they inhabit.

In this regard, design has designs (on us). For design in the general sense, meaning architectural design, supports design in the specific sense, meaning designs on the world outside design. Like literature, design does this in a way science (or at least the physical sciences) does not. Mark Cousins and others have commented on this in calling architecture a "weak" discipline, meaning one in which "the definition of the object of knowledge includes the subject [of knowledge]." The university has long upheld an essential partitioning of the humanist arts (humanities) off from the sciences, with only the former deemed capable of addressing the demands of instruction for living the good and just life. Similarly, design too is taught yet it also teaches: specifically, in its connection to the discipline of architecture, it educates not just those who undertake it, namely architects, while at university, but it also edifies those that encounter it, in all its numerous manifestations, as buildings and drawings and other manifestations of architectural thinking.

This, we would argue, directly relates to the thesis. For if, as Wigley suggests, the thesis is the institution of design as architectural education within the university, then the thesis is divided, for it can be taught but it also teaches, in a manner similar to yet distinct from studios. These in particular—and above all else they are—-serve as a mode of apprehending knowledge, a type of experience, similar to the lecture or the seminar; they do not constitute pedagogy, but like much else in education are merely pedagogical tools, which can be used wisely or squandered. The thesis on the other hand marks an institutional future as reserve, becoming a paradigm not of activity—like studio—but of enactment; it institutes education in such a way that, quoting Kamuf regarding literature, "whatever stabilized forms they [institutions] assume in the present remain open to the transformations of a future," a future perpetually held in reserve for being held by the thesis. Much as T. S. Eliot argued—famously noted by Robert Venturi in his 1966 Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture—that new works of literature augment and realign the lineage they join, design's potential depends as well on the promise that what the future will bring enables us to understand the story of our past, and call upon its vast and rich reserve. If the place of the thesis in education is marked by this, it is clearly not entirely due to its once having instigated design instruction, at the end of a basically technical sequence; nor in its role culminating it, as it did after instruction in design began to be introduced at the start of curricular structures. Instead, design's ability to call forth a reserve through which futures arrive in the now, within education and within the university, as well as within the world at large containing them both, is its link with the unique cache of the thesis. Spending the reserve of design on a mere design thesis, when the designing of a thesis instead could be undertaken, would be—to quote an old adage—a terrible thing to waste.

5: CONCLUSION, WITHOUT END

For an architecture thesis to open onto a future worth anticipating, it needs to open onto new concepts of architecture and hence new concepts of the thesis. If the design studio brokers already-constituted knowledge under the guise of skill-building—a brokering policed by accreditation requirements—then the thesis studio should invite, welcome and even risk the production of new knowledge. This production cannot, by definition, be instituted. It can only be solicited. Thesis ought to be the name of this solicitation.