The Studio Turned Inside-Out

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Universities, most notably public universities, are under increasing pressure to engage the communities that support them. While this trend may well produce very positive results, it also has the potential to fundamentally endanger the academy's freedom to determine research agendas and curricular content. In response to this public mandate, the following paper advocates a model of service in which faculty play a proactive role in determining the nature of their community involvement.

REACTIVE VS. PROACTIVE MODELS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE IN SCHOOLS OF ARCHITECTURE

In the traditional model of community service in schools of architecture, local organizations and occasional individuals approach the university with projects in hand; the faculty and students then respond by providing some form of architectural service. While the nature of this service varies from school to school and project to project, the faculty and students are generally reacting to problems framed by others. Without argument, this traditional model of community service serves several important functions. It satisfies the university's mandate to engage the public, it provides architectural services to those who might otherwise not be able to afford them, and it offers students and faculty experience with the demands and opportunities of working with real clients, sites, programs, and budgets. However, because the projects arrive by happenstance, their pedagogic value is predictably uneven. The needs of a community group and the ongoing requirements of an academic program may at any given moment simply be incompatible.

In the proactive model of community service, the educator first establishes their pedagogic and research agendas, and then seeks out the most appropriate client, program, and site in the community. This model retains the meritorious qualities of traditional community service mentioned above, while optimizing the educational experience for the students and research opportunities for the faculty.

Community service performed from within the academy serves implicitly as a model for professional practice. The reactive model of service perpetuates a similar model for practice, one in which projects are framed by others. A proactive approach offers both the students and the community a model in which professionals assume a leadership role. To illustrate the potential of this model, the paper will describe a course presented at the Fall Semester at the Technical University in Helsinki.

STUDIO OVERVIEW

The semester-long course was entitled "On the Surface." The subject of the studio and the accompanying seminar was the space of the city's surfaces. Class discussions ranged from the narrative potential of surfaces and the role of cladding, to the complexity of transparency and the effects of masking. The ideas generated by the seminar discussions directly informed the studio work. The course began with two projects executed within the confines of the studio, and concluded with full-scale installations in Helsinki's downtown commercial district.

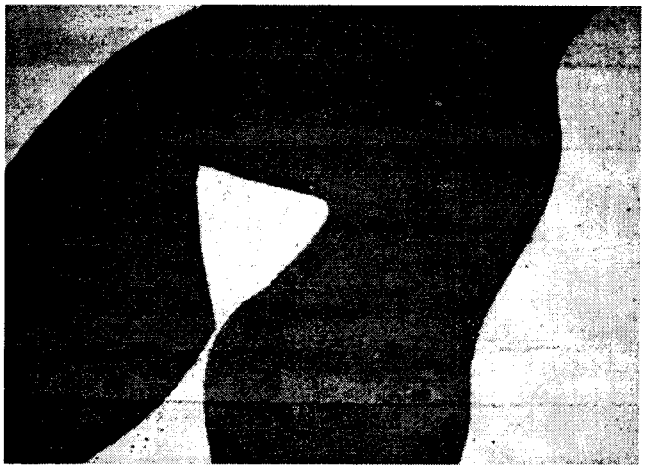

Fig. 1. Project One.

Project One

In the first project, students were asked to design a surface in the Cable Factory, the industrial complex that housed our studio. After programming their interventions, the students designed and built small-scale constructions containing the essential qualities of their proposals. The constructions, framed by prescribed dimensions, were to be built with the same materials and tectonic strategies that would be employed in a full-scale realization. The pieces were then re-sited and presented in the Cable Factory gallery as a public exhibition.

One German student, frustrated by the excruciatingly slow movement of the freight elevator, proposed painting an obscure, but provocative image of a woman's body on the exposed, interior, concrete walls of the shaft. The image, alternatively revealed and concealed by the elevator platform and the counterweight, would, it was hoped, alleviate the anxiety of waiting. Targeting the men's room, a Finnish student replaced an existing metal partition between two urinals with a surface of white silk to encourage precision in a place normally used (and abused) without regard. The silk, stretched

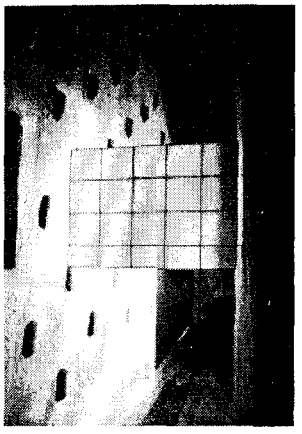

Fig. 2. Project One.

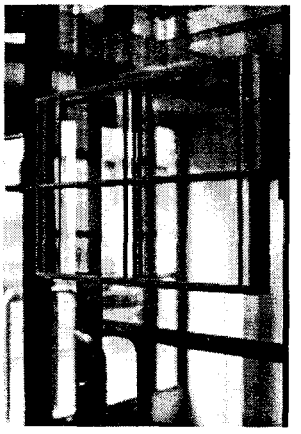

Fig. 3. Project One.

Fig. 7. Korkeavourankatu, Helsinki.

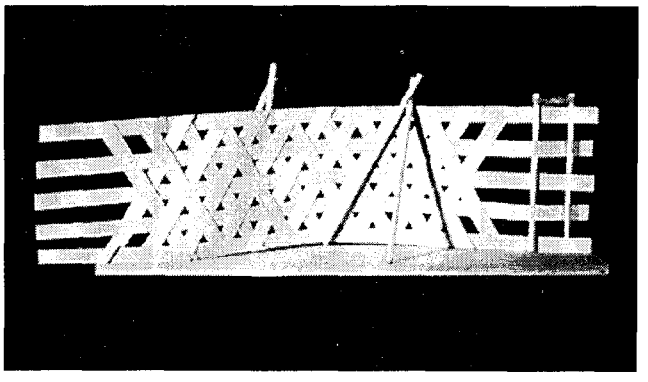

Fig. 4. Project Two.

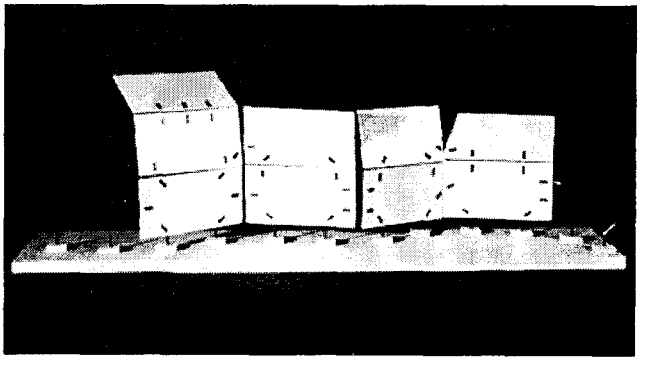

Fig. 5. Project Two.

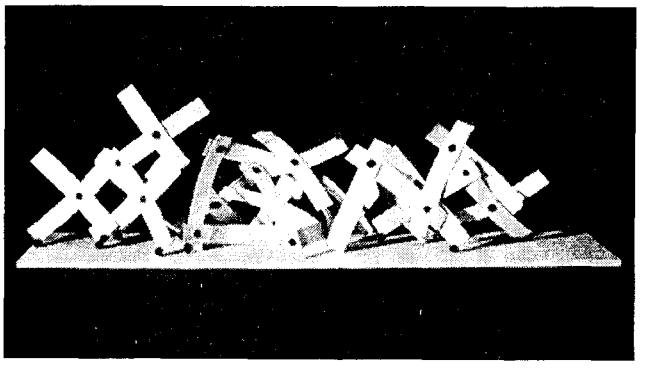

Fig. 6. Project Two.

over a gridded frame, mirrored the white ceramic tiles of the room, while presented an unfamiliar fragility. Less pragmatic, an American student, fascinated by the play of reflections in the thick, double casement windows of the factory, extended the effect by adding additional layers of framed glass to create windows upon windows upon windows.

Project Two

In the second project, Dan Hoffman continued the study of surfaces for two weeks, in a discussion focused on the integration of commercial imagery and construction. He began with what he calls the "white-out" process. The students were asked to white-out a magazine advertisement until it was just unrecognizable. What remains is just the "tone" of the image. The lessons of this brief exercise were then applied to the design of a construction fence surrounding a commercial property. To quote Dan Hoffman from an interview published in the Finnish architecture magazine, Arkkitehti (4/1995): "The idea is to design the fence in such a way that it evokes the "tone" of the advertisement. ..." A site in Helsinki was given, and each student designed a fence with a specific commercial program in mind. The completed designs were presented as small-scale models and fragments of full-scale details. This study of tectonics in the service of commerce paved the way for the third project.

Project Three

For the final project of the semester, we took our interest in programmed surfaces out of the studio and into the community. Peter MacKeith, Director of the International Masters of Architecture Program, approached an association of merchants on behalf of the studio to request the use of their storefronts. Eleven shopkeepers agreed to allow us to continue our studio explorations in their stores during their critical Christmas season.

By lottery, each student in the class was assigned a client (a shopkeeper) and a site (a storefront) and given a budget of $300 (funded equally by the shopkeeper, the student, and the program.) Armed with ideas generated from the first two studio projects and the seminar discussions, the students had seven weeks to program, design, and build the storefronts. The process began with group meetings attended by all the students and the shopkeepers. After the initial groundwork was laid, the students met often with their clients individually to present their designs for review. There were many challenges for the students, cultural differences not the least among them. In order to minimize disruption to the businesses, all of the projects were conceived of as pre-fabricated installations. Most of the construction was carried out in the workshop at the Cable Factory. The prefabricated pieces were brought to the site and

Fig. 8. Project Three: before.

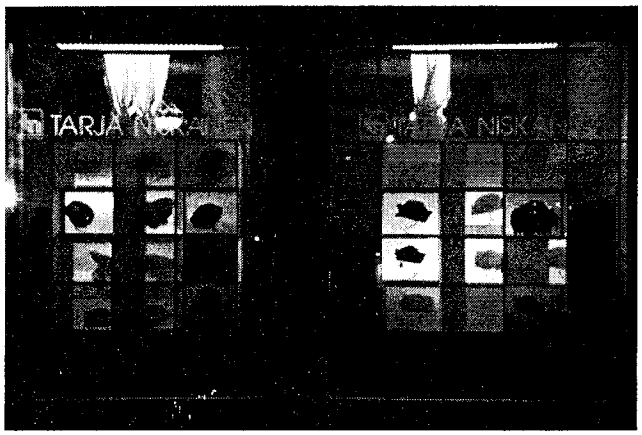

Fig. 9. Project Three: after.

Fig. 10. Project Three: before.

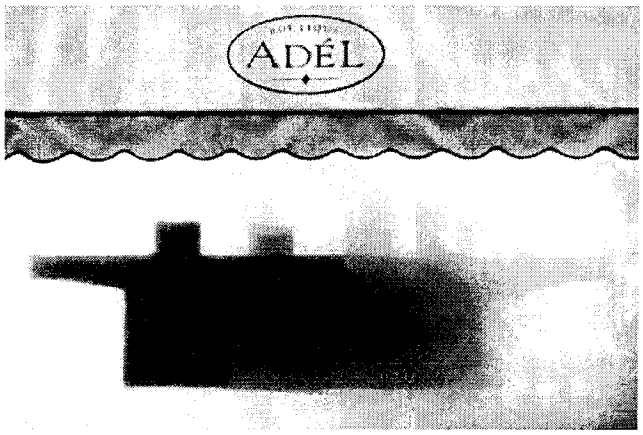

Fig. 11. Project Three: after.

installed just prior to the opening block party. The installations ranged from literally paper-thin proposals on the shop windows to thick solutions that extended through the depth of a shop.

The participating stores were distributed over two blocks of a narrow commercial street in downtown Helsinki, bracketed on one end by a boutique for petite women and on the other end by a vegetarian restaurant. Remote from the other stores, the boutique posed its own special problem for one of the Finnish student: its small, odd-shaped windows offered little opportunity for display. By mounting backlit, orange Plexiglas panels in each window, the student sent a brilliant glow falling with the snow on the passer-by. Upon closer inspection of the windows, the pedestrian discovered an article of clothing resting on each panel, the fabric contorted into unrecognizable, sculptural forms. At the far end of the street, a Swiss student made curtains to enclose the vegetarian restaurant, curtains printed with sequential sections of cut vegetables. For the vegetarian food store next door, a Slovenian woman transformed the cluttered windows into a surreal vision reminescent of a Magritte painting. Loafs of bread floated like clouds against a bright yellow "sky" in the darkness of the Finnish winter.

Two students choose to highlight the range of merchandise for sale in their assigned businesses. One filled the window of the bookbinder's shop with a newly constructed display case. Its shelves opened alternately to the inside of the shop and to the street. The other student, assigned an overstuffed fur and hat shop, choose to display the spectacular handmade hats in a display case that functioned as a Christmas calendar. At the start of the season, all the hats were obscured in individual boxes clad in translucent fabric; only their silhouettes were visible to those in the street. With each day, a new box was opened, until finally on Christmas, all the hats were revealed.

The majority of students chose to obscure the merchandise, to test the allure of masking, a strategy that naturally took a leap of faith from the shopkeepers. In a second woman's clothing shop, the normal entourage of garbed mannequins was replaced with alternating sheets of white silk and sweaters that filled the window. The eye of the spectator was drawn through the shopwindow and into the mesmerizing depth of the moire patterns. Across the street, an Icelandic student assigned to a store peddling stained glass lamps used a similar strategy, but extended the layers of screens through the depth of the shop.

The student assigned to a visually chaotic discount shoe store constructed a curtain from the remnants of stamped rubber soles. A shoe manufacturer allowed the American student to stamp the soles himself and gave him the scraps without charge. The resulting facade advertised the merchandise, while effectively obscuring views into the cluttered interior. On the windows of the Italian deli mid-block, rice paper was used to mystify the interior. Behind each screened window, the student placed a backlit turntable. On one, he put a bottle of olive oil, on the other, he attached an industrial-sized beater. As the objects turned around and around, their distorted silhouettes were thrown onto the screens and into the street.

Finally, a German student designed a wall of wax for the window of an upscale knickknack shop. In December, a month filed with darkness and holidays, finding the necessary quantity of wax required great resourcefulness. After many experiments, the student managed to cast five enormous aqua-colored wax panels in the shop, transport them across town to the site, and install them in a steel frame propped against the window without incident. Pedestrians

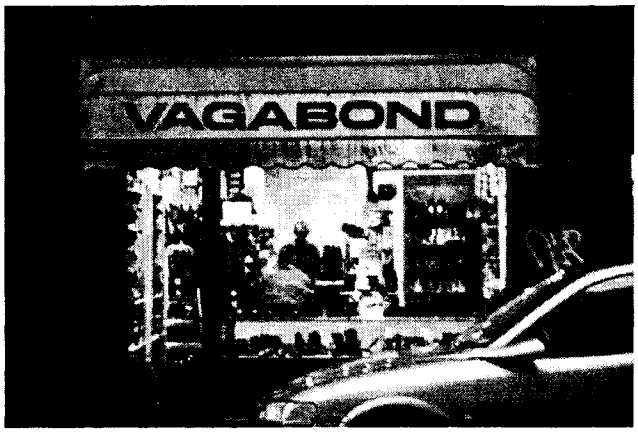

Fig. 12. Project Three: before.

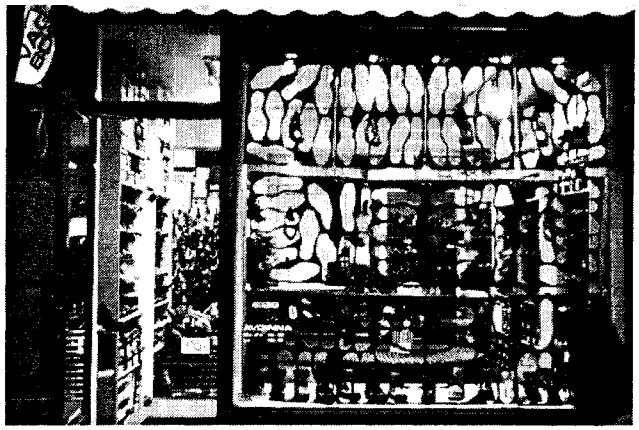

Fig. 13. Project Three: after.

Fig. 14. Project Three: before.

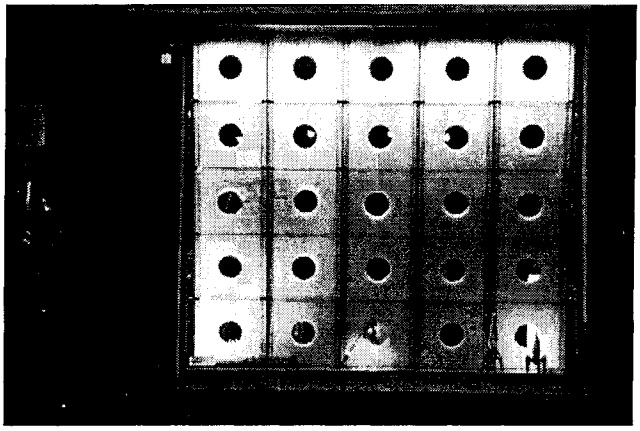

Fig. 15. Project Three: after.

passing by the shop would be bathed in soft green light as they peeked through the portholes for a glimpse of the merchandise.

CONCLUSION

This proactive community design project, "The Eyes of the City," was rewarding for all those involved. The university was credited with having given the shopkeepers a project that helped strengthen their community, the shopkeepers received publicity in the press during their peak season, and the students gained experience juggling the demands of a client, the limitations of a budget, and the realities of construction. In addition, the foreign students had close contact with the Finnish shopkeepers, giving them additional insights into the culture. From the perspective of this educator, the act of turning the studio inside out gave weight to our theoretical investigations by successfully testing them in the public realm.