

# Creating Hospitable Environments

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## INTRODUCTION:

In these days of suspicion, paranoia and fear in the face of a faceless enemy, it is more important than ever that we architectural educators emphasize the ethical dimension and responsibility of the architectural act. As those who establish the setting for human interaction, we must not succumb to isolationist tendencies (gated houses and communities) but must on the contrary be leaders in the effort to ensure the survival of a civil society. It is our responsibility as architectural educators to convey to the students that their designs are much more than simply formal gymnastics or elaborate studies in representation. Like it or not, all works of architecture, whether consciously or unconsciously, define an ethical position. More often than not, it is unconscious. The myriad suburban boxes that encircle our cities testify to an acceptance of, or resignation to a political, economic and social status quo. If we do not inculcate in our students the visionary potential of architecture, there is little chance that this will happen once they leave the intellectually supportive and necessarily idealistic academic environment. It is crucial that students develop a strong and sustaining ethical position while still at School.

With this in mind, the studio that I developed for the 4th and final year of an undergraduate Bachelor of Architectural Studies program, focused on the issue of Hospitality. For some reason, the word "hospitality" has come to assume a somewhat pejorative connotation, derived perhaps from associations with superficial institutional attempts to make people feel welcome. And so we have hospitality booths and welcome centers that turn the provision of hospitality into a job rather than a true engagement with another person. But I would argue that Hospitality is one of the fundamental human institutions that defines culture and civilization.

"Absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.) but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names."<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Derrida

"When another person comes to my house, he teaches me things about myself. His mere presence makes me confront myself. He upsets my space and my habits and teaches me what I am. It's a kind of test."<sup>2</sup>

Tahar ben Jelloun

Moreover, there is an important cultural dimension to this institution. The rules and rituals that are invoked in the receiving of a guest are traditions that are passed down from generation to generation and contribute to the very definition of one's cultural being.

"Some peoples are more hospitable than others: generally speaking, they are those who have remained close to the soil and live in the wide open spaces, even if they are poor. The industrialized countries, obedient to a cold rationality, have had to unlearn hospitality. Time is precious and space limited. There's a shortage of accessibility, or in other words of generosity and freedom, because everything is calculated and measured. Doors are shut, and so are hearts. What is left is the individual and his privacy, a withdrawn universe generating egoism and loneliness."<sup>3</sup>

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These, and related topics, particularly the idea of the "Gift" and the ethic of generosity, were discussed in a

series of seminars during the first weeks of the semester.<sup>4</sup> The issue of the role of food and drink in the provision of hospitality was equally a focus of discussion, since the serving of food was intended as the sub theme and functional program for the studio.<sup>5</sup>

“Food is still our ritual relaxation (a break in the working day), our chance to choose companions and talk to them, the excuse to recreate our humanity as well as our strength, and to renew our relationships.”

“A meal can be thought of as a ritual and a work of art, with limits laid down, desires aroused and fulfilled, enticements, variety, patterning, and plot. As in a work of art, not only the overall form but also the details matter intensely.”

“In many cultures, two people do not feel they can talk in a friendly way with each other unless they have first eaten together: it is an equivalent of being “properly introduced.”<sup>6</sup>

Margaret Visser

In keeping with the theme of the Studio, I served pistachio nuts and a combination of green, red and concord grapes at the very first studio meeting. Following the introductory discussion of hospitality, one of the students suggested that we continue the tradition of serving food throughout the semester and that each student take responsibility for a particular event. The first organized event was a movie night hosted by one of the students where we watched the appropriately themed movie, *Babette's Feast*.

#### STUDIO APPETIZER PROJECT:

The studio began with an exploration into the guest/host relationship through a full scale installation project. In groups of two, the students were asked to design, build and choreograph an evening culinary event at the School of Architecture as a reception following a lecture by the renowned New York lighting designer, Howard Brandston. Each pair of students was asked to choose an appetizer or dessert to be served at this reception and design a setting for its display and consumption. The challenge was to come up with a design for the appetizer event that explored architecturally the narrative of the host/guest relationship. What was the essential character that was to be expressed through the construction? What was the architectural sequence/set of transformations that welcomed and drew the visitor into the world created? How was the event choreographed to ease or even

erase the boundary that initially exists between strangers? What was the role of the lighting design in the experience of the event?



Fig. 1. Ice cream sundae table

Jessica Archibald and Trisha McCullough created an amoeboid shaped (designed to minimize hierarchy) black surfaced table set at 15" off the floor. Too low to stand around, this table height was a deliberate move to subtly demand of the visitor that he/she make a commitment to sit on the cushions around the table and engage with the other guests. The food being served by one of the hosts was ice cream, but in order for you (the guest) to get the topping that you wanted for the sundae, you had to pass your bowl to the guest seated in front of the topping desired. The obvious question being raised: To what extent can architecture engineer social behavior?



Fig. 2. Water wall

Another group of students, Janouque Leriche, Brad Hindson and Stephan Schulson, wanted to explore the condition of the anonymous host. This resulted in a rather elaborate and beautiful water wall. The automatic serving of water was triggered by the interrup-

tion of a light beam. In juxtaposing qualities of light and water, the project introduced an aesthetically and sensuously pleasing and playful response to the offering of hospitality.

A third pair, Michelle Lee and Eva Russell wanted to explore the blurring of the guest host relationship. The intention was to create an installation that would entice the guest into taking on the role of host. The set-up therefore had to be reasonably self explanatory, but unlike the water wall that was clearly a self-serve situation, a dimension of ritual was designed into the arrangement that allowed for the role of host to be easily assumed: "Please, won't you let me fill your glass of Sangria?"

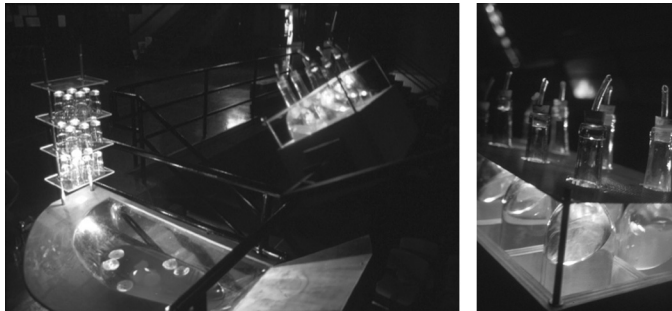


Fig. 3. Sangria fountain

The post-mortem discussion of the event focused on the various strategies that had been and could be invoked in the design of a hospitable environment: Perhaps the most important discovery was that it was essential that the project be joyful. It may be appropriate for some institutions to be serious, but an institution that wishes to create a sense of hospitality necessarily needs to embody a sense of joy and generosity of spirit. Once this atmosphere is established, interaction and exchange amongst people is much more likely to occur.

The introduction of the unusual seemed to be a very successful strategy for encouraging interaction; the unusual as in an odd juxtaposition of objects, scales, themes; or as in an exceptionally beautiful object or lighting condition. Aesthetics clearly play an enormous part in the creation of a civil society. Well crafted and beautiful objects and settings demand a certain decorum and respect from their users.

Finally there is the issue of ritual; a set of learned behaviors that are culturally based and transmitted from generation to generation. There is a language, both verbal and architectural, that is associated with the tradition of welcoming a stranger into one's space. Every attempt must be made to make the guest feel comfortable and at ease in a relaxed and affirming environment.



Fig. 4. The Dinner Machine

#### CAMPUS HOSPITALITY:

The scale change from the first project to the campus plan of the second half of the semester was dramatic. Our University is a relatively new university that grew out of a post World War II need for institutions of higher learning for returning war veterans. From its rather modernist socialist beginnings, the University grew significantly during the 1960's and early 1970's, a time of significant student unrest culminating in the Kent State massacre. Sadly, the primary design intention for the campus plan at this time was to facilitate possible police control of the campus in the event of a riot. Situated on the then outskirts of the city, the two controllable entry points to the campus further isolated it from the adjacent medium density community. Notwithstanding the lack of funds, the lack of architectural vision for the campus at a time in architectural history not known for its sensitivity, further exacerbated the problem of isolation both within the campus proper and between the campus and its perimeter conditions. This, compounded by a harsh winter climate, sadly makes it a contender as one of the most inhospitable campuses around. The students were therefore faced with a very challenging project, but one with which they were extremely familiar. How to bring a dimension of civility, comfort, and welcome, to the campus and to its relationship with its nearest neighboring community situated across a six and in some places eight lane arterial road?

The original studio outline called for a 2 week project in which each student developed a strategy for the campus plan, particularly the undeveloped section of campus (indicated in orange) between the academic precinct and the arterial road. Following this process the students were to pick one of three key sites and develop a hotel/conference type center as a catalyst

project for further development of the campus. Through this program, the students would engage the question of hospitality from the largest to the smallest of scales: The relationship of the campus to the city (a hotel on the major artery connecting the airport to downtown), to the neighboring community (no existing hotel accommodations in the area), and to the academic community (no existing accommodation and conference facilities on campus); the gift of the landscape to the building and the potential for the building to reciprocate that gift through responsive and sustainable design practices; the architectural interpretation of the moment of arrival and welcome to the complex, to the building, to the room.



Fig. 5. Campus Plan showing area to be developed.

It was during the review process of the short campus design project that it became clear that it might be possible to develop a concomitant ethic of hospitality

for interactions within the studio group as well. There were a number of interesting individual ideas for the campus plan but for the most part, they could be combined and layered on top of one another without losing the strength of any single one, and on the contrary adding a dimension of complexity that was lacking in the individual schemes.

Similarly, a variety of programmatic interests and concerns were brought to the table during this early phase and it seemed as if there were many possibilities for the development of the hospitable relationship between campus and community beyond that of the hotel/conference center. Moreover, it worked out coincidentally that the various interests were rather evenly distributed across the designated section of the campus. So rather than continuing with a more traditional studio structure where each student develops the same project independently (a rather competitive environment), consensus was reached to pursue the remaining portion of the semester in a more creatively hospitable project where the individual projects would be developed simultaneously with the elaboration of the campus plan.

There was also general consensus about the overall campus planning strategy that the group would pursue, based essentially on the preliminary scheme by Mijanou Gravelle. Of the group, Mijanou had the most compelling approach to the arterial road edge. Her project was structured around creating places of encounter between members of the Ottawa South community and the University. These places took the form of a series of pavilions placed along the east edge of the campus; each connected by pedestrian bridge to the street grid across the arterial road.

Each pavilion would house a portion of a Community center program (music practice room, dance studio etc.) with co-op residence accommodation for eight students above.

The students were excited by the design potential of this strategy and were eager to elaborate the campus area to the west by gathering their programs around the pathways leading to the pavilions.

The accompanying diagram is the chart the group came up with to describe the various relationships that would exist between the different projects. The position of the names represented the relative locations on the site. North, Dows Lake is at the top; the west edge is the commuter railway line through the campus beyond which are the academic and residence precincts; the eastern edge is the 6 lane Bronson Avenue arterial road

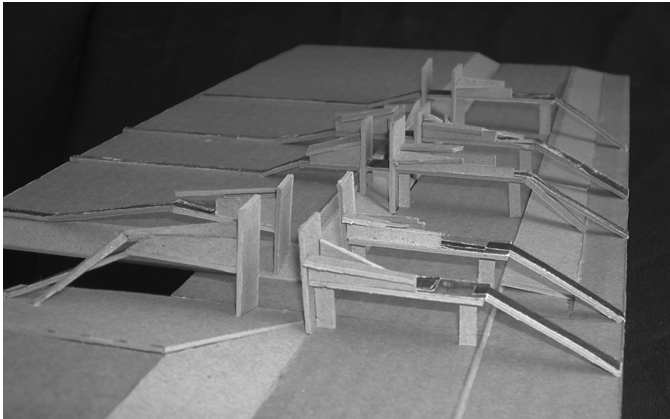


Fig. 6. Overall campus planning strategy Sketch model and site plan 1:1250

beyond which is the medium density neighborhood; the south edge is the Rideau River.

Needless to say, this diagram was only the first stab at establishing a structure within which the students would work. As the projects and programs began to develop, some students, reconfigured the roadways and topography and in some cases even switched sites altogether. This was more a process of discovery than of imposition of a network of exterior public walkways and gathering spaces. The campus plan grew out of the landscape and the individual visions for hospitable building proposals.

Once this basic structure was established, smaller team meetings were held on studio days, alternating between north-south teams and east-west teams to focus on issues related to each particular condition and to facilitate collaboration on the spaces between the adjacent projects. The overall campus project as it stood at the end of the semester is illustrated below.

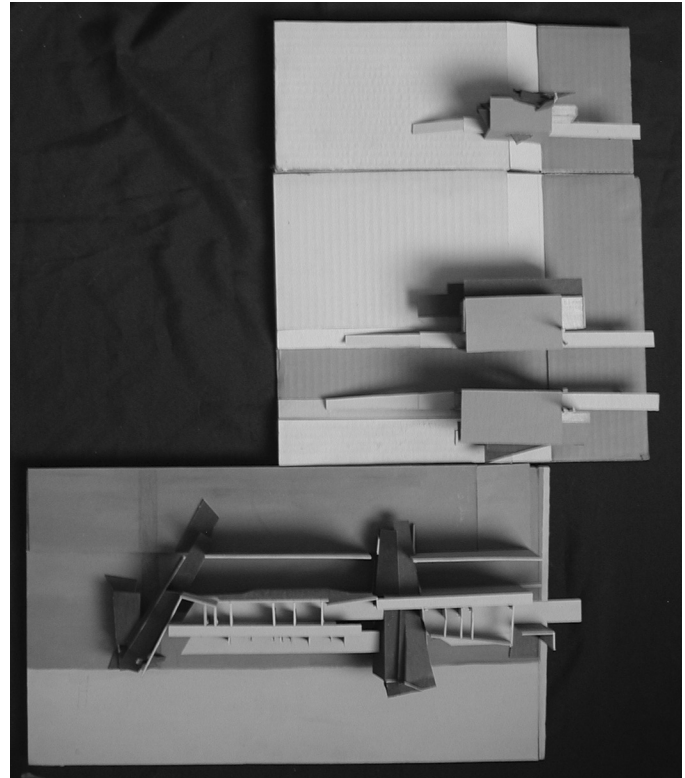


Fig. 7. Community center study models

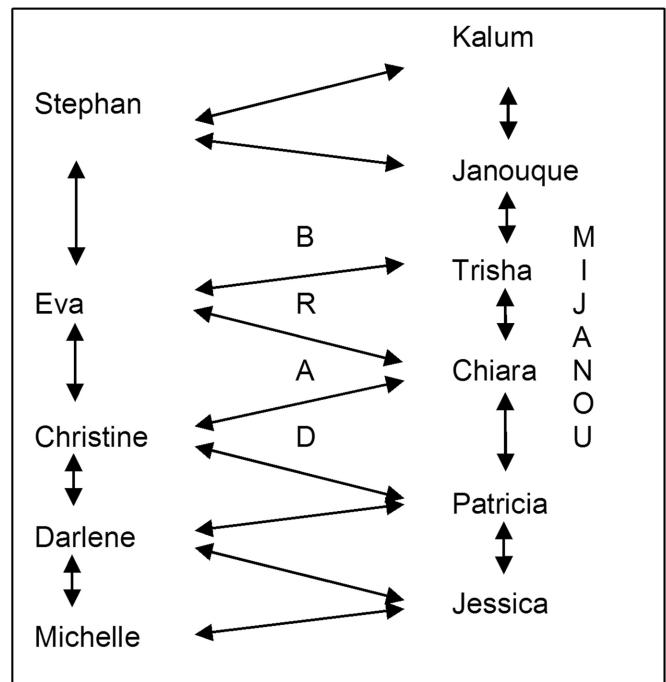


Fig. 8. Diagram showing projects in relation to each other



Fig. 9. Proposed Projects and Programs

## Proposed Projects and Programs

### 1. Eva Russell: Residence Common Annexes

West Annex: Bar/ social area, Coffee bar, Bookshop, Residence association offices, Food/market dining area, Reading/study spaces, Gallery, Music rooms, Art Rooms, Water treatment area, Small shop. East Annex: Outdoor movie screen, Theatre, Video rooms, IMS Video rental area.

### 2. Darlene Arriola: Carleton Transit Stop

O-Train Station, Student Hostel, Climbing gym, Arcade, Internet café, University bookstore.

### 3. Michelle Lee: Carleton University Faculty Club (w/ Sabbatical Accommodations)

Lounge, Reading rooms, Library, Restaurant, Café, Sabbatical accommodation for 4 families and 2 individuals.

### 4. Stephan Schulson: Sports and Recreation Facility

Circulation spine, Bleachers, Change rooms, Indoor field, Running track, Weight room, Squash courts, Swimming pool, Gymnasium, Cafeteria.

### 5. Christine Wang: Graduate Student Union

Graduate Student Association Offices, Study area/Library, Information Centre, Student Resource Centre, Music performance space, Graduate Student Pub/Café, Graduate Student Co-op Housing: 6 pers. suites w/ shared kitchen/living, Retail, Public Market, Organic produce from Campus Living Machine, Gardens, Outdoor Performance space.

### 6. Brad Hindson: Carleton Institute for Lighting Design

Gallery, 2 Classrooms, Archives, Administration, 4 Office spaces, Conference Room, Copy area, Library/Study, Workshop, Dark space, Pit/auditorium, Outdoor auditorium/Pause, Studio space, Rooftop green space, Parking for 39 cars, maintenance, utilities.

### 7. Kalum Galle Kankanange: Carleton Hotel/Conference Centre

80 Room Hotel, Conference facilities, Restaurant, Coffee shop, Tourist Information Center, Skating/Boating facilities.

### 8. Janouque Leriche: Carleton Digital Research Centre

Offices, Computer labs/class rooms, Virtual Reality Caves (2), Café, Restaurant/pub, Lecture hall/theatre— full-size VR presentations, Seminar/conference rooms, Main office, Mech./server rooms, Central gathering space/small theatre.

### 9. Mijanou Gravelle: Carleton/Ottawa-South Community and Information Centre

Community Centre, Office/Building Info centre, Conference Centre, Residence accommodation, Gallery, Carleton Info Centre, Retail.

### 10. Chiara Camposilvan: Carleton School for Studies in Art and Culture

Departments of Film, Music, Art History, Faculty offices, Classrooms, Auditorium/Theatre, Café.

### 11. Patricia Salik: School of Journalism

Radio Station, TV Station/Theatre, Newspaper, Internet

Magazine, Administration, Classrooms, Living Machine wall, Parking. Egg Café with free Internet/Computer.

### 13. Trish McCullough: Sustainable Design Research Building

Entrance foyer, Library, Classrooms (2), Conference Room, Offices, Research lab, Workshop, Storage, Garden Spot (inc. outdoor space and Kitchen), food outreach for students, Collective/Public rooftop gathering space

### 12. Jessica Archibald: Living Machine Research/Interpretation Centre

Water Treatment Facility (Chemical-free Living Machine) for Campus sewage, Lab/Research spaces, Offices, Administration, Water Garden

As with most studios, the end of the semester came too soon and the individual and collective projects had not progressed as far as we all would have liked. "If only we had been at this point a month ago!" was a common lament in the studio. To use a culinary metaphor: the stew finally had all its ingredients and the flavors were just beginning to merge into something quite special. We could taste its potential.

#### COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS:

Based on my experience of this studio, I am more committed than ever to a studio curriculum that explores an ethical dimension of architecture. This is supported by both positive and negative experiences of the studio described above. On the positive side, the students were very happy to have a forum in which to discuss the role of architecture in the context of current events and concerns (race and gender discrimination, the technological society; basic human relationships and interactions). The discussions were extremely animated and each student had something to contribute from his/her personal experience. All were intrigued by the notion of bringing a sense of decorum to our studio meetings and were eager to share and participate in the "extra-curricular" events that explored the issue of hospitality.

While extremely interested and excited by the intellectual notion of hospitality however, the students had much more difficulty putting some of the tenets into practice. In this, we were battling against three prior years of individual studio projects that focused, in the best cases on completion and the integrity of the design process within the individual project, and in the worst, on instilling a prima donna, self referential and egotistical attitude to design. While many stunning projects

may come out of such processes, such aspirations cannot be the primary motivating force in collaborative work.<sup>7</sup> On more than one occasion I was told by a student that she could not talk to the author of a neighboring project until she had a clearer idea of what her own project was going to be like (read until her project was finished). Only then would she feel comfortable exchanging ideas and adapting her project as required (keeping in mind the protection of authorship). The result was a subconscious resistance to engage in the part of the project that most fully explored the theme of the studio. Intellectually, the students also agreed that the creatively hospitable design strategy for the development of the public spaces between the buildings had enormous potential both in terms of actual design but also in terms of the design process, however when it came to the crunch, less energy was required to complete the individual project than to work with others in a more interactive venture. The fact is that hospitality does require more time and energy; both from the students and the professor. To repeat:

"When another person comes to my house, he teaches me things about myself. His mere presence makes me confront myself. He upsets my space and my habits and teaches me what I am. It's a kind of test."<sup>8</sup>

Tahar ben Jelloun

In order to combat this natural tendency towards egotism and isolationism therefore, it is all the more necessary to run a studio that celebrates a more demanding ethic.

#### LESSONS LEARNED:

The fact is, that in the case of this first attempt at a studio exploring the theme of hospitality, the intention to introduce a dimension of hospitality and civility into the organization of the studio was basically an intuitive move; more of an incidental appendix to the architectural theme of the studio. Had I been more aware of the potential to develop the theme of hospitality within studio group interactions from the start, I would have been much clearer, right from the start, as to the intention to implement a different organizational structure in the studio. What was needed (and that I failed to supply in this case) was a clear set of rules and objectives that placed as much value on development of the hospitable design process as on the final architectural design.

First and foremost it is essential that all students assume full ownership of the ideas and tactics being used to

achieve the creatively hospitable project. I would suggest that some sort of studio structure that assigns a leadership role on a rotating basis would be the most effective way to ensure full participation. The professor too must relinquish a certain amount of control, and act as a facilitator rather than a director. All must be willing to follow where the project leads and share responsibility for the changes in direction that a project might undergo.

The issue of grading has to be dealt with up front. Focus has to be squarely taken away from the final product and placed on the process. This has to be stated clearly in the project outline.<sup>9</sup> It is crucial to convey to the students that their grade will be based on their ability to respond to the creatively hospitable situation rather than on their individual project.

Finally, I return to the issue of joy. There is nothing so invigorating as a collaborative venture that is working, but nothing so disheartening as one that isn't. It is important to recognize immediately when things aren't working and change tactics if necessary. Focus should be on flexibility, discovery and innovation; on intellectual and creative hospitality.

To quote Eleanor Kaufman in her book, *The Delirium of Praise*, that studies the encomia amongst five 20th century French thinkers:

"Hospitality is an important construct in that it is both a formulation of rules and something that shatters all norms of appropriate behavior."

"So does an overpowering force or energy of thought take over the persons of Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, and Klossowski, so that they are no longer just those distinct individuals, but also collapsed into a single group identity. ..these thinkers obey impersonal rules of hospitality, hospitality to the other as a form of thought and not as a person. This configuration of thinkers, then, represents a new form of intellectual hospitality, a mode of being in common that is not a form of correcting or out-mastering the other, but rather a way of joining with the other in language or in thought so that what is created is a community of thought that knows no bounds, a hospitality that liquidates identity, a communism of the soul."<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality / Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Taher Ben Jelloun, *French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants*. Trans. Barbara Bray. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37

<sup>4</sup> The following books formed the basis for the seminar discussions: Ben Jelloun, Taher. *French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants*. Trans. Barbara Bray. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger* (L'Etranger) trans. Stuart Gilbert. (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1946).

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Hospitality / Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Kaufman, Eleanor. *The Delirium of Praise: Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Leed, Eric J. *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*. (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. Ian Cunnison. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967).

Schrift, Alan D.(ed.). *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The following books were references for the food theme:

Counihan, Carole and Penny Van Esterik (eds.). *Food and Culture: a Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Farb, Peter and George Armelagos. *Consuming Passions; the Anthropology of Eating*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1980).

Visser, Margaret. *Much Depends on Dinner: the Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allur and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos, of an Ordinary Meal*. (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1986).

Visser, Margaret. *The Rituals of Dinner: the Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Visser, Margaret. *Much Depends on Dinner: the Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allur and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos, of an Ordinary Meal*. (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> This could be the subject of a complementary paper on the structure of an architectural curriculum: creating a balance between the development of the student's individual imagination and design style, and the ability to work in an intellectually and creatively hospitable fashion, relinquishing individual authorship and the notion of "my project."

<sup>8</sup> Taher Ben Jelloun, *French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants*. Trans. Barbara Bray. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Sadly grades are a necessary evil. However, having gone through a pass/fail/honors system myself, I feel it is by far the preferred grading system for a field such as architecture.

<sup>10</sup> Eleanor Kaufman, *The Delirium of Praise: Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 130, 141.