

DENIS WOOD in

# pol emics

1981-1982

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## A Note

During the summer of 1981 Vernon Shogren talked with me and Paul Tesar about the creation of a School forum for the articulation of thought and opinion--in a word, polemic--about issues of moment in the School. In retrospect it turns out to have been one of those good ideas that comes too late. Though none of us knew it, debate had already been foreclosed on the School's future. It was from that time forward to turn its back on the interdisciplinary plurality of the 1970's to embrace the reconstruction of a 1950's sensibility, tight-assed little departments jealously protecting their miniscule turfs from raids only their paranoia could ever imagine; a full range of grades with +'s and -'s; teachers--excuse me--faculty members (there is a difference) with grade books filled with long columns of check marks in them; a return to rigor (mortis as Vernon often observed) and professionalism (or at least great drawings at whatever cost to the content); in a word, the present.

We had thought that maybe we could forestall this present by fostering debate about what it was we thought we were all up to, architecture, design, teaching, the whole kit-and-caboodle. But nobody cared to respond. What we ended up doing was writing to a largely terrified and unresponsive audience of fellow faculty and students. During the first semester we didn't sign what we wrote in the hope that this would enable readers to focus on the issues instead of the personalities. Instead of which they decided they needn't attend at all, or only to the extent of guessing who wrote what. So during the second semester we signed them. Now people said, "Oh, I read your piece," but little else. Following the first year the venture was turned over to the students whom we had always intended to involve, but who had shied away. POLEMICS continues to be published by the students, but its seriousness and role diminish with each successive issue. Tant pis.

Still, I frequently get requests for a series I wrote during the second semester on, as everybody says, dishes washing. That that's not what they're about is obvious to anyone who's read them, but whatever they're about, pulling together a selection of old POLEMICS has become increasingly difficult. Almost impossible. Old issues are hard to come by. So I thought I would pull together all the things I wrote for POLEMICS, signed and unsigned. Because most people ask for the dishes washing pieces I have put these first; but the fact is that those that begin with "Outstanding Teacher of the Year" (on page 25) were actually written in the Fall of '81; while those that begin with "Thoughts of a Dishes Washer" (on page 1) were written in the Spring of '82.

And, uh, it's never too late to start talking...

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## THOUGHTS OF A DISHES WASHER

I am standing here with my arms up to the elbows in dirty water wondering what it is about washing dishes. I figure on the average and taken all together every man, woman and child in the United States must wash dishes once a day. If we died at this rate we'd all be dead, so it's obvious that washing dishes is a lot more common than dying...but for some reason it's not something people want to talk about. They'd rather talk about dying. I checked it out once: in the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, for example, there were over five hundred entries under dying and hundreds more under death, but only one under dishwashing. This has always struck me as kind of sad, for a man dies but once, but enroute he does a lot of dishes...unless he's rich or powerful enough to get others to do them for him. For it may be true that a man has to die for himself, but he can always get someone else to wash his dishes.

For a lot of people this is the only distinction between washing dishes and dying, believing as they do that dishwashing is the closest man can come to death and still draw breath. I have never believed it, but isn't it cant that a soldier would rather die than face KP? And isn't it the brunt of the cartoons that a man would sooner go to jail than pay for his supper washing dishes? John Cage used to tell a story about washing dishes for the Blue Bird Tea Room in Carmel, about how the owner and her daughter got up and left a concert hall when they found their dishwasher taking the seat next to theirs. There is nothing more demeaning than washing dishes, and nothing lower than a dishes washer.

Children learn this early. Adults have never been known for giving up their pleasures, and dishwashing is one of the first tossed to the kids. More malignly it is used as punishment, and relief from it as a promise.



That entry in the Oxford dictionary goes:

Curly Locks, Curly Locks  
Wilt thou be mine?  
Thou shalt not wash dishes  
Nor yet feed the swine.  
But sit on a cushion  
And sew a fine seam,  
And feed upon strawberries,  
Sugar and cream.

But how those dishes pile up! And unless Curly Locks is expected to suckle at the udder in a field of strawberries, somebody's got to get to them, got to be sinking those arms into hot soapy water, scraping those scraps into the garbage, digging out those coffee grounds, maneuvering those roasting pans and platters, scouring those pots, getting the egg from between the tynes, getting the milk rings from the bottoms of the glasses, getting the lipstick from lips of the cups, rubbing and dipping and scrubbing and rinsing, the water splashing, the clothes getting wet, the water along the edge of the sink, the sweat dripping from the nose to mingle with the suds, the suds dying and the water cooling, the scum on the dishpan, the broken crystal, the blood running in the water, the rust on the carbon steel, the crumbs on the bread knife, the stains in the sink, the three, four, five-times-a-day of it, the every dayness, the unendingly more-tomorrow, more-next-week, more-until-I-die forever purgatory of it, the getting-nowhere-farther-than-yesterday, than-last-week, than-last-year of it, the marking-time mythic ongoingness of it, for it is this that is loathed, that nothing is done that will not be undone, that the rock will roll down again, that there is no top, no end, no thing, no product, no enduring achievement, no monument, no vistas from Dishes Doneness except the view of dishes to be done stretching on forever like life itself, yes, for it is life itself, the most obvious expression of life, unceasing, forever repeating, little changing, clean to dirty and dirty to clean, going on, demanding, remorseless, unpitying, uncaring, unsentimental,

ongoing, now. Dishwashing is now. Dishwashing is.

And the pain lies here, that this nowness is so unequivocally obvious. You may want to say that next year my time will come, or in ten years, or in twenty, that I was not put here for nothing, that I am made for greatness, for becoming some definable, limitable, palpable end, for some conclusion, for some climax that will wrap up this petty saga with a rousing finale and make them sit up and take notice--...but do not think these things with your hand around a sudsy glass or it will slip from your unfeeling fingers and then, incisively, cleanly, simply, purely beyond enduring, you will see not twenty years from now, but tomorrow and you will know that you will once again, still, forever be doing dishes. And though inside the truth may be moving, saying "It's not the dishes--this is it, this is life, this is it. It's now. This is the finale, the end, the conclusion, the greatness, the whole thing, right here, dishes, life, now--" you flee, call the dishes nasty names, get others to do them, disparage the act, eat out, buy paper plates, a dishwasher, get servants, have kids--anything, anything to keep from doing the dishes, to keep from facing the ongoing, the nowhere-goingness of being, of living, of inhaling, of exhaling, of eating, of shitting, of getting up, of going to bed, of getting dressed, of getting undressed, of setting the clock, of shutting off the alarm, of another Christmas of getting the tree and getting rid of the tree, of getting the ornaments out and putting the ornaments away, another New Year's, another class, another teacher, again and again and again, over and over, the sun rising and the sun setting, the seasons passing in their turn, again and again, spring and summer and fall and winter, this year like the one before, this year like the one to follow, over and over, the seed bursting, the plant growing, the scythe falling, the harvest coming in, never for the last time, never over that final hump, never done, but this

time just one more time looking forward to the next time, that job done, this to do, again and again, for life is not a pile of bones in an expensive coffin but a doing, and its sign is doing, and its only monument is doing...

This realization comes to every one many times, tonight as for the ten thousandth time he puts his leg into his pajama bottoms and sees what he is doing, tomorrow morning as for the ten thousandth time she turns the tap on the shower and sees what she is doing, each in his own way, and for some what they see is reassuring and they accept the way of the world at face value, inhaling and exhaling, but others are petrified and turn their faces away and these deny and trivialize what they have seen or aggrandize and worship it and each is as neurotic as the other.

Design, design with a capital D, as practiced in the offices and taught in the schools and paraded through the history books and the coffee-table glossies, is the business of those who have turned away from the world as it is, who have rejected the world of washing dishes and taking a bath, who have thrown over the mundane, ordinary, quotidien, recurrent, cyclic banality of life for some implausible vision of a more desirable alternative. Most of these simply deny that all this has anything to do with life: rather than deal with eating and drinking and shitting and peeing, with breathing in and breathing out, with living, they would deal with stasis, finality, accomplishment, with being finished, with being done, with getting things settled so we can see where we stand, with dying--with being dead. These designers are terrified of the ongoingness of life, balk before its unsentimental remorselessness. "What's the point?" they ask...but then, before they have a chance to hear the response, they rush to make a thing, and force it to stand as answer to their question. Autonomous, dead, out of it, such things stand aside from life, finished, complete, not breathing--

funerary monuments for the graves of the spirits of their creators.

Others, equally unwilling to endure the unpitying relentlessness of the metabolic process and the stolid turning of the stars, rush off in the other direction, aggrandizing the grinding of the wheels in sentimental celebration, making sacred the profane and worshipping every mark of recurrence, as afraid of the stopping of the turning as those who deny the turning fear its going on. These realize there is no point and have opted for a party. There will be colorful vendors and striped awnings and little old balloon men whistling near and far and ceremony and fountains and the bubbling noise of well-dressed children and a plastic sense of place and lots and lots of fun. And in American cities on every side dour people emerge from their work into the shadows of the funerary monuments to rush off down the street to the festive Rouselands to eat crepes and drink white wine and talk of foreign films.

But as the sun sets on the gleaming towers of mid-Manhattan, and smiles on the happy commerce of the Inner Harbor, there are some casting long shadows on the fields they're tilling. Husbandmen may construct silos, but they don't confuse the building with the silage; they may celebrate, but they don't confuse the party with the harvest. Sleeping is for them not an end and a reward for another day survived but an interim among interims. Without beginning or end, and with full participation as the world turns, life for the husbandman goes on, unpausing, in recurrent motion, neither giving nor taking but exchanging, neither demanding nor acquiescing but growing; husbandmen are tillers of the soil, but they are also any who cultivate, any who economize any who eke, any who conserve, any who save, any who store, any who live in touch with the world, who are in love with it. Cultivators, they are responsible for both crops and tillage; conservative, they have nothing to waste; participant, they are neither threatened nor threaten;

economical, they do not squander; accepting, they neither worship nor disparage the way of the world. There is no profit in kissing the earth, nor in kicking it.

There is profit only in acceptance. This is the way things are. The rest is illusion and false hope. There has always been a husbandly design and there always will be. Ways of being that husband their resources, that employ what's available instead of what's desired, that participate in their surrounding, negotiating instead of imposing, that conserve their traditions, that accept their responsibilities for appropriate functioning not just now but continuously, that are aware of their impact on the world--these ways are the ways. Except in the offices and the schools. These are organized instead to turn out things, hair dryers, buildings, students, it doesn't matter much what. Extravagant. Irresponsible. Wasteful. Inappropriate.

But accommodation does not mean construction; and education does not mean filling up students like empty bottles topped off at graduation; and research does not mean asking large numbers of stupid questions. What we must have--what we will have!--is a design that is research and education, an education that is research and design in action, a research that embraces education and design in a whole husbandly sense of reciprocal responsibility, unbounded, unafraid, unprofessional, unprotected, open, honest and committed to the mundane, ordinary on-goingness of life!

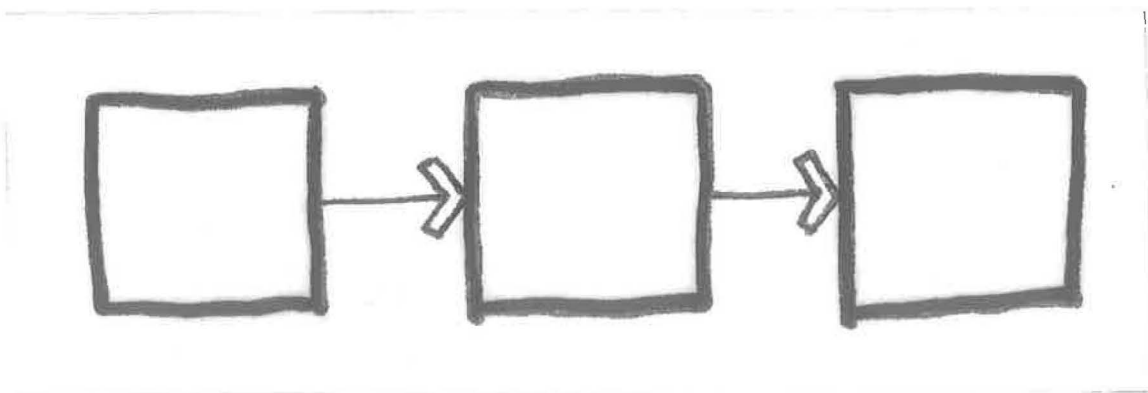
Conveniently, I conclude my hortation with the dishes. "I want a design that acknowledges dishes washing", I whisper, "not as an after thought, but as a raison d'etre." Drying my hands, I realize I've been shouting at the dishes. No sane person shouts at the pots and pans...mad!

Yes, mad with life!

## AFTER THE DISHES

Well, they get done, of course....sooner or later. Sooner or later all the dishes get done. Even the dishes of the dead get done, by somebody, sometime. Unless they're buried with their owner, or broken. Perhaps there is some ghost town in the arid West where particles of food still cling to dirty dishes, or some Pompeii waiting still to be uncovered where people fled from their overflowing sinks, but most of the dishes get done. Get done again and again. Mine are. For tonight. I've done "knee stuff" with the kids and kissed them goodnight and showered and shaved and now I'm in bed with Ingrid and a book, not a book I'd choose to be in bed with Ingrid with, but I've promised to review it for one of the good gray journals desperate to fill their pages and --...Well, I can scarcely believe it: I'm just flipping through the book getting a first feel for it when it leaps right off the page. The Diagram, The Diagram that I imagined had completely vanished from the scene. For a second I'm convinced they've sent me the wrong book--The Diagram went out of date years' ago--but no, this is it. Maybe it's an example of what not to do. I'll read the book and see, but for now I'm stunned, just staring at the Diagram.

Everyone has seen The Diagram. Most of you have probably drawn it, once, twice, a thousand times. Like ravioli it doesn't really matter what you stuff it with, for it is the heavy squares and designer arrows that are important.



As long as the filling is sufficiently abstract and meaningless, any will do. Analysis, Synthesis and Design were former favorites, but the one I am staring at right now is stuffed with Problem, Behavioral Issues, Design Marketing Issues, Analysis, Program, Design Marketing Strategies, Design Schematics and Schematic Selection. I cannot believe it means anything to anybody, but I am usually wrong about this and am always finding people who take these things seriously. I can imagine that earlier this very day someone said to someone else that, "That's very interesting, but we're in the Behavioral Issues Phase now, and that's a Design Marketing Strategies problem." I'm glad I wasn't there. But this only reminds me of the times I have been there, of the time my bosses at The Cleveland-Seven Counties Transportation and Landuse Study kept me from attempting a project because they couldn't fit it onto their CPM-PERT diagram, and of the times here in school when students have been frustrated in studios in which they were collecting "data" so far in advance of the thought of a design they never understood what they were collecting "data" for, and I start feeling bad just remembering.

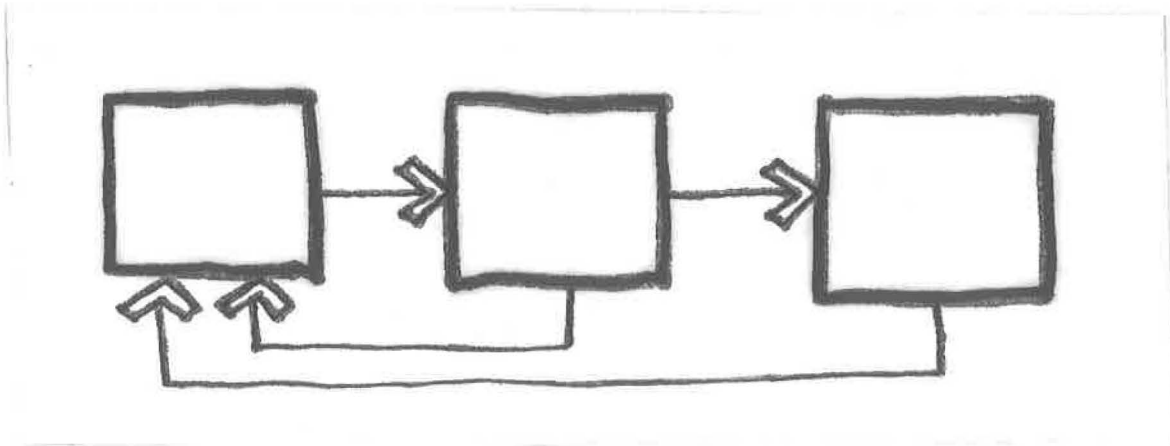
Right off, the pretension of The diagram has always gotten me, the unwarranted implications of assurance and reality implied by those heavy boundaries around the meaningless words, the nifty arrows that somehow distract attention from the content of The Diagram by drawing attention to its form, from the lack of meaning of the words, to the inherent meaning of the drawing. The Diagram is a thing masquerading as an idea, an end itself, not a model for something else, and like the drawings of Michael Graves, the merest pretense. As is the very idea that any natural process can be chunked up into discontinuous little boxes, Feeling discrete from Thought, Problem discrete from Design. Sometimes I think that it is the distance from one side of The Diagram to the other that convinces designers they've gone somewhere when the client requests

a playground and they deliver a playground, a playground at one end called The Problem and at the other end The Design. I know it infuriates me that the boxes usually shy short of Build, as though the purpose of the whole thing were to fill pieces of paper with lines instead of doing something useful in the world. Conceptual Art is vacuous enough, but Conceptual Design is a contradiction in terms! So why not a box labeled Build? Actually the answer is eerily simple and doesn't have to involve the reknowned disdain of designers for artisans, of professionals for laborers, or fee-for-service honchos for hourly wage-earners--though this is difficult to overlook--, but if there were a box for Build, why...someone would think of a box for Use next, and pretty soon there'd be a box for Modify and perhaps even Destroy and the first thing you know not only is the designer's work lost amid the rubble of living but, dammit!, we're back in the real world again, that ongoing, unrelenting, remorseless, ordinary, processural world of the dishes washer and the house cleaner and the snow shoveler and the husbandman. And the whole point was to beat this unpitying world back with a stick, with a thing, with a monument. Some designers have been rather candid about this and I admire them in a crazy way for their assumed self-consciousness and purity like I admire virgins and madmen. Everybody knows, for instance, that the window shades on Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building will stop only all the way up or all the way down or exactly halfway inbetween. That this is a foreclosure, not an opening, of possibilities is pretty obvious, but that this is what death, not life, is all about is something fewer people care to notice.

But a lot of people noticed this about The Diagram, the way it shut down the very opportunities it was supposed to be promoting, the way it precluded movement, for example backwards; and suggested there was only one way to go and that was straight ahead, first this THEN that THEN another, that there



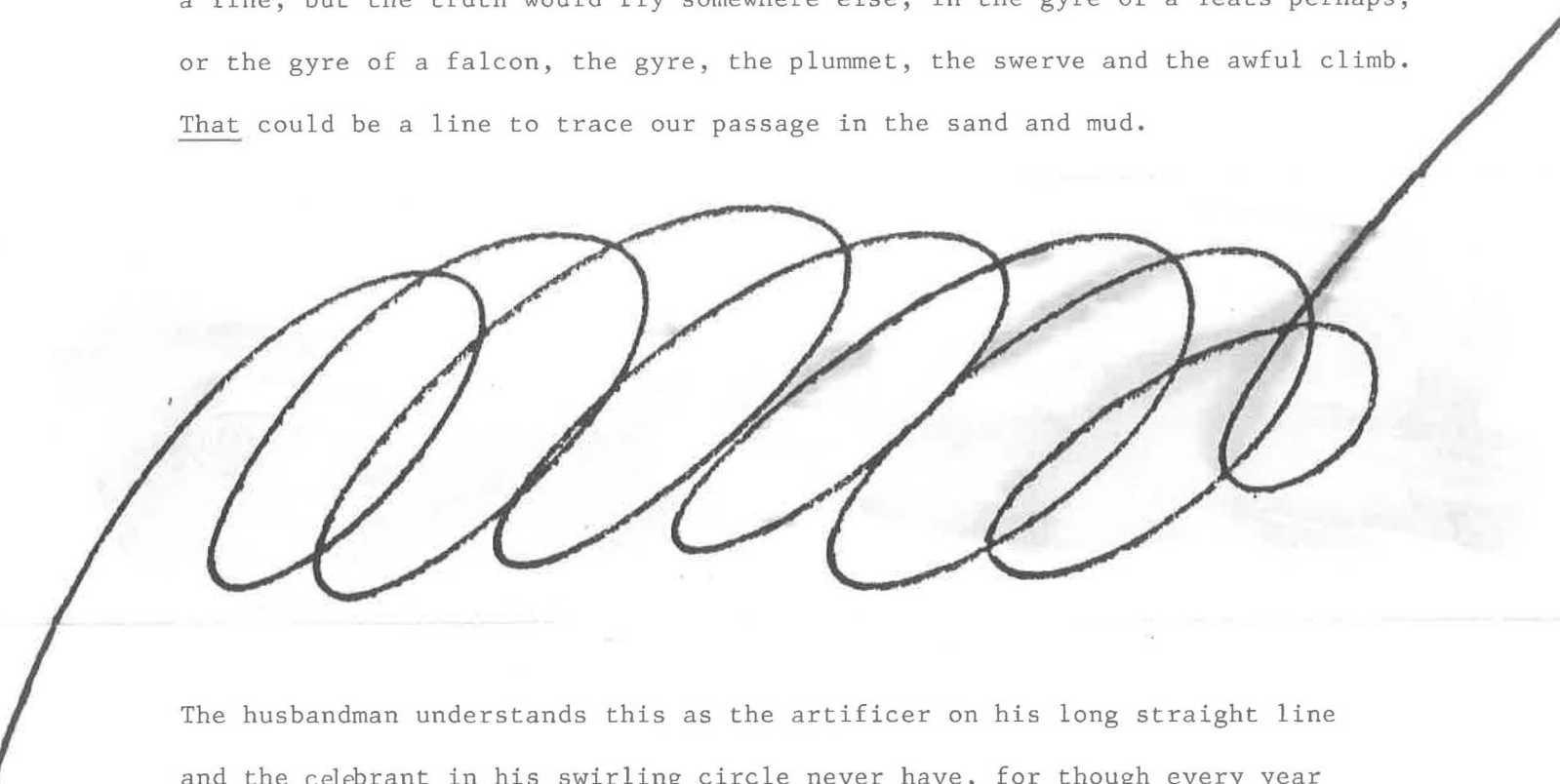
was no heading back along those one-way arrows...And what if you needed to go back, what if new questions arose before the current phase were completed or that required new "data" collection, further "analysis," a new "synthesis"? Sorry. Too late. We're in the Design Phase now. FORWARD! FORE! As if design were some insane golf game with the designer whacking his design through the hazards of possibility with his bag full of methods, woods, irons, and wedges. Even the dunderheads could see how hopeless this was so they added a bunch of lines to The Diagram and turned it into The Loop. The Loop is still The Diagram, though now you are permitted--if not exactly encouraged, for movement backwards is still messy and suggests you didn't do the job right the first time through--to retreat as needed.



These movements against the grain are usually referred to as iterations. An Iteration is nothing but a repetition, but repetition sounds...well, too much like repeating a grade, while Iteration reeks of computers and numbers and the rigor and security of Quantitative Methods. Since The Loop itself is nothing but the First Iteration of the Diagram, it is often referred to as Second Generation. Many people refer to either, or both, as The Design Process...well, they bear about as much relation to processes as a granite tombstone bears to the geologic workings of the earth, but if one of them

irritates me more than the other it is The Loop, for The Loop pretends to have overcome the shortcomings of The Diagram when all it has accomplished is its endless repetition, as in Swift's mad dance, the nose of the first up the skirts of the last, the same flatus moving through the circle forever, as if the endless repetition of failure guaranteed success. The Loop not only embodies all the lies of The Diagram, but adds one of its own, the closed circle, as monumental, as terminal, as deadly as the other, for there is no perfect repetition, no genuine iteration, no real doing again, for every doing becomes the grounds for its redoing and so changes--irrevocably--the grounds and conditions for doing it again. Brian Wilson might want to get back together and do it again, but the poignancy and pain in the song blooms from his awareness that the bushy, bushy blond hairdos and suntanned bodies will never mean the same thing to the fat fortyish millionaire genius that they might have to the teenage surfer boy. There is no repetition, no closing of the circle, no recurrence, no reliving, no living again...only echoes, faint and distorted and fading fast. When I wash the dishes tomorrow night it will not be as tonight, but something different, different food on different dishes, different pans in different conditions, from one night to the next perhaps only the slightest differences, but over time increasing from the barely discernible to the blatantly obvious, from one week to the next, from season to season, as I change and my dishes change and my dishes washing changes and my circumstances change and my environment changes and I but one washer in a stream of washers in a vaster process and time of eating that once did not include dishes and their washing and may not once again. Like the line the circle also is a lie, and the truth is there is no simple sign to solace the weary. I could draw a spiral and call it life, a curve moving toward closure, but just off enough that no point of the line lay on another, which

up close would look a lot like a circle and from a great distance a lot like a line, but the truth would fly somewhere else, in the gyre of a Yeats perhaps, or the gyre of a falcon, the gyre, the plummet, the swerve and the awful climb. That could be a line to trace our passage in the sand and mud.



The husbandman understands this as the artificer on his long straight line and the celebrant in his swirling circle never have, for though every year he sows and reaps, he sows and reaps never any year the same, for every year is different, he is different, the weather is different, the soil is different, the bugs are different, the markets are different, and to sow and reap at all he is himself constantly alert, constantly learning, constantly risking, constantly alive. For the husbandman, education and work and research are one syncretic whole, each creating the other's possibility. But though the world is seamless, the designer sees another than the husbandman, and where the husbandman finds shifting sand, the designer finds firm ground, stone hard facts, infallible methods, eternal verities and simple, simple ends. Unlike the husbandman who wonders what each day will bring--and peels an eye and sets up research institutes and even runs his enterprise experimentally--the designer somehow knows. He has his vision. He has his genius. He has his ample store of slaty facts. Education's for the young, research for the

leisured---...heavy lines around little boxes strung out on classy arrows.

It need not be this way: design is not so very different from husbandry and the world is the same in either case. Others have had these thoughts. Landscape architects are known to speak of stewardship and that is one with husbandry and even architects make obeisance to the seamless whole with "reuse", adaptive or otherwise, and post-construction evaluation. But can't you see it, the endless possibilities? Each design conceived, not as an end, but as one of the many steps en route to an unknown goal? What if we admitted--right out--that we knew not where we were going, that like everyone else we were on a quest for something we couldn't name? That we didn't know the answers, but were looking for them? What if we thought about design as an experiment, not as the results of years of tedious research, but as the research itself, each design, each thing--each park or house or record jacket--as an hypothesis in an ever-running experiment, the next hypothesis--the next thing--cantilevered off the results of the evaluation of the last, the whole moving, like science for God's sake, from hypothesis to hypothesis, the things byproducts, almost, of this exciting quest, this exciting search, not frozen things made out of last year's out-dated "information", but gambles in the dark of a summer's night, like science? like love! in either of which the failures are as vital as the successes and hard to tell apart, for the important thing is not the success or failure, but the learning, the growing, the thinking, the working, the staying alive... What if we thought about design like that? What if we stopped thinking about research as something different from design, and imagined them as the same damn thing? What if we stopped thinking about education as something different from research and accepted the reality of their identity?

But I came to with a start. Dreaming. I closed my silly book with its pointless diagrams and turned off the light. Dreaming...

Obviously!

#### GUESTS

They have gone and I have come--we have come--back to the kitchen and the dishes. The dishes never depart with the guests but wait to welcome you home from the leave-taking at the door. Conclusion. Continuity. Ingrid starts to put away the food that's left. Emptying the pots is the beginning of dishes washing, and when she is finished with them, I give each a quick once-over, or put it to soak near the end of the counter. We talk as we work, sometimes about the meal, sometimes about the company. I get things arranged, crystal to my right, then the china, the silver over there, the serving dishes, the sharp knives off beside the soaking pots. I like to work from the small and delicate to the big and the unbreakable. Much of this I have already done. When we have company I try to scrape and rinse and sort and stack in the middle of things, while clearing, just before sitting down to the meal itself, between the salad and the dessert, while making the second pot of coffee-- there are so many dishes! Where usually there are plates and glasses and silver for four, with company there are the dishes and the glasses for the eating and the drinking before the meal, and the soup plates and the bread plates and the salad plates and the dinner plates and the glasses for the meal itself, and the plates and the bowls and the cups and the saucers for whatever follows, and the serving dishes and the pots and the pans, and for six or eight instead of four, and it all won't fit on the counter at once, or in the dishpan, or the drying rack, and Ingrid has to dry while I wash, and put away. Sweat gathers beneath my eyes and my glasses

start to slide down my nose. With my shoulder I nudge them back--my sudsy hands would only smudge them. For a second they fit, snug behind my ears... then they start to slip. I pull a plate from the sudsy water, scrub it, immerse it once again and stack it in the second sink. When I rinse it, the water runs off clean and the plate is nearly dry when I place it in the rack.

In and out of the suds and the water, drying in the rack and sparkling in Ingrid's hands, the china and the crystal, the silver and the steel, the wood and the aluminum are beautiful. Like fat moons tonight Ingrid's mother's plates had ridden their sky of cloth and the candlelight had danced like stars on the silver, and now again in our hands the celestial ballet takes place. As she dries I can see through the creamy porcelian her fingers like uncast shadows and hear in the silver shifting in the folds of the linen the sound of horses' hooves on cobblestones through a morning fog, and there is no rush to finish the dishes and a pleasure in that fact and it takes as long to do them as it takes...

Unlike school.

Standing here with the dirty dishes to my right and the clean dishes to my left, I am struck for the first time by the dissimilarities between washing dishes and teaching school. At first these seem obvious: washing dishes is brutish labor, teaching school a humane science, but it becomes clear after very little thinking that this is backwards, that it's the other way around, that it's teaching that is brutish, the dishes washing that is humane. Dishes washing, at least, responds to the dishes, takes their uniquenesses into account, takes longer or less long as they are finer or less fine or as there are more of fewer of them. I will towel the blades of carbon steel, but let those of stainless steel dry by themselves; I will not scour the Calphalon, but I will take a Brillo pad to the Wear-Ever; tonight it will take us two hours to do the dishes, but last night it took me thirty

minutes. Schools are less responsive, less considerate of students, and of faculty. Year after year for as long as I teach I shall teach in semesters, each of fifteen weeks. Semester after semester I shall hold forty-one or forty-two fifty-five minute classes. Week after week I shall meet them on Monday and Wednesday and Friday. Day after day I shall start at ten and end at ten-fifty--or whenever the person who wants the room after me kicks me out. Hour after hour I shall start--wherever I am--and end--wherever I might find myself, my continuous life arbitrarily cut into so many chunks of such-and-such a size, like cheap sandwich meats slapped between slabs of pre-sliced bread...I had a teacher once who couldn't handle it--I had a lot of them actually, but he was the worst--, who couldn't to save his job figure out how to fill a semester. He would start off fine and for the first few weeks it would feel like any other "well organized" course, but it would become apparent gradually that he was floundering, that he'd already said everything he had to say about the subject of the course, that he was thrashing about for a way to fill the tedious string of days stretching ahead of him, the very image of empty days, screaming to be filled if only like those of prisoners, by the make-work of pressing license plates or the nullity of crossword puzzles. Then lurchingly he'd find his feet again and he'd be off, perhaps down roads not suggested by the course description, but somewhere anyhow and running hard, but soon again, the floundering, the thrashing, the stuttering attempts at stringing sentences together into sequences. People said he couldn't teach, but what they meant was that he couldn't figure out how to assemble the many useful things he had to say into packages of fifteen weeks, that he was stifled by the suffocating structure of the school, that he didn't breathe in fifteen week breaths. Like those other teachers I had who had too much to say, for whom every semester was far too short,

and who tried to make up for it by cramming into every period more facts and figures and frameworks than even a year could really hold, or a lifetime. And it's not just the time slots, but the entire edifice of course structures and grading mechanisms and curricula and departments and degrees and ideas of professional competence...

Gramming, stretching, crushing, thinning, they are the stultifying games that must result from every attempt to squeeze into uniform schemes the wild variability of the world, the inevitable consequences of courses--the very word is a giveaway--conceived of as things, as packages, as artifacts, as most buildings and products are conceived, every sense of individuality forgone in the rush to conformity, every possibility of responding responsibly to life's ever-changing demands sacrificed to the bureaucratic necessities of record-keeping, transcript interpreting, and long-range forward planning.

So pervasive, so dominant, is this model that students themselves come to be conceived of as nothing but products, as nothing but numbers of FTEs and number of graduates, so many units churned out, as nothing but things, things to be mass produced in the school-factories on the conveyor belts of courses, to be mass produced and after graduation to be mass consumed, if the demand stays strong, so many units of architect or visual designer or landscape architect gobbled up by the design-factories, in which they will produce things in turn as they themselves were produced. The brave new world is not coming--it has been here for years, for where buildings are understood as nothing but piles of bricks arranged in particular ways, it is necessary that students be understood as nothing but numbers of courses taken in particular sequences. We are all things thingifying each other, perhaps not intentionally, perhaps not because we want to, but willy nilly, like machines run AMOK destroying in their frenzy the very sources of their energy.



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The 1982 SODesigner. Knocking at your door now...

But Ingrid is knocking at my door now, actually, moving her hand up and down in front of what must be my glazed eyeballs.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks with her eyes as she hangs up the towels.

"I was thinking about how stupid it would have been for us to have tried to do tonight's dishes as rapidly as I did last night's dishes," I say as I recommence scrubbing out the sink, "and I was thinking about something Haggerstrand once said, about how because students are graduated only annually in regions in which job opportunities are spread more evenly throughout the year, many are driven to migrate to large cities outside the region."

"It makes you wonder how many people might have ended up in New York just because schools everywhere get out in May," Ingrid says.

"It would be like eating every day," I say, struck by the already empty dishrack, "but doing the dishes only once a year."

"What a repulsive thought!"

"Yeah, it surely is." And as we cut off the lights and head upstairs it occurs to me that it would mean rethinking schools from top to bottom and inside out to make them more like washing dishes, but also, that it might be something worth doing...for a change!

#### LOVE AND HATE

From a distance I can forgive them anything. Coming in from Jersey, dropping like a hawk on the Verrazano, we sail smoothly above the docks of Brooklyn. The sun is reddening; the day has twenty minutes left. Reaching across Manhattan, stretching across the East River, the towers of the World Trade Center lap Long Island like an airy surf. "Will you look at that!" the voice of the insurance salesman from Des Moines in the seat behind me whispers, and if I turn in my seat I can see his face pressed against the window. City of spires Whitman called it, what? a hundred years ago? singing of the "high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies." This afternoon midtown is a forest of tremendous trees, the sun on its windows like light on wet leaves; but I have seen it in the evening with its lights coming on yellow when it has been a jumble of gems, a thicket of tourmaline and topaz floating on a haze of gray; and I have seen it on sunny days of cloudless blue enamel when it has been a bewilderment of mirrors, hard-edged and clean, as certain and sure as facts for five year olds, and as undeniable as breathing; and I have seen it in the morning blooming in the rising sun like rose quartz crystals in some unimaginable beginning, vital, fresh, clarion, and full of promise; and confronted now with this view these memories fuse and in spite of myself I feel like laughing and crying for the crazy wonder of it, for the sheer gratuitous insanity of it, for the delirious

exuberance of it, like I feel at the climax of a great chorale, the singing roaring even in my toes; or like I feel when I see into someone's heart for the first time and I find it is not cramped or narrow and am enlarged; or like I feel on a hill to whose top I have just raced, panting and amazed at the world, overflowing myself, big, full rich--that's how I feel now gazing at the towers of midtown Manhattan on this late afternoon, devoid of doubt of any kind that I am looking at one of the things in this world worth looking at, at the greatest sculpture ever made by man, of a size, of a magnitude, not only inconceivable a hundred years ago, but inconceivable to most men even today, a sculpture not architectural in scale, or civic, or even urban, but wholly regional, expansive, extravagant, unbelievably bountiful, the wonder of wonders, the attraction of attractions, the certain cynosure of the whole world's eyes; and there is sharp pride that it is in some way mine, that I am of this incredible time and place, and that I will be tomorrow in and among those towers, of them, really. We wheel east, away from the river. The avenues--not yet dark--are veiled, except where slashed by the molten streets flowing with the dying sun west to east across the island. We continue our turn. The view is lost. All that remains is the interminable vista of the countless homes that made the vision possible.

Lost, lost and forgotten, for though to forget the towers in this guise, to fail to see in the office hives this every-evening miracle, to ignore the aspiring in the spire, to fail to respond to the energy sparkling in the splintered sunlight scattered down the side-streets, to close your ears to the sound of jackhammers digging deeper holes for taller buildings, to refuse to see the culture in the sculpture, is not to see them at all, or to see them solely through a scrim of sense-deadening ideas, to willfully and stupidly choose not to see what Stieglitz saw, and Sheeler, and Sloan and Stella, to decline to hear what Ives heard, and Varese, to insist on not knowing what the airplane

pilot feels who feels constrained to tell his passengers, "It's quite a sight, isn't it?"--...still, the buildings themselves make it hard to remember, kill every effort to recall that vision of boundless enthusiasm, for within them it is easy to forget what they're like without, it's easy to forget everything, and from in close I can forgive them nothing.

To even enter them is to die a little. It is the smell that gets you first, or that collection of impressions we call a smell, just within the door, that smell of entombment, entrapment, of perpetual care, or refrigeration or slow cooking, of stressed ventilation and flammable materials. It is the smell of falseness, of fakery, of gimcrack and lies. Somewhere in the acres of marble veneer a sheet is always chipped; and among the brass and bronze of the sleek door frames there is the broken mechanism of the one that always fails to open. Skyscrapers we call them in our arrogance, but the vaunting bravado stops at the door, denied by the obsequious guards in their watchman's uniforms, at their security desks, behind their banks of television monitors. The lobbies of the best of our buildings are pallid imitations of the worst excrescences of decaying palaces. Perhaps they once made sense, but the king is dead. Still, in the cramped elevators it is courtiers' talk, rehearsals of the latest bons mots of the CEO, talk of profit and return on investment. Even rising toward heaven we can speak only of the money we will never take with us. Daily the poverty of an architecture of democracy is acknowledged. Outside the bright sunshine is careening madly from mirrored facade to mirrored facade, but within it is banished and night and day it is the same, the same cool daylight, a little on the blue side, a little on the cool side, a little on the humming side, that humming of the transformers that becomes a part of us, like the noise of the blood running through our veins or the very sound of our nervous system. Here beyond the banks of elevators stretches the floor,

row after row of desk after desk, or the "office landscape" in which each desk is tucked behind a Herman Miller partition bright with a fabric by Alex Girard, the tasteful carpet--vacuumed last night by the faithful poor--smelling of Orlon or Rayon or Nylon or Some-lon, the quiet buzz of the phone, those voices ("Mr. Kramer's desk..."), the distant "dong" of the elevator, the efficient chattering of the latest word processor, the rows of cubicles, the tiny rooms along the outer walls, the uncountable number of prints of paintings by Maurice Utrillo or Robert Woods: outside is the world, in here it is under glass. Perhaps monuments to capital must be prisons for labor, as monuments to militarism are tombs for the dead, but one would as soon be a side of beef in a packing house freezer as a senior vice president in a Manhattan office tower.

Or for that matter a student in the Addition to the School of Design. The pathology confusing art and architecture, monument and workplace, sculpture and dwelling, is no less rampant here than in Manhattan--though there the sculpture is more flamboyantly spectacular, the prisons more dour--and the Addition provides as terrifying an example as any of the futility of trying to work or live inside a thing conceived as a work of art. One may see the world any way he chooses and it is as easy to find the face of beauty in the Addition's facade as among the spires of Manhattan, but exactly as in the latter case, it too is best appreciated from afar, especially at this time of year when it is really uncomfortable inside, stuffy everywhere and too hot, especially along the windows, especially upstairs where--when was it? last year? a student heaved a stool through a window in desperation and this year already quiet students plot the ways to create within this Cubist palisade of brick some sense of living air. From a distance it is possible to admire the play of sunlight on the richly textured brick, to find a fascination in the

"dialogue" between the mechanical stack and the building proper, to delight in the mirror of metaphor the Addition holds up to Brooks; and unless you've tried to work here, even the interior is not without its charms--especially for parents, provosts and other passers-through--, for it is not immediately obvious how stupid is a carpet in a craft shop; or how stifling to every sense the cupboards allowed to pass as rooms for seminars; or how hard it is on neck and shoulders to watch slides in what we call an auditorium; or how difficult it is to work at night in the poorly lighted studios. How did this building come into being, here of all places? Why do we tolerate it, this kind of outrage, anywhere? For in the end the sculpture is not worth it, the sun can make anything beautiful, sparkling among the broken shards of glass at the city dump, but we do not live there, or try to read or work or even think, we throw our bottles and exclaim and blink--and my heart goes out of me even at the dump for it too is beautiful and sad and we made it and it is crazy--but shortly I come home, as I do also from New York, and The School of Design Addition.

How this building came into being and why we put up with this crap, how the office hives of Manhattan came into being and why we're building more of them, are the themes of Tom Wolfe's From Bauhaus To Our House. If the questions have any interest for you, I want you to read it, for if it doesn't have the answers--though I'm sure it has a big part of them--; and if it isn't his best book--though what should that matter unless you've read the rest?--; and if it is also sometimes wrongheaded and marred and strident, still it is a history with a thesis grounded in lived experience as, say, Kenneth Frampton's arid and tedious chronology of irrelevant and questionable minutiae could never hope to be. It is an attempt to matter, to make a difference, though perhaps what most astonished me about the book was when it came out, almost precisely

at the same time as another book with an identical message you also have to read, this one by an architect, this one from within, in some sense, the deepest recesses of the compound, this one asking not why we put up with the crap but telling us we don't have to, that Christopher Alexander, for one, has an out. He's told us this out for a long time, and even though I've wanted to believe he had the answer, until The Linz Cafe I wasn't really sure, for the cafe-- a simple, childish, movingly human building--convinces me as the Oregon experiment did not that there are more than words to the Pattern Language:

I believe that the things and buildings we have come to know as "Modern Architecture", or "Modern Design", represent an absurd and ridiculous--often even immoral--preoccupation with a world of pretense and show, which almost no one believes in, truly, deep in themselves--but which goes on and on, year after year, as designers, architects, artists, and interior designers go on trying to impress one another, and themselves, with their new "conceptions".

I believe that there is a very simple substance to what a building is. I believe, further, that for most of human history, people have understood this substance, and have made their buildings in one version or another of this substance. But we ourselves have chosen, deliberately, to turn our backs on this substance...and even have the frightful arrogance to try and justify our highly artificial attitude by claiming through various transparently false arguments, that "the modern age demands something new" and other ostentatious drivel of this kind--

when suddenly, unbidden, I see New York again, glittering outside my window, and with a rush that sense returns of which I stumble when I try to speak, that wonder at the mad throwing away for the sheer abundance of it, at the profligacy of pretense and show, at the abandon of holler and shout, at the purgative extravagance of braggadocio and rodomontade...How to reconcile this...with that?

Well, New York's not going anywhere. It'll hang around like the pyramids to puzzle and confuse for a long, long time, and I'll get to see it maybe more than I'd wish; and even if I don't, well, I can always

catch that feeling racing up a hill or looking into the brimful beauty of a beating human heart.

#### OUTSTANDING TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Of the many dumb things we do at the School of Design, none is more symptomatic of the general malaise than our selection of the Outstanding Teacher of the Year. There would seem to be a widespread concurrence that such a thing actually exists, and that he or she can be readily identified. The only accepted problem is precisely the manner in which this is to be accomplished without, as everybody says, "getting into politics".

While alarming, this state of affairs is easy to understand. In the first place, epistemology is not popular in the School. It is messy and gets in the way of the simplistic parade of facts that passes here for both education and conversation: this is this, that is that. Period. That one could ask what it means to know anything; or what it means to assert that the sky is blue; or what could be meant by "teacher" or "outstanding" or even, in this context, "year"--well, certainly one could ask such questions, but...not now! We've got work to do now. We've got to work out the "process" for weighting the votes for this year's Outstanding Teacher. It follows, then, in the second place, that politics is not very popular either. Oh, there is lots of character assassination and squabbling for attention and accolade--for strokes--but this is largely whispered and furtive and unclean; or, when public, screechy and vituperative. Calling this politics is like calling gossip literature. When the only contenders are self-evident facts, any contest is forgone. Facts are hard, immutable. No fact can demolish another: one or the other is simply constrained to retire. This is why so many conversations around here conclude with rupture:



"You just can't talk to him," it is said, meaning of course, nothing more than that he was unwilling to abandon willy-nilly his facts for the other guy's.

The appropriate model for such encounters is not politics, but war. War is what takes place in the absence of politics. War is concerned with abandonment and domination. Politics is concerned with growth and change. The situation is altogether different where it is admitted that reality is a social construction and facts nothing more than elements in evolving social conventions. Here no one is forced from the arena, and not only is development (and education and real conversation) made possible, but it even occurs.

Such could be the case with the Outstanding Teacher Award. Instead of passively accepting the idiotic idea, we could first of all attempt to understand if it meant anything to us at all. In the endeavour we would have to confront what we as individuals and as a community meant by "teacher" (and education) and "outstanding" (and the very idea of quality) and "year" (and complex problems of identity and effect and time). Last year an opinion survey was conducted to assess School feelings about the award. But an opinion survey is a collection of "facts", not a confrontation of our constructions of reality; an inquiry of isolated individuals, not the engagement of the political acts of discussion and debate. I would like to see such politics here. I would like to see the articulation of a position in support of the award, and another in support of no award, and as many other positions as may be, not articulated in the privacy of an office or a dorm room, but out in public. Not only would this allow us to involve ourselves in the granting of the award purposefully (as opposed to doing it because the University--which is us after all--says we have to); but it would make

public discussion about just what we think teaching is and how we think about it. Not only would our participation in the granting of the award cease being passive, but our participation in what passes for education in the School would simultaneously cease being passive. We could become political, and thereby take control of our lives. Unless the merit and meaning of the Outstanding Teacher Award is annually digested in the alimentary canal of political activity, it will necessarily sink to the significance of any other unconsidered sterile habit. Such is its status today, and as such it ill repays our most meager expenditures of time and energy.

#### THE CRIT

The crit that punctuates or terminates most studio projects may be functioning much as it always has and always will. Still, it is not functioning well. Whenever a good crit takes place, news of it spreads rapidly, and often a crowd of outsiders ends up hanging around what is clearly a rare but highly valued experience. It may be too much to expect such experiences frequently, but is it inconceivable that their number might be increased? Must most crits remain the deadly boring often brutal and distinctly unedifying spectacles they are? Perhaps the form and role of the crit need to be rethought. Perhaps the focus of the crit should be shifted from the work of the students to the studio itself. Perhaps the studio instructor should be excused from participation. Perhaps the critics should be selected through chance operations. Perhaps outsiders to the School should be encouraged to participate in greater numbers. Perhaps if only a few of the interpersonal dynamics currently fueling a crit were openly acknowledged, it might be possible to regard the crit as in some way related to the students' education. But as it stands, it typically contributes only to their diseducation,

and to their fund of cynicism which, after thirteen or fifteen years of rigorous diseducation, is hardly in need of further contributions.

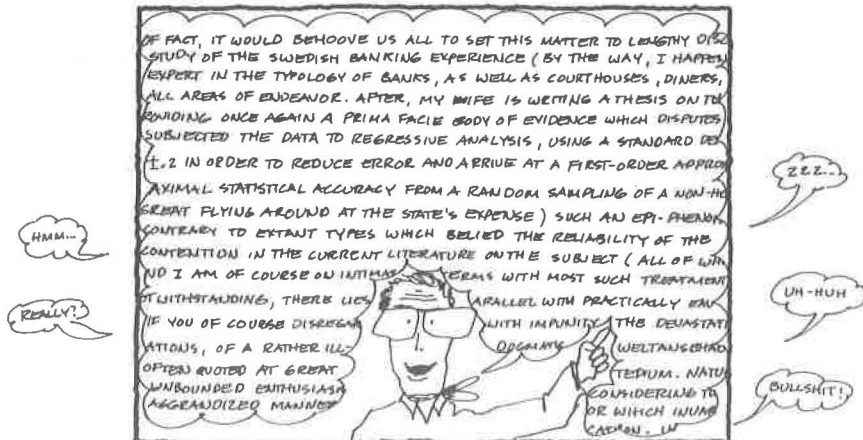
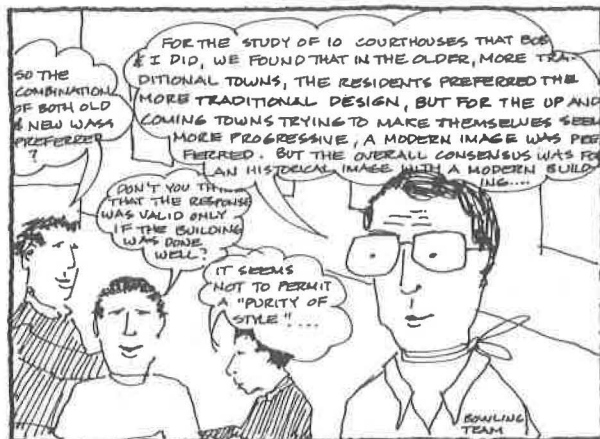
But how could it be otherwise? We pretend the crit is one thing, while we make it something else. For example, everybody pretends it is the students' work that is on review, but it can scarcely escape even the dullest sod that it is the faculty capering and strutting in the front of the room. And are they ever! These are their finest hours, rich with opportunity for withering criticism, cutting witticism and razor-sharp repartee. While most of this is at the students' expense, it is not primarily for their benefit. The faculty is its own best audience and the peacocking--like this sentence--is for home consumption--though the students are far from forgotten: nothing could be more deeply appreciated than the attentive motions of the students' heads following the critic's every gesture like sunflowers the sun; or those approving chuckles that acknowledge a score.

After all, if it is the faculty that best appreciates the critic's feints and parries, it is the students for whom the duel is being performed in the first place. And it is a performance, no matter how spontaneous; for no matter the blood the students lose, the foils that touch another member of the faculty are never bare, and no thrust is made that doesn't stop just before a colleague's breast. The rules for these performances have never been spoken, but they are clear for all of that. The rotten work on the wall is always to be laid at the door of the students who did it, never at that of the instructor who asked for it, specified its essential character and nurtured its growth and evolution through many days or weeks. On the other hand there is always the danger that some renegade lout of a teacher might run amok and do just that! Since this must be avoided at any cost--especially that of education--it is best not to take any chances

and invite only like-thinking faculty to review projects in the first place. Or even better, invite no one from outside at all! Roger can review Michael's projects and Michael can review Roger's. Paul can look at the work of Vernon's students, and Vernon can look at that of Paul's. Henry Sanoff will be invited to the crits of John Tector, and John will be invited to those of Henry. Linda and Pat can be found at Bob's crits, Bob and Linda at Pat's and Pat and Bob at Linda's. Dick is usually quite content to take care of his by himself. Okay, perhaps there is a hint of hyperbole here, but it is only a hint; and it is always possible that if records were kept, we might discover that the truth were even worse.

Some aspects of the system are worse. It is cant that it is better to have critics in earlier than later. This way they can make "substantive input" into the "design process" rather than simply burying the final project at the end. Of course all their criticism can be deflected at the same time, since this isn't final work (and therefore no one need take responsibility for anything--"Oh, yeah, I was going to show that in the final drawings..."), and you will look high and low for the critic invited in media res who is brought back at the end to see what effect his words of wisdom had. At that point it always seems desirable to "hear a new voice," "to get a second opinion". Critics are brought in for one phase, but denied access to the rest. Artificial boundaries are raised around the work to limit discussion. Attention is constantly redirected from the formulation of the problem, to the work of the students. It is no wonder the critic descends to entertainment. The context could not be more artificial if it were a supper club in a Las Vegas casino, which, with all the wine and food and pretty pictures it often seems...almost...to be.

## THE CRIT



Sometimes there is no pretense that it is not entertainment. Rules are established "to create an interesting situation" and the crit is declared a game at the outset. The critic may not inquire into the designer's intentions. Or the only question to be addressed is that of the distance moved between phase one and phase two. Or words may not be used in the crit at all. Or some arbitrarily selected students presents the work of another. Or the student has only three minutes in which to present (or no time limit and he drones on and on and on and on) and the critic only seven minutes "or we'll never finish" (or the crit ends at midnight, everyone wiped out for a week), or the critics are to view the work as a whole and comment on it as such, or are constrained to view the projects hanging upside down, or -- But does it matter? The crit, that is. Under these circumstances, denied by most to exist, how could it? The thing that really needs a crit is the crit.

#### RESPONSE TO ADMISSIONS: IMAGE AND REALITY

Ahh, c'mon fellas. Let's get serious. I didn't mind all that stuff about getting together as a community, but when you wrote about "the tremendous expenditure of effort we invest in selecting our crop" I just had to break out laughing. Then it occurred to me you guys might not work for a living. After all, where I come from an afternoon a year is not mistaken for a tremendous expenditure of effort.

An afternoon a year?!? I know, if you listen to the guys on the committee you'd think they were building the Great Wall of China. "God," sweat, pant, "I just interviewed twelve (T\*W\*E\*L\*V\*E!!) applicants for the School and I'm completely wiped out!" Yeah, I know. I used to say things like that too. And there's no question it can get to you. But

let's get it in perspective. In the first place most of that plaint is braggadocio ("Boy! Can I ever put out the work..."), and what isn't, is a little bit put down on the one hand ("...unlike you!") and a plea for a stiff drink on the other ("No ice, thanks"). It cannot, in other words be taken seriously. And why should it? Admissions committee service is a voluntary and temporary commitment made, in the ordinary course of events, about once in eight years. During this year the typical committee member interviews between fifty and sixty applicants. If these were spread out over the eight years, they would amount to seven or eight a year. At a half an hour apiece, we're talking about three and a half, maybe four hours a year. That is, an afternoon. Oh my aching back: what an expenditure of effort!

Studios, about which I am a great more concerned than admissions, cannot be construed as tremendous expenditures of effort either, yet these absorb at least 270 hours of classtime a year. A typical nine-hour teaching load takes up at least 360 hours of classtime a year. How am I supposed to see the three and a half hour burden added to this by our commitment to admissions: as the straw that broke the camel's back? But wait! It gets worse. Let's assume that everybody puts in one hour of preparation for every hour in the classroom--a joke as we all know, but let's assume it anyhow. At least it gives us a foothold on a figure we wouldn't have to blush to present to the State Legislature. Now let's add our three and a half hour burden. Frankly, I don't believe I can sense the difference between 720 and 723.5 hours a year. And I know I can't see in either figure any grounds for complaint. After all, any one of the School's typists is putting in closer to 2,000 hours a year and everyone of those hours is a pain in the neck.

So basically I would just as soon stop hearing about the terrible impositions made on faculty time by their unbearable committee loads. It's not only ridiculous, it's impossibly self-centered. I read, for example, the piece on admissions in vain for any illusion to the applicant's perspective. The applicants when mentioned are compared to sheep and goats and performing bears! Nor is this confined to the piece in Polemics. It's far worse in the halls and around the committee table. There, for example, the suggestion has been put forward, by one who is usually most hot for a world of deeper and more widespread face-to-face human interaction, that we save time by replacing the interview with a test! As if we didn't have enough tests already! But this one would not be unreliable or uninformative like the SAT's and all the other tests most of our applicants have endured in high school. This one would have the applicant, say, draw a tree, and then we'd all sit around and base our judgments on this!!!! It has even been argued that this would increase the objectivity of the admissions procedures. When I hear talk like this I want to throw up, not only because it is beneath stupid, but because it reveals the emptiness of our talk about humanity and community. Personal contact is great--uh, as long as it doesn't take up any more of my time!

I know these things are unbelievable. I can scarcely believe them myself. One of the full professors on the committee was jolted to realize that in the interview he might have something to give the applicants, advice, perhaps (such as this might not be the school imagined), or succor (to calm that beating heart) or insight (into what the applicant might be really looking for). It is all very well to say they should this, they should that, but the fact is they are. These most obvious things never occurred to this full professor because all he can think of is himself, what he



can get out of it--or more accurately--how he can get out of it. And as horrifying as this seems, what is truly frightening is the shortsightedness--the essential self-derision--of the perspective. Somewhere around a third of these people will be admitted to the School. These people will come to know us as they find us, certainly, but they will not forget their first impression. What do we want this to be? What do we want them to think of us? What values do we want them to imagine we hold? Or shall we be surprised when they hear our fine words and refuse to take them at face value?

Why should the students put out when we shirk our job? Why should the students cease complaining when they hear us incessantly complaining? Why should the students be anything but self-centered when we are nothing but? But perhaps most interestingly, why should the students come forward, as they do, eagerly and not a few of them, to participate in an admission process which is apparently such a burden and so inutile? Perhaps they see something we don't? Perhaps we could learn from them the many things they could never learn from us.

#### YOUR BODY IS MINE

There are whole cultures devoid of the notion of radical creativity that we here in the School of Design take as the foundation of our being as professionals. It would be comforting to be able to think of these as "traditional", "primitive", or at worst "peasant", but few terms could be less adequate descriptors of China. If distant and in many ways unapproachable, China is one of the handful of world cultures capable of taking the measure of any other. One of the most sophisticated, it is also among the oldest and most continuous. If the word "greatest" may be said to have any meaning, the world's greatest poets have been Chinese, as have many of the world's greatest painters,

military strategists, architects, engineers, novelist, politicians, historians, and cooks. Fecund from the beginning, its fertility has not diminished. Yet it is a culture almost void of those notions of radical creativity and creative autonomy that pervade our thinking about "making" like a virulent virus.

Pauline Yu suggests that the Chinese unconcern with originality can be explained by the absence of any canonical work exemplifying, sanctioning or extolling, for example, creation ex nihilo. We, on the other hand, imbibe such models from birth and have them regularly reinforced in a variety of ways. The only true canonical text in the West, the Old Testament, opens on a scene of creation ex nihilo, and in fact God is alternatively called The Creator. Simultaneously The Father. As The Creator and The Father are confused, so are fathers and creators. Fathers in fact become creators--essentially by themselves. Other Western traditions compound the problem, for example that of the Greek demiurge, a palpable will external to Being yet necessary for its existence. In the West the idea of creation is pregnant and its models potent. Creation, especially ex nihilo, and attendant notions (such as originality), are the hallmarks of important people. In the arts and sciences there is a sense that nothing much else matters.

No such important tradition exists in China. The Chinese cosmos is generally regarded as an uncreated one, existent simply, and continuing. Far greater importance is attached to a sense of continuity, to building upon and connecting to an existent whole, than to making something, in any sense, new. Families are not creations of parents, but links in an unending chain of familiness. Importance is attached to the transmission of a culture intact, as opposed to its transmutation. Artists are conceived much as we think about craftsmen. Certainly no parallel is drawn between his activities and those of some autochthonous Creator Spirit. With no emphasis on creation,

there is none on primacy. With no emphasis on primacy, there is no urgency toward novelty. Things change as the world changes, as needs demand them. Things are not manifested compulsively, merely to be novel, simply to be first, only to say, "Look, I, a Creator Spirit, made these things."

Where could this drive have come from. Were I Chinese I would accept it as a characteristic of the world as given, but were I Chinese I would not have to contend with it. And neither would you. As it is, we are burdened with an impossible and degrading need to be what we cannot be even if we try: original. Our possibilities as generative entities are limited. Alone they are non-existent. The only case I can think of that is meaningful is our capability as reproductive organisms. Significantly the act takes two. Our only generative ability is a social one, our only creative act a social act. In our madness to see ourselves as gods making from nothing something, even if only ourselves, we have begun to visualize ourselves not only as individual (that is, separate), but independent, generative and creative in and of ourselves. This mad dream has taken final form in the novel notion that a woman's body is her own, that a man's body is his own. Yet I cannot by myself engage in the sole act in which I can live this role of originator. I willingly sacrifice my independence to claim a right to the body of another, a body necessary in order for either of us to be creative in the only way possible. The only working model of creation and origination we have, abnegates the existence of the individual as it celebrates the existence of the whole, for even the two are not alone, but come from families and connect to families both in space and time. The creator standing alone before and outside his work is a nightmare unfulfilled in any human life. The sterility of onanism is his only option. As social beings we have no right to ourselves:

we belong to each other.

Yet in school, this is denied. In our isolation booths--quite literally in the Beaux Arts tradition--we are asked to create, from nothing, a novel whole, new, original, uncontaminated by the work of our fellows or our fathers. The only image that comes to mind is that of a person, in his little stall, grunting on the toilet...

#### WE ARE WHERE WE ARE

It is almost a universal that if students in a studio are asked to design a house they will search everywhere for insight into houses except the house they live in. If they are asked to design a school, they will rush to the library for pictures of up-to-date schools in Illinois and Turkey, but never think to look around and learn from the school they are in. Students working on courthouses know all about those in Paris and St. Louis, but nothing about the county, state, and federal courthouses of the city they are living in. The books I find on the desks as I wander through the studios are about everywhere but here: I wonder what the people who have checked them out read when they are there.

"We have no roots!" we moan; but instead of probing for them where we are, we probe for them in books on Africa and Rome. "We have no sense of place!" we cry, but instead of making one, we pursue it through books on the hilltowns of Italy and the peasant communities of the Frache-Comte. We hunt for precedents, not among the myriad buildings that have shaped our lives, but in the rotting villas of a decaying Venice and the rubble of an imploding modernism. Precedent for whom? Who among us will again encounter a prince of the Veneto?

It is not that we ought to learn from what's at hand, but that we can

learn nothing much from stuff that isn't. Precedents are not all things that have gone before. They are acts or instances that may be used as examples in dealing with subsequent similar cases. But I do not think that Jack McLean would choose to live in La Rotunda. And few of us again will labor in the vineyards. The sun that shines on Vicenza does not shine on Raleigh. The grass that glows in Wivenhoe Park will not grow here. How can these things speak to me?

And why should they? What else do we strain to hear in their whispers but how they become the place where they are, how they punctuate their phrases of space and time, how fittingly they speak their age and their address. It is not their originality that captures us, but their aboriginality; not their autonomy, but their autochthony; not their abstract qualities of form, but their concrete sense of being rooted in a place. What captures us is just what we can never capture, for transplanted here they are not native, but merely novel; not aboriginal but absurd; not apt, but mal a propos. Life in this litter of the everywhere but here and anytime but now is electric with hysteria. Uprooted roots, displaced places and retrocedents are jumbled together in a universe instinct with nothing but fancy, whim and a real despair that nothing matters and that anything can go. Freed of the referens loci, individualism is the only center around which choice can circle. The descant of opinions begins. In this world without reference, they are the only thing that matters; and in the international placelessness that must result, the only cult is the cult of the ego. Before the genius, the genius loci flees.

The invention of the vernacular was a mistake. It reduced our world to a word. When I talk about the here and now, when before they would have stumbled and started--who knows?--to think, they say now. "Oh. You mean vernacular," and having labeled it, dismiss it. Or they parse it as pathetically

as the others parse the Parthenon and paste vernacular details on their facades as the others paste on pilasters and pediments. It misses the point. A root is not a stick shoved in the ground, but a lively system of exchanges. It is not a thing, but a process. Until they are lodged in where we are and who we are at, the pursuit of place in books of travel will remain a thing, and the analysis of precedents will be nothing but a stick shoved in the ground.

#### WE ARE HERE TOGETHER

This time of year when students come to see me I know why without asking. They are having trouble with their groups. Each member comes individually complaining of the others. So-and-so won't show up. Such-and-such doesn't want to do what the rest of them wants to. Somehow they just can't get together, much less get it together. Would I consider a special individual project? Some are on the verge of tears.

What difference does it make? Even the group that works together, each member subsuming his wonderful one-ness in its sense of collective purpose, acts alone in the context of the class. Groups do not build on each other's efforts, but behave as if each were alone. Afraid I would see none of their own were they to reflect some borrowed light, the semester becomes a Sirens' coast of deceptive beacons each urging me to wreck upon their shores. They do not wish me or each other well. When I raise the issue of mutual aid they cry, "But you didn't say we could!" in a whiny, bitchy sort of way. No...I didn't. But then I didn't say to keep on breathing either.

It is no different in the studios. Twice the credit, it is twice as bad. Instead of contributing to the groups's understanding, the individual projects fight for the group's attention. Instead of being cumulative, the

effect is dissipative, each fragment reducing the meaning of every other. Instead of augmentation, it is one-upmanship. It is no different with the faculty. Studios and classes do not sum to any whole. As student competes with student, so studio competes with studio and class with class. It is not a ship, so it is a school of fools, adrift in an anxious sea of hysterical competition.

How could it be otherwise? Students share uncounted hours with studio mates, yet not more than one or two know the first and last names of even most of the rest of them. Why bother? They are together not out of any desire to be together, but out of some ill-conceived notion of advancing their idiosyncratic futures. Chance threw them together, chance will pull them apart. Like naked victims of a shipwreck they cling to all they have that they can count on. There is no investment in chance. There is no payoff.

Why should I expect aught else? The school is lashed by its situation as a ship before a storm, is cemented in its context like a ship grounded in the desert. In an environment that has elevated individualism to the eminence of invincibility, is it any wonder that students and faculty alike seek to maximize the only good that matters? Among people who have to read the label before remarking on a picture, who demand the director's name before commenting on a film, who need the author's identity before venturing a response to a polemic, can it astonish that students shy away from activities incapable of adding luster to an already well-burnished name? The American people has disintegrated into a congeries of interests; the community of scholars has dissolved into an assortment of superstars; neighborhoods are holding patterns for a population in random motion; schools...are mirrors of the mess. Mirrors, but makers too. We cannot get off so easily. The mess is one whole. You may not enter at this point and

say, "Here it begins." It begins here and there, with you and me. If your body is mine, and mine is yours, and we are where we are, and where we are is us, then we collectively share the responsibility. We cannot point at others without pointing at ourselves.

Some have caught on...and stopped pointing. These now stand silently twitching, their hands at their sides like mannequins at a cocktail party. Some have yet to notice at whom they're pointing. These bore us still with their noisy empty blaming, the Dean this, the student that, their colleagues yet another, like smalltime businessmen being eaten alive by their own ineptitude. But some have taken the mirror into their hands and studied their reflection...and some of these have bestirred themselves.

You can feel it in the air. There's a mansuetude about the way we treat each other, and if we'd finally acknowledged the bits we have in each other's mouths and decided to abide them. There's an authenticity in the voices, as if for the first time in a long time they didn't have something to hide. There's a grace and assurance of posture, as if for a change everyone weren't worried about being hit. Not everyone is like this. There are still those walking around exuding enough darkness to reduce all the bulbs in their vicinity to ten watts, but by and large, and most of the time, there's a nice new openness, people speaking and others actually listening. Let me admit it: studios may be factories of alienation and crits may be inhuman circuses, but compared to the classes and tests on the rest of the campus they're practically orgies of self-criticism and community participation. The regular Friday afternoon review of the work of one studio by the others in the Graduate Center has carried this logic yet one more step beyond its usual sectarian and studio boundaries. It would be going too far to say there is a community of interest emerging there, but at least total disdain and



virulent antagonism seem to be things of the past. They seem to be things of the past in lots of places. The faculty seminar on place Dick Wilkinson has organized would have been inconceivable even a year ago. It may prove to be unworkable yet, but the larger changes auger well for its success. Compared with the acrimony of past accreditation visits, the recent one to architecture was an object lesson in cooperation. Brotherly love wasn't pouring through the corridors, but at least the poison arrows were in their quivers and the dirks in their sheaths. Too bad the team couldn't stay till Friday. TGIF has long since ceased being a place for graduate students and faculty in landscape to gather. The number of faculty and students on the breezeway astonishes not only visitors from Gardner Hall, but those from Berkeley and Oxford as well. "There's a great feeling here," a guest from the fabled land of Where-It's-At remarked the other day. "I wish we had something like this at home."

Even Polemics helps. Few may read it, and fewer write, but both numbers are growing week by week. Sleepers awake!!! Things are changing! It's your school. Where do you want to go? If we keep on like this, we may come to understand some day what John Cage meant when he said "that nothing was lost when everything was given away."

#### IT'S SO EASY

It's so easy when you're inside something not to be able to see it. You take things for granted that are really special and see as glaring faults things that from another perspective are either minor to the point of invisibility or even advantageous. It's so easy, but so unnecessary; and when the something is the School of Design, it is not only unnecessary but stupidly exhausting to hear day in and day out—from former deans, disgruntled and politically

motivated faculty, and even students--how bad the school is. Every week we hear, from former students, from faculty and administrators of graduate schools, and from practitioners distant and local, another story. We hear how good the school is.

In an unsolicited letter (see following),\* a former student now doing graduate work in architecture at MIT says that "There is no better undergraduate design program in the country." We don't know about that--MIT ranks us third in the nation based on the performance of our students in their graduate program--but we still hear it all the time. It has to do with a lot of things, a lot of things we just assume are part of every undergraduate program, and a lot of things we see from within as disadvantages which are actually our very points of strength. Take our space. We complain about it all the time--and not without reason. It's too hot or it's too cold and it's locked up over holidays, but we have it. We don't appreciate it though. It's hard to unless you've seen the studios at Miami (Florida) with their hot desks, yours to use in the morning, somebody else's to use in the afternoon, and in many studios, somebody else's again in the evening. Like seats in a lecture hall. Or watched the students at Cooper Union dragging their work--and all their equipment!--back and forth from home to school every day. Or even seen the spaces students use to work in at a place like Princeton, desks set up facing blank walls in hallways. Visiting faculty from other schools are blown away by the space we have. We just take it for granted--and complain.

Last week one of us was in the Media Center when a group of graduate students from VPI--down here for the Richard Meier talk--stopped to chat. They wanted to know what all the stuff was down there and if it belonged

\* This letter was printed in the original Polemics, but does not appear here.

to the school or some other part of the university; and if it belonged to the school, if the students could use it. They had none of our facilities accessible to them as architecture students--none of our copy cameras, typositors, enlargers, cameras...no presses no Cage to disburse Kodalith and PMT papers, slide projectors and four-track tape recorders. We complain about the Cage hours, but they don't have a Cage to complain about. And they spoke of our Shop with awe.

It is only once our students have gone, on to Yale or Columbia, that they begin to appreciate the facilities offered by the Cage, the Shop, our computer room, even our "sad" "little" library (you have to see the others to appreciate ours); to appreciate the easy access they are vouchsafed, the openness of the system and the school. Maybe we can't speak nationally, but we can say there isn't a design school that can touch us in these regards, from Montreal to Tulane. We have the space, the facilities, the access--all wrapped up in one well-maintained and comfortable (again, you have to experience the competition) three-building complex that an indulgent administration permits and encourages us to use for things like Bash, the Outdoororgasm and TGIF. Talk about something that blows visiting dignitaries away: "What are all these students and teachers doing consorting together drinking beer?" they ask. "We have nothing like this at (Washington) (Berkeley) (Oxford Polytechnic) (Case) (you name it)."

Of course a superb physical facility without a useful faculty and curriculum to complement it is nothing but an empty shell, pretentious in its vacuity (like the ill-fated California School of the Arts). To hear about us from each other you would think our faculty consisted of a bunch of inept jerks who stole their sinecures through blatant political machinations reminiscent of the most decadent days of the Roman Empire, knives and daggers and blood

flowing through the corridors. And, yes, there is some of this, and, yes, it's not all necessary, but our acrimony tends to obscure the fact that it is our diversity--if not our divisiveness--that is our greatest asset. There is no School of Design philosophy, not even fundamental agreement about the advantages of diversity! There are those who would like to see a school dogma, and those who think it's too tight already. There are those who are convinced we don't teach the tools of the trade, and those who know we spend too much time on them as it is. There are those who won't be able to teach next semester unless their studio is vertically integrated, and those who won't be able to manage if it is. There are faculty members who believe form is where it is at, and others who can prove conclusively that the issue is social utility, and still others who imagine that it is some of both, and other things to boot. Because there is no willingness on the part of some to accept this range of views and practice, and because we are all steamed-up opinionated vocal hot-heads, we fight over precisely what our students doing graduate work elsewhere--and the practitioners that end up hiring them--recognize as the thing that especially distinguishes education here: those students who can take advantage of it do not find a stultifying single way here, but a plurality of ways--actively fought over and discussed--among which they must fight their way, their own way. Of course it's a struggle and not always pleasant, but then, growing and learning rarely is. Our students capable of exploiting what's here are forced to be open, not closed; forced to explore and try, not just rely on last semester's formula; forced to construct themselves, not as educated products of some factory-school, but as ever-educable designers.

Recent polling of alumni in architecture and landscape architecture bears this view of the school out. As practitioners, many of them have the usual gripes, the same ones they have always had about any school and always

will (graduates can't--sigh--draw, and require more supervision than can be afforded); but, by and large, their view of the school is positive and, rumor to the contrary notwithstanding, growing increasingly so. Far from seeing the school going down the tubes, they see the school getting better and better. Nor is this the case only with alumni. Our graduates from the four-year programs experience little difficulty snagging real plums wherever they go. Recall the experiences David Tobias described in one of last year's Polemics about getting jobs and working Boston. Think about the fact that our students have the capability of walking out of here with the BED and walking right into a reasonably responsible job with a top firm like Milton Glazer's. That these are not simple matters of luck is borne out by the fact that they happen--in Atlanta, Cleveland, Boston, New York, Washington--year in and year out; as well as by the quality of the graduate programs that snap our students up. One graduate of the landscape concentration will be studying (geography no less) at Penn State next year on an \$11,000 a year research grant. If it weren't for the regular testimony of letters such as that of Ken Diener's (which follows),\* you could say it was just her, that she was special. She wasn't. It's the school that's special, the school that's getting better and better with every passing year, the school that's attracting increasing numbers of applicants from all over the eastern half of the country, applying to our undergraduate program from Connecticut and Florida, Ohio and Louisiana, Canada and Venezuela. Why, we ask them, are they interested in seeking admission to an out-of-state school when they have the Rhode Island School of Design (or Parsons or Rennselaer or Georgia or you name it) in their backyard. "I hear the School of Design is better," they say.

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It's time we admit it is, and accept the fact that one of the things that has made it so is the school's commitment to a variety of viewpoints and unending debate--and polemic--about them. If the heat of this ferment is too great, the rigor of absolute zero Kelvin is waiting at any number of other less well respected institutions.

(This last piece was signed by both Vernon Shogren and myself; and though the sentiments were shared, and the point of the piece the outcome of mutual discussion, I actually wrote it myself.)