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Forming Ideas

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FORMING IDEAS
New York, Boston, Denver, Rome. These are all places we may visit as a part of the architecture curriculum. More importantly, they are the setting for long studio projects, marathons of sketching, critiquing. These site visits may seem like work under the guise of academics to some, but they are a rare opportunity. They are the one chance to take in as much about the immediate site and surrounding our projects firsthand. We each gain an experience that, along with gathered knowledge research, provides the context on which we discover and ultimately form the concept for our project.

Visiting a proposed site, I am struck with a mental image that stays fresh in my mind, sometimes for months after experiencing it. The image is unchanging and unaltered by the passage of time. Whether it is conscious or not, I attempt to identify what about the idea is so significant to me. In his book Image, Herbie Greene describes that images and architecture are compromised of “sense cues.” A sense cue is a stored experience that triggers a mental image. Artists and architects become skilled in arranging the cues to call forth a variety of layered memories. The image is a created idea, and the cues of a site are the cues. The cues may be anything, such as the sound of a nearby train, or the way light reflects off the river. I dissect the image in an attempt to isolate the cues that acted together to elicit the emotional response. By finding some common thread between them, I am able to form a concept.

Assumed that the concept was something concrete and answer any question that may arise during the project. I wondered how a word or phrase could describe every aspect of a building, from its general form to the spacing of structural columns. Over time, it became clear that the concept is something dynamic and fluid; it changes as our understanding does. As new information arises and failed attempts occur, it should evolve. There is often an attachment to our original verbalization of the concept; rather than change it to better fit a new understanding of the idea, we formally “break” the verbal description when something doesn’t necessarily fit. We are told not to get attached to the first forms we create at the outset of a project. However, just as we should not stick to a design because it “looks cool,” we should not be afraid to abandon a verbal explanation of the concept, even if it sounds good at a review. Failing to do so leads to an ill-informed and nebulous design.

We need to take the time to look back and reflect on our current manifestation of the idea and explanation of it. Doing so reinforces our ability to convey it: graphically, through models and drawings, as well as during our verbal presentations. Reviews require that we explain ourselves and unveil our reasoning, though they occur only a handful of times during a semester they are our opportunity for the final product to be judged in relation to the concept we present. Building upon a concept that is no longer truly representative of your idea leads to confusion and inconsistency within the project and for those who are trying to understand it. Knowing how to understand our original response would allow one then to have a more focused view when it comes to the creation of the form. We can personally reflect on this work through writing, honest dialogue with peers, or simply looking at the evolution of the work done over the course of a project. Through a better understanding of the work can more accurately express the concept that has lead us in the body of work we created and in the verbal presentation of that work. Ultimately, we are able to gain insight into our own thought and design process, and then better express ourselves.