Boundaries

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Last year in the College of Design there was a large installation that invited students to inscribe upon it their own suggestions for ways to enrich their education. In bold blue letters, someone had written that they do not want to be looked down upon for what major they are in. In our College, there is a kind of stereotype that every major has a different level of difficulty. A corollary of this is that students of various majors operate at different levels of intensity, meaning that some students work harder than others, that some students are ‘above’ others. I am inclined to reject this point. How can such a claim be made when the education of the designer is, fundamentally, self-driven? We do not ‘study’ design, we ‘do’ design. Additionally, the design assignment, regardless of discipline, is judged subjectively in an ecosystem of peer work. Any difference in arduousness, then, must come from the level of motivation of the class, not the discipline itself. An instructor will point you in a direction, but it is up to your peers to push your rate of production. They will challenge the strength of your proposal simply by making their own proposals. One major is more strenuous over another by virtue of the overall motivation of the class, not by virtue of some kind of objective difficulty inherent in the discipline itself. In order to gain a more experienced perspective regarding these notions, I met with Pete Goché, instructor in both the departments of Industrial Design and Architecture.
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The majority of our conversation revolved around uncovering the possible origins of the phenomenon, rather than discussing its validity or consequences. Pete made it seem as though he views design as a fundamental action, nearly identical in all disciplines. We all produce artifacts, be they purely visual elements, models, or some other kind of tool to inform our decision making. Regardless of this fact, there remains a division between the fields. One key difference seems to revolve around scale. When designing Architecture, rarely does the maker have the luxury of producing artifacts at the same scale they will realize in their final iteration. Other disciplines, such as Industrial or Graphic Design, have the certain ability to produce iterative work at the same scale as their final realization. Landscape Architecture and Community and Regional Planning, however, are executed at an even larger scale than Architecture is, and yet our discipline retains an undeniable arrogance.

Beyond the question of scale is the question of politics. Architecture, in comparison with the other majors, has an emphasis on highly individualized work. This being the case, emphasis in school is placed on the individual student and their work. Arrogance, Pete suggested, bubbles up from this kind of organization. This arrogance can be useful at times, when a particularly strong idea advocates a particularly strong defense.
In addition to his work here, Pete has taught art at Drake University. He claims that there is a certain distinction between the student of design and the student of art, in that the art student is much more reluctant to answer the question of ‘why’ in relation to their work. The architecture student, however, is expected to not only answer the question succinctly, but to produce an adequate amount of evidence for their reasoning. This expectation may come from a kind of arrogance within the discipline, the line of thought that says, “Of course I have an answer. I am the architect.”

Regardless of these phenomena, the fact remains that all of art and design is concerned with similar elements including aesthetics, joinery, and materiality, be they literal or abstract. This being the case, it is imperative to benefit from cross-pollination across disciplines. Once the illusory walls begin to dissolve, the mind is opened up to all instances and people from which to draw inspiration.