

2005

## Situating Design

Gregory S. Palermo

*Iowa State University*, [gpalermo@iastate.edu](mailto:gpalermo@iastate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch\\_conf](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf)



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), and the [Art Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Palermo, Gregory S., "Situating Design" (2005). *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations*. 45.  
[https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch\\_conf/45](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf/45)

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [digirep@iastate.edu](mailto:digirep@iastate.edu).

---

# Situating Design

## **Abstract**

This is a case study of the development of a new Core curriculum course at the Iowa State University (ISU) College of Design (CoD). It relates an overview of the creation of the course and sample learning exercises that activate a large lecture class. Historically, the CoD separated first-year students into discipline specific studies, narrowing, we believe, their perspectives about design. A Task Force analyzed learning outcomes of the first year programs, and proposed a more interdisciplinary conception of design education. The CoD committed itself to creating a Core foundation year of design studies, which students in Architecture, Landscape Architecture (LA), Community and Regional Planning (CRP), and Art & Design (A&D) including graphics, interiors, and studio arts would share. We established learning new outcomes first, content and method second. The faculty envisioned enriched preparation for each discipline via a common core of drawing, studio projects, cultural studies and sciences that would serve as a platform for upper division studies. Faculty from all departments would be (and are) involved in Core teaching for the beginning design student cohort. Design Studies 183x: An Introduction to Design Culture (Dsn S 183x) is one of the new core courses. Supported by university and collegiate grants, Susan Bradbury, CRP; Mike Martin, LA; John Cunnally and Gary Tartakov, A&D; and Gregory Palermo, Architecture, developed and offered the course experimentally. Fall of 2004, it became a required course for all CoD curricula.

## **Disciplines**

Architecture | Art Education

# A Beginner's Mind

**PROCEEDINGS**

**21st National Conference  
on the Beginning Design Student**

**Stephen Temple, editor**

**Conference held at the  
College of Architecture  
The University of Texas at San Antonio  
24-26 February 2005**

# A Beginner's Mind

## PROCEEDINGS

21st National Conference  
on the Beginning Design Student

Stephen Temple, editor

College of Architecture  
The University of Texas at San Antonio  
24-26 February 2005

Situating Beginnings  
Questioning Representation  
Alternative Educations  
Abstractions and Conceptions  
Developing Beginnings  
Pedagogical Constructions  
Primary Contexts  
Informing Beginnings  
Educational Pedagogies  
Analog / Digital Beginnings  
Curriculum and Continuity  
Interdisciplinary Curricula  
Beginnings  
Design / Build  
Cultural Pluralities  
Contentions  
Revisions  
Projections

*Offered through the Research Office for Novice Design Education, LSU, College of Art and Design, School of Architecture.*

**Copyright 2006 University of Texas San Antonio**  
/ individual articles produced and edited by the authors

Printed proceedings produced by Stephen Temple, Associate Professor, University of Texas San Antonio.

**All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.**

Published by:  
University of Texas San Antonio  
College of Architecture  
501 West Durango Blvd.  
San Antonio TX 78207  
210 458-3010  
fax 210 458-3016

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Temple, Stephen, editor

A Beginner's Mind: Proceedings of the 21st National Conference on the Beginning Design Student /  
edited and compiled by Stephen Temple

1. Architecture - Teaching 2. Architecture - Design 3. Design - Teaching

**ISBN 0-615-13123-9**

## Situating Design

GREGORY PALERMO  
Iowa State University

Design Is:

“~ The process of creating and producing a physical artifact; ~ A layout or plan for the creation of any given thing; ~ You design something, whether it be tangible or not, to your liking or for the appreciation of others; ~ The combination of art/visual appeal with function; ~ A process of creating an object of organized patterns; to design > create > to make new from *imagination*.”

Culture Is:

“~ Beliefs, traditions, and products of a certain group of people; ~ The customs and characteristics of a group of people – what makes your particular group unique; ~ Everything included in a way of life of a certain group of people, including language, art, music, and many other things; ~ The values of a society that become apparent in designs, activities, stories/media and other happenings in a society.”

Student definitions; Tuesday, August 26, 2003

### Background and Starting with Outcomes

This is a case study of the development of a new Core curriculum course at the Iowa State University (ISU) College of Design (CoD). It relates an overview of the creation of the course and sample learning exercises that activate a large lecture class.

Historically, the CoD separated first-year students into discipline specific studies, narrowing, we believe, their perspectives about design. A Task Force analyzed learning outcomes of the first year programs, and proposed a more interdisciplinary conception of design education. The CoD committed itself to creating a Core foundation year of design studies, which students in Architecture, Landscape Architecture (LA), Community and Regional Planning (CRP), and Art & Design (A&D) including graphics, interiors, and studio arts would share. We established learning new outcomes first, content and method second. The faculty envisioned enriched preparation for each discipline via a common core of drawing, studio projects, cultural studies and sciences that would serve as a platform for upper division studies. Faculty from all departments would be (and are) involved in Core teaching for the beginning design student cohort.

Design Studies 183x: An Introduction to Design Culture (Dsn S 183x) is one of the new core courses. Supported by university and collegiate grants, Susan Bradbury, CRP; Mike Martin, LA; John Cunnally and Gary Tartakov, A&D; and Gregory Palermo, Architecture, developed and offered the course experimentally. Fall of 2004, it became a required course for all CoD curricula.

### First Exposures

The cited student definitions set Dsn S 183x into motion. Design is understood as verb and noun, active imagination and invention, a plan, fabrication, as thing (tangible or not), and involving aesthetics and purpose. Culture entails the values of a community of people, their traditions and rituals, and their production of language, art, music and implements.

How might ‘design’ and ‘culture’ be related? That there are keys to *thinking* design, as opposed to *practicing how to* design, is arguably a radical notion for incoming students. *Design self-consciousness*, thought and action inextricably bound, is new to them. Dsn S 183x is designed to initiate an awareness of the connections on these multiple fronts.

In Dsn S 183x we present humankind as social, inventive and constructive – constructing life through inventing and making stuff of all scales and sorts as we go about living life. Invention requires labor, resources, material transformation and fabrication to come to fruition, and waste thereafter. It entails economics, politics, social negotiation and ethical choices. We launch into the disciplines of the college through some unexpected yet shared territories.

### **Content and Learning Outcomes for ‘An Introduction to Design Culture’**

Dsn S 183x is intended as a complement to studio action. It is *a* beginning, *an* introduction to design enterprise, its historical context, and how it fits into contemporary culture. Expected student outcomes:

~ to *develop abilities at a beginning level of mastery* to observe, experience, analyze, critically reflect upon, evaluate, form judgments, and write about design processes and the products of design.

Toward obtaining those encompassing abilities we expect that students *will develop an enriched understanding of*:

~ Design in the context of site, region, and society; ~ Design in the context of technology, ethics, and culture; ~ The historical, social, political, and ideological context of design; ~ The communal and ecological nature of all design processes; ~ The language of design discourse; ~ Reading and writing about art and design that addresses theory and criticism; ~ Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary design processes and professional practice.

By ‘Design Culture’ we mean the full range of intentional activities we humans undertake and things we produce to shape our material lives, experiences and social patterns through the creation of planned environments, landscapes, buildings, furniture, appliances, artifacts of all sorts, including art works, and media expressions. Design processes and works are presented as socially, historically, economically, politically and culturally grounded events and artifacts.

In ‘Part I: Case Studies in Design’ we explore the pervasiveness of design in contemporary society and how to analyze a case study. ‘Reality Myth and Showtime: Transformation of the [Hispanic] Working West to [American] Ritual Rodeo,’ and ‘Lifestyle Design’ enterprises such as IKEA, Martha Stewart and IDEO are the first case studies. We construct an historical armature for each and a correlated culture and design analysis. We address several questions: What constitutes design action? What are design works? How is design ‘cultural’? How do technologies of production affect design? Is ‘design culture’ about markets and consumption, ‘high art’ – or more? In what way might design be political? Are ethics involved in design?

‘Part 2: Mediated Reality, Ideology and Propaganda’ looks at communication media, MTV & CNN, Nazi and Civil Rights poster art, and Washington, DC, as case studies in the use of design as forms of propaganda serving ideologies to shape culture, cultural meaning, and everyday life. To the questions from Part 1 we add another: What has ‘beauty’ got to do with design?

Part 3 lectures and take-home assignments use ISU as a model of comprehensive design. We explore the establishment, planning, landscape design, buildings, artwork and interiors of the campus as well as campus literature and website. Design processes and environmental character are analyzed in the context of encompassing historical national and international design movements. The designing and designs of the university are seen in historical context.

*The Power of Place*, by Dolores Hayden is the required text. It provides a wake-up call to the political and ethical dimensions of design. It involves diverse design (i.e., architecture, landscape architecture, graphic design and fine arts) and social science disciplines, illumines racial/gender/power connections to design, and outlines collaborative models for design practice.

## Teaching Resources

The course syllabus, lecture abstracts, faculty contact information, and full lectures are available on-line through the ISU e-Library, a publicly accessible site. Information developed during class was recorded and added. Slides can be reviewed on the CoD's Visual Resources Collection site "Plato's Cave." PowerPoints converted to PDFs are available on another resource: WebCT. Students can download slides and PowerPoints for personal use. Videos and music played in class are available through the ISU Media Resource center for individual student review.

Material is available 24/7 at the students' choice of time from their choice of location! We found attendance to be extremely high – partly because, as does any text, the lectures require explication that helps students make sense of the material. Partly because 10% of the course credit was reserved for in-class writing exercises that were unannounced!

## What Students Produced

We employed several active learning practices. The first was impromptu in-class writing exercises that were shared during class, recorded, and used to drive discussion directions. In another, small groups generated questions or responses to a challenge question. The same process of sharing, recording and explanative commentary took place. Using the campus as a site, we assigned three field analysis projects. There were three exams, 30% of each being essay based. Our concern was not so much memorization as engaging new material and making sense of it. For example, the essays were 'open book' enabling students to use research materials.

Assessing enduring learning outcomes is dicey at best. As a trace, in architecture we most typically retain studio work. For Dsn S 183x we collected a portfolio of papers, assignments and exams. The opening citations to this paper are the first student production of the semester. Here we will be looking at in-class writing exercise results, field exercises and sample exam essays. They form a general set of practices of observation, direct experience, reflection and recounting.

## In-Class Writing Exercises

One response theme in the early essays was a sense of surprise or revelation: "I had not thought of that before; this is the first time I thought of ...." The first unit covered the West and rodeo noted previously. Here are a few excerpts from responses to this question: "Identify one new thing about cowboys and rodeos related to design that you learned in these lectures, and discuss why it is important to you."<sup>1</sup> The first example is typical of the full responses:

~ I learned the purposes for why the cowboys wore the clothes they did. *I never really thought about* the fact that bandanas would keep dust from the face and that the saddles had to be designed for low back support and comfort. This is important to me because it made me realize that design is not just a look and how attractive something appears. It must be practical and convenient which I think is a good realization. [*Emphasis added.*]

~ *I never had really thought of* a saddle as an element of design. ...

~ ... *I have never made the correlation* between the desolate plains when riding horses and space in artwork.

~ *I never tied* the cowboys of the West to the Knights of the Middle Ages before. ...

~ The evolution of the clothing and gear seem to be most interesting. *I never really thought about* how the outfits and tools would have to change as the environment/jobs of cowboys changed. ... *I had my eyes opened through this unit.*

We do not believe these particular students are more naïve, insular, uninterested or unaware than most others. Rather, *design* is not connected to everyday life in prior education, or daily endeavors. An essential expectation of the course is breaking the ice on this front.

The second major unit covered three design organizations. Here are a few responses to this question: “What is a common thread among: Martha Stewart Inc., IKEA and IDEO?”:

- ~ We see a common process – when inventing a new design or refining one. A very important aspect in this process is teamwork in collecting ideas from various sources to combine these ideas into the best one. In this process, another common thread is not only the design but the manufacturing and production process. All three design not only “cool” things but also efficiently. They stress the value and good quality at reasonable prices and also stress the importance that the products are user friendly. ...
- ~ The common thread was to design something that was affordable, useful, or innovative. ...
- ~ Studying them makes you realize how different they are, ... MS is selling information, IKEA products, and IDEO ideas. The common thread is each of these companies has devoted all of their time in trying to better our lives in practical ways. ... They don't just look at how “cool” it looks; they also make sure it is easy to use, practical and reasonably affordable.
- ~ Each organization has developed a way of identifying their market, the needs of their consumers, and problems that may arise both during and after production. ...
- ~ ... They are all helping our lives to be better by design + innovation.

Teamwork, client needs, research, improving the quality of life, efficiency, material production, visual appeal, innovative thinking – the hallmarks of designing and design. Not too bad for 5 minutes of reflection! Responses to subsequent short question topics revealed increased analytic depth, improved grammar, more complete analysis and more complete assessments of the topic. We are hopeful that the lessons of these design cases, so well reflected upon and written about, will remain with the students as they pursue their individual disciplinary studies.

### **Field Exercises in Observation and Mapping**

Part 3 of the course utilizes the history, culture, physical and electronic environment of ISU as a case study. ISU is explored as a sustained design event: from political imagination, to physical place, fashion & ritual, and virtual place. We began with the legislative founding of the university in 1858, and its chartering as a Land Grant University in 1867. How and why we are located where we are, the shape of the land, and early site development are presented as social, political, planning and design processes. We covered formal site planning and landscape design, the emergence of classicism as the dominant architectural image at the turn of the 20th-C, contemporary campus architecture, interiors and artwork. The rituals of the ISU community, sports and band uniforms, alumni association memorabilia, university publications and diverse university websites round out a picture of culture and design inextricably intertwined.

The student work is place-based site observation and recording. We introduce methods of direct experience and assessment of the designed landscape.

In ‘Campus Memorials’ students directly engage the campus landscape while assessing the bits of culture and history that designed memorials reveal. Working in pairs to locate 10 memorials students to become familiar with diverse parts of the campus, and also learned that memorials in the landscape act as ‘windows’ through which we can glimpse views of history and values – what is included and what is not. The resultant work was a map of the memorial locations, photographs, a summary of what was memorialized and why that was important.

The ‘Place Recording Exercise’ involved going about the campus, locating places that possessed a strong atmosphere, e.g., good places to relax, to study alone, to socialize, places that are unpleasant to walk or that have an attractive view. The intent of this exercise was to have students consider the experiential qualities of the campus landscape from a distinctively personal point of view, to be reflective about the reasons for the qualitative assessments they made, and to

articulate those reasons in a concise narrative form. The result of this was a table with written descriptions of their perceptions and supporting design attributes of the selected places.

'A Lynchian analysis of the Iowa State Campus' followed. Students applied Kevin Lynch's urban typology to a place with which they were becoming familiar, so that Lynch's valuable conceptual ideas could transcend abstraction and become more real, memorable and useful.<sup>2</sup> Like the previous exercise this was an interpretive effort on a personal level, but there was an additional responsibility to see and understand the environment through Lynch's framework – establishing a model for exploring other environments or testing other such frameworks. Students prepared maps identifying districts, nodes, edges, landmarks and paths with explanatory analysis.

### Final Examination Essay

The final exam included an open book comprehensive essay question:

"*Art* (painting, sculpture, frescoes, film, photography, etc.) has been an integral aspect of many sections of the course. Describe and analyze: a) several artworks, b) the use of art, and c) its purpose and cultural importance *for at least one aspect of each of the following topics* presented in the course. Support your general premises with detailed comments. The three topics are:

- 1) The Cowboy, American West, and Rodeo group of lectures (Part I of the Course)
- 2) The Ideology and Propaganda group of lectures (Part II of the Course)
- 3) The ISU Campus and Artwork lectures (Part III of the Course)"

Given that the short in-class writings and the essays of the two prior exams focused on design, using *art* in lieu of *design* induces coming to terms with the range of uses of art. There is a shared perspective: *art* and *design* are not seen as autonomous, ideal, neutral property-based disciplines (e.g., proportion, composition, visual beauty, color, etc.), but socially contextual. Cultural, political and ideological positions are ever-present. Students were asked to cite sources if other than their personal notes. Faculty notes are in "[--]". One example:

[*This student prepared a detailed outline not included here.*]

The rodeo and overall cultural history of the cowboy is intermingled with art constantly. We see as early as 4000 BCE that in Mesopotamia there are early depictions of horse riders (Rodeo timeline, pg. 1) In around 2000 BCE there is an early depiction of saddles brought to our attention. The consistency upon which art is part of the cowboy is carried up into the 1870's when painters and writers begin to go to the West and record all of the Spanish vaquero's cultural influence. [*Art of the West was well underway in the 1870's; also, by the 1870's the Spanish influence was being 'erased.'*] This initiates the genre known commonly as Western Art and produces the portrayal of the mythic cowboy. The next few decades of cattle drives and Wild West Shows inspire the first art of film in 1903 (timeline, pg. 2) with "The Great Train Robbery" that will always be a part of our art history.

The use of art here is not solely for our personal pleasure, it is the description of a constantly evolving part of our lives, a description of the times that could not be captured with a still picture on film. Painting and sculpture beginning with George Caitlin (lecture notes, pg. 2) in the 1830's to Charles Russell today, artworks' purpose is to provide us with images of the West. Even in objects like boots, shirts & belt buckles art is involved. It is important to not only recognize graphics as art but to dig deeper and find the true historical values of art throughout cowboy culture.

Propaganda itself is an art. The art of persuasion and can be seen locally as 'Vote for Goodman' poster [*student government campaign*] to national levels like Washington, DC. One great example of art as propaganda is the Guerrilla Girls poster distributed in class. This poster educates people to the unfair treatment of women in art. This poster itself is art but more importantly it propagates the role of women in art. From art departments @ national universities [*The poster lists faculty member ratios.*] to the unanswerable critique that women allowed into the Metropolitan Museum have been inanimate ones with their clothes off. (pg. 8, Beauty lecture). The Guerrilla Girls 'in your face' attitude deals with propagation very well. We also see art in the form of propagation in the movements such as Modernism or simply shown in war bonds, Nazism posters, & abortion rights posters. [*For*] The Modernism movement it is the design work itself and the ideas it embodies around which a system of propaganda is organized. Examples range from the 'Salon de Refuses' in the 19th-C, to the Bauhaus of the 1920's and '30's to the LA Case Study houses of the 1950's.

More specifically let's look at sculpture, classical details and building inscriptions. Each of the following were designed to reinforce the ideology of the American democracy. We see inscriptions like 'Equal Justice for All' on the Supreme Court Building, frescoes in the capitol recalling the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Viet Nam Memorial, and even the design of our money includes major US buildings. Today we can literally carry around built symbols of democracy. (p. 2, lecture notes)

Lastly, on the topic of propaganda. Let's look at our nation's capital Washington, DC. From the selection of Greek and Roman architecture as the federal image to the constant use of painting, sculpture and graphics portraying America, Washington is a landscape of free self-governing people. In today's age of digital media, Washington is a model of physical design from past to futures (p. 3, lecture notes).

Overall, we must look at the art of persuasion, more deeply into its historical values. Propaganda has painted us a vivid picture using art of our nation's history. The cultural importance of propaganda cannot be expressed in words. To me it is something that must be experienced and interpreted for oneself.

Finally, let's take a look at art and its uses throughout the ISU campus. Picturing the campus as a landscape sets the scene for art to be involved. [*This student concludes the essay with four additional blue-book pages on art and the ISU campus; many examples and uses are provided.*] ... So now the landscape of ISU becomes media itself. ... It is important to know the history of a place that you spend lots of time in. ISU uses various degrees of art to help us along. ...

It appears that the overall theme of art throughout these topics is [*art*] is here to educate us. Art shows us the past ... Art is everywhere not only to educate but to enjoy!

Above average, this essay is by no means 'perfect'. There are a few technical factual errors; a number of grammatical ones; and it presumes the reader is familiar with the cited artworks, counting upon the professor to know the referent! Written under the pressure of an examination period, it is a solid consideration of the interplay between art, design and social context.

## **Onward**

Design requires informed thought, ability to research, and capacity to communicate design ideas via diverse modes. Rational, poetic, reflective, and inventive action arguably come together best in the studio, but this requires nurturing by multiple means. Dsn S 183x's structure, lecture content, required exercises and examinations are designed to awaken and engender informed thought, critical perspective, and recognition that design is not an abstract field of forms intuition and personal will, but a shared deeply cultural endeavor.

Notes:

1. A sample of the nine in-class questions posed during the first offering of the course: a) Define: design; define: culture. [8/26 *Asked prior to any lectures.*]; b) Identify one new thing about cowboys and rodeos that is related to design that you learned in these lectures, and discuss why it is important to you. [9/9 *Asked at the completion of the topic lectures.*]; c) What is a common thread among the three companies: Martha Stewart Inc., IKEA and IDEO? [9/18 *Asked at the conclusion of the topic lectures.*]; d) What new issue, process, or product from a design perspective did you learn about in these lectures on MTV and CNN? [9/30 *Asked at the conclusion of the topic lectures.*]; e) What do you think ideology and propaganda are? What does design have to do with propaganda? [10/7 *Asked prior to topic lectures.*].
2. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (MIT; 1968) and related works pertaining to place and its analysis.