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The Lessons of Architecture School

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As graduation nears, I'm reaching the point in my life where I'll need to actually put my education to use. After all of the lectures, exams, studio projects and papers, Iowa State is about to pronounce me "fit for work" in the world of architecture. There are a lot of questions that a graduate has to ask him or herself. For instance, where will I be living in three months? What will I do for money? What will I eat? What will I wear? Will I be able to make new friends, or will I sit sadly at the bar making lonely faces into my beer? Will a hover-board ever be invented? Not to mention the most frightening question of all, if the greatest years of my life are over, what am I looking forward to?

That's a lot to take in at once, and I don't intend to answer any of those questions in this article. What I would like to do is, before I make my next big life decision, to look back at my last one. This is a turning point, a point in which to look forwards as well as backwards. In this article, I would like to reflect on my experience in architecture school, and to take stock of the things that I learned that will be valuable in any line of work.
HOW TO PRECISELY CUT AND GLUE CARDBOARD:
Someone who has not been in design school, who has never tried to build a 1/16th scale model for presentation might not appreciate the practice, discipline, and patience required to turn a flat sheet of cardboard into even a basic rectangular prism. There are a lot of factors of model building that surprise first-timers. First of all, are you using a sharp x-acto blade? What kind of glue are you using? What kind of cardboard are you trying to cut? Are you holding the cardboard down firmly enough to prevent the blade from pulling it out of square? Are you allowing the glue to dry completely before gluing the next piece of cardboard? The list goes on. As frustrating as it is to make models, I’ve always loved looking at finished ones. Now that I know how difficult they can be to make, my appreciation for them has matured, much like a novice vintner admires a fine wine... But with cardboard.

HOW TO BUILD PRACTICAL FAMILIARITY WITH THE ADOBE SUITE:
Everybody understands what Photoshop does. The seemingly limitless possibilities of the program make it seem magical. When I first used Photoshop, I expected to be able to instantly transform the image into whatever I desired. With the power of Photoshop, I would advance all of my ideas through flawless photo-manipulation! Turns out, it actually takes skill. Little by little, however, I did gain some experience with the various Adobe programs. Illustrator diagrams? Photoshop building renderings? InDesign portfolio? Oh yeah. Now that’s what I call practical familiarity. Still, it is easy to forget what it was like to use these programs for the first time. Every now and then I get the chance to impress people with the “photomerge” tool. That one is pretty close to magic.
HOW TO PULL AN ALL-NIGHTER:
The Red Bull and beef jerky combo works for me, although a lot of my friends like delivery pizza, pots (yes, plural pots) of coffee, Hy-Vee sushi, and last-minute Wendy's drive-thru. Other staples include bags of candy, Dr. Pepper, and raw cookie dough. It's a bit of a personal decision.

HOW TO NOT PULL AN ALL-NIGHTER:
Just go to sleep. It's amazing how long it took me to figure this out. And architecture students are supposed to be the smart kids! Everyone in architecture school wants every project to be their best project ever. This usually results in extensive hours spent in studio. Once you become addicted to being in studio, it's easy to tip over that line into spending entire nights there. It's also easy to overlook how unproductive you are during most of those hours. Coming into architecture school, it seems that everyone just accepts all-nighters as being part of the deal. When I heard that some of my classmates were completing projects and also finding time to sleep, I was baffled. How could they do it? It seemed an impossible feat. Slowly I figured it out. Once you limit the number of hours you spend in studio, you force yourself to be more productive with the hours you are there. Once you accept that not every project is going to be your best, it becomes easier to cut yourself some slack and go to bed. Thus begins your re-entry into the real world, with real people, who sleep because they have more going on in their lives than school or work.

HOW TO ANSWER A QUESTION:
Use your words. Speak, but not too fast. Don't use words like "like" or "um," and know when to stop. It's sad, but I still see people who don't know when to stop answering a question, and it's a bit like watching a slowly sinking ship. It's sad, and you wish there were something you could do, but all you can do is watch. Just answer the question... and then stop.

HOW TO BREAK THE RULES:
“We thought our concept was strong enough that it warranted doing something that wasn't explicitly in accordance with the rules.” I should warn the reader, that explanation doesn't work for all rules. Nothing frustrated me more in my first years of design than when I took great pains to fit my project within the given constraints, only to see another project throw the same constraints aside and receive more praise. How unfair!
Those experiences taught me an important lesson. Design is about value. It requires making a lot of judgment calls where there is no right or wrong answer. There's a certain value in following the rules, and there's a certain value in breaking them. So the short answer is: if you want to break the rules, just break them. Following them isn’t as important as doing what makes you happy.

HOW TO MAINTAIN A SENSE OF HUMOR: This comes from the moment when, after many long hours of work developing a project, a previously unnoticed error becomes obvious, or a much better idea simply pops into your head. When review day comes, maybe the project that only took three days of work is better than yours which took two weeks. Why do things like this happen? Because we live in a cruel, cruel world, my friends. Architecture professors know this, and strive to impress the cruelty of the universe on their students by assigning vague, obtuse building programs and providing equally vague process criticism. These things happen, and often the only thing you can do is to have a laugh and move on. It's a lesson that's best learned young, before facing the real jokes life plays on everyone, like taxes, relatives, adult metabolism, and for the truly unfortunate, baldness.

In retrospect, even though it’s not a certainty that I’ll ever stamp my name on a drawing of a building, I think I can safely say that I learned a lot in architecture school. But don’t ask me to calculate heating and cooling loads; I forgot that completely over the summer of 2010.

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