

If walls had ears (and voices too): teaching fundamentals to interior architects

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What is a wall? Is it a thing of separation or connection? Does it divide or bring face to face two identifiably different sides; an inside and an outside (depending on where you're standing); in front of the wall or behind it; protected by it or incarcerated by it? Does the origin of a wall emerge from the desire to draw an abstract distinction, then a line of human bodies, then an inscription drawn in the dirt and /or on a map, then a line of posts, then a wire fence, then a line of stones piled upon one another and so on?'

Introduction and context

Concepts of place and dwelling are primary issues for interior architects and in the foundational levels of design education they need to be introduced in a manner that reveals both profundity and specificity to culture and identity. This paper examines a pivotal first year collaborative studio programme for interior architecture and architecture students which explored one of the most fundamental building elements, the wall, as a medium for responding to issues of human dwelling. Using introductory formal exercises, and metaphors of individual narrative, the generic wall was configured as a divider and definer, a filter of light and movement, a screen which can conceal or reveal, a sculptural element, a marker, a means of display and organisation, a habitable zone, not something where something ends but where something can begin its presencing.²

The use of metaphor in design education is a familiar and effective strategy for expanding design language and process by borrowing established concepts from personal experiences and other fields of enquiry. This project introduced metaphor to students in two ways. Firstly it invited them to consider the conventional notion of the novice design student as a *tabula rasa*. Many models of design education imply that beginning design students are blank slates awaiting inscription, where perceptual and technical skills are valued above experience and identity. Secondly it challenged this presumption with an exploration of the wall based not only on narrative metaphor, but explicitly individual experience. Parallels were then drawn between the image of the wall as a bare surface and the novice student condition. Many initial assumptions students made about the wall emphasised its limiting characteristic and ubiquity.

Why do we use the wall so much as a negative metaphor? The wall is sometimes seen as the blank canvas of (interior) architecture, a surface onto which 'architecture' is applied. But it is much more than that. The wall itself is one of the most powerful instruments available to an (interior) architect. By the arrangement of walls the architect sets out the spatial matrices within which lives are lived.³

Intentions and methods: material walls and human walls

This introductory project consisted of two interrelated exercises in the first term of their studies: The initial project was a full day exercise exploring a series of formal conditions and qualities including material, site, boundary, structure, massing, pattern, texture, repetition, and additive and subtractive forms. This took place on the first studio day of the course ensuring a memorable start to their studies. 170 students dressed in black in order to stand out against the silver sands of Pt Willunga beach. They assembled to construct two series of walls. Staff dressed in white to distinguish themselves in this extended classroom, which stretched for half a kilometre along the beach. The main objective was to realise that the process of design is not always permanent, that it considers context and temporal aspects and should be (at the best of times) fun. It was also a means for this large group of novice design students to get to know one another and their tutors in an informal quintessential Australian summer environment.

In 'feeling the immediacy of the material and the place'⁴, the novice design student, who otherwise does not know the parts of the design equation, was given an intrinsic starting point that was not in any way simulated. Designing space is, after all, the central and critical activity to be mastered but it is 'an abstract undertaking for beginning design students.'⁵ Visual and tactile immediacy alleviated the barriers of language and encouraged communication and social interaction between students and staff. Where protocol between students and staff had been more formal in other cultures, the process of making and doing became a congenial and responsive medium of translation.

By using familiar materials, sites and equipment, students were able to embark on what might otherwise be dauntingly abstracted explorations. While overseas students may not have had the same cognisance of these sites, similar qualities of nature, recreation and retreat accorded with comparable places in their homelands. Like the evocations of play inherent in the design activities they undertook there, the places visited were reminiscent of childhood adventures and provided an introduction to the Australian environment.



Figure 1: The first exercise was to construct a wall using sand, selected found materials and objects. Students responded by making walls which were organic and plastic in form, shaped around the body and using texture and detail to emphasise particular themes. Photography: John Forrest



*Figure 2: The second exercise was to form a human wall, using their bodies, and siting themselves to define or emphasise natural boundaries. The physical interaction required to do this helped establish a sense of studio culture and sociability.
Photography: John Forrest*

The two exercises were to construct material walls using sand, selected found materials and objects and then human walls, using their bodies or parts of it. In each part they were asked to address the following: site; orientation; massing; boundary; pattern, texture & repetition; structure and additive and subtractive forms. Despite being freestanding in the landscape, the relevance of these walls to the making of interior space was apparent, as students were required to accommodate aspects of dwelling and consider the links between material, structure and form.

Each of the five tutorial groups constructed one of the following types: a wall to invite transition and breaching; a wall to resist transition and breaching; a wall of belonging; a wall of containment and a wall to dwell in and on. They also had to conceive junctions with adjacent walls to build a single continuous wall in the sand. Students initially explored obvious visual analogies from the beach environment but were encouraged to try and abstract rather than pictorialise their surroundings.

In the majority of cases students responded by making walls which were organic and plastic in form shaped around the body and using texture and detail in the sand to emphasise the particular theme they were considering. The only group that chose to use a regular module in a rectilinear repeated form was that dealing with the notion of resistance. In this case, students worked hard to achieve highly tectonic and crisply detailed forms, which were devoid of personalised marking.

The second wall they were required to form was a human wall as a backdrop to the beach and defining existing natural borders. Each tutorial group built one of the following sections: a wall of vitality & exuberance; a permeable wall; an impermeable wall; an anonymous wall and a 20% less wall. One of the intentions of the first year is to orient novice students to their new status through socially based projects. This part of the exercise, which effectively forced a large number of students to physically interact, was carried out with spontaneity and camaraderie.

Both series of walls were photographed as a record of students' initiation into the school and the images revisited at the end of the year to symbolically mark the progress students have made. Subsequently they are revisited at the end of their programme as a reminder of how far they've come.

Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall

Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

The second and major part of the wall project ran over five weeks exploring this fundamental building element as a medium for responding to issues of human occupation. Based on a series of recollections of identity and place from a previous exercise, and underpinned by collected narratives, students were required to design and construct a single wall from white card through a series of working models scale 1:20. The walls dimensions were taken from the golden mean, 9040mm long x 2260mm high x 430mm deep.

They were required to address intrinsic aspects of the wall, including its political implications, pragmatic filtering characteristics and poetic qualities. Could the wall be a boundary or a threshold and despite its inherent linear and planar quality, how could it become a vessel of meaning and a place to dwell? The principal design criteria of scale; form; habitation; ergonomics; orientation; additive and subtractive forms; thickening and layering; filtering and light and materiality were to be addressed in the designs.

Process

The delivery of this project included three lectures on *Space and Boundary*, *The Body and Dwelling* and *Compositional Devices*. These were supported by specific studio workshops on model making and formal strategies. The collaborative studio was designed, coordinated and supervised by a lecturer from each discipline. Five practising architects and interior designers were engaged as tutors, each with a designated sub studio group of approximately 30 students each. There was an interim submission in the third week. Students were referred continually to a series of texts, which covered the fundamentals of formal composition, empirical observations of design and theoretical bases.⁶

Reflection and outcomes

Student responses to this project were remarkable considering their novice status and that there were no similar precedents of other student work or local built examples for them to refer to. In general, the outcomes showed a high degree of technical skill and a diverse palette of forms. While they initially struggled with the metaphorical translations from their narratives, the process of informally reviewing the most successful schemes to the whole group at the end of each session eased this task. By the completion of the project most students comprehended the notion that design can be generated by and respond to criteria and prompts well beyond the most pragmatic building concerns.

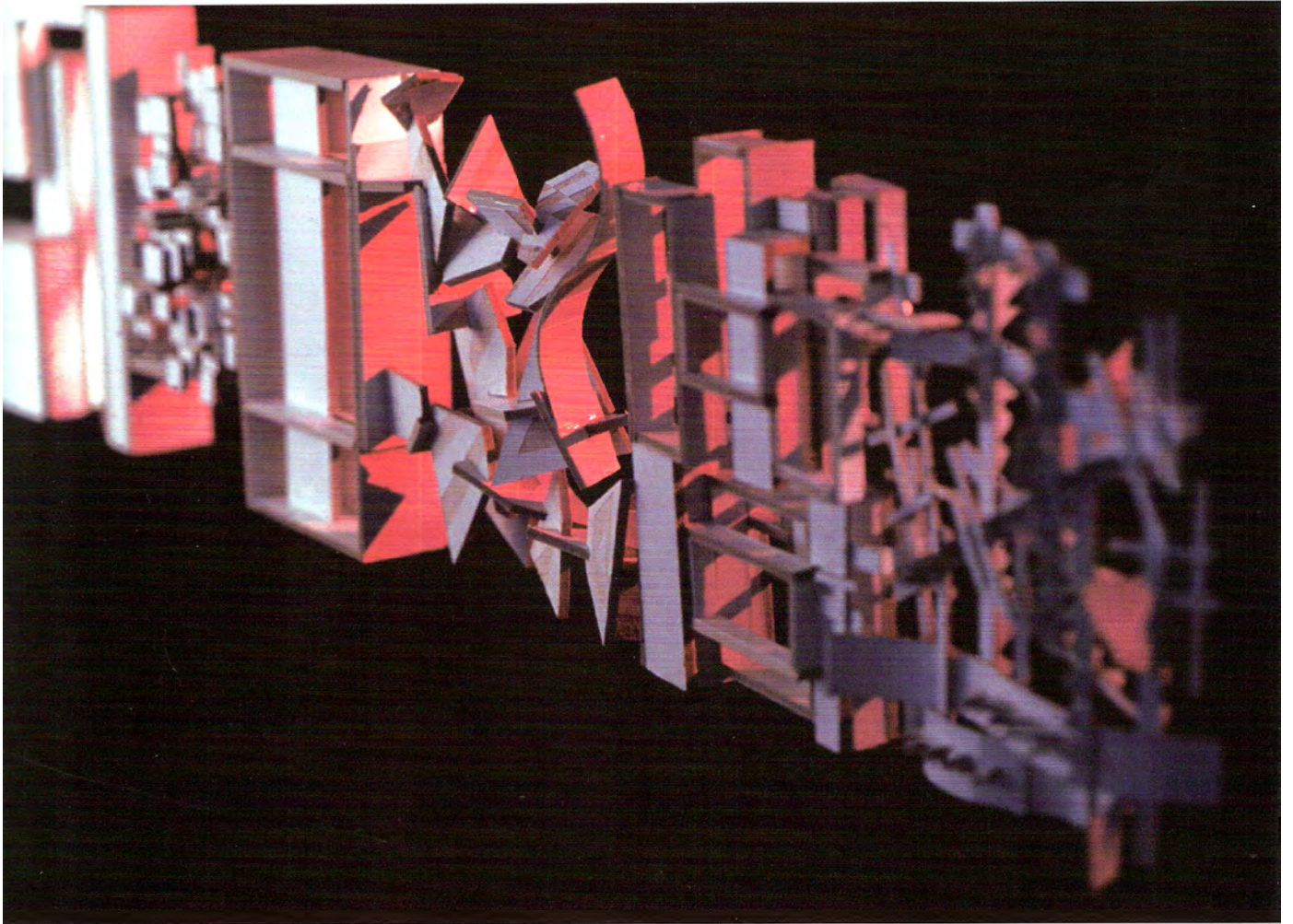
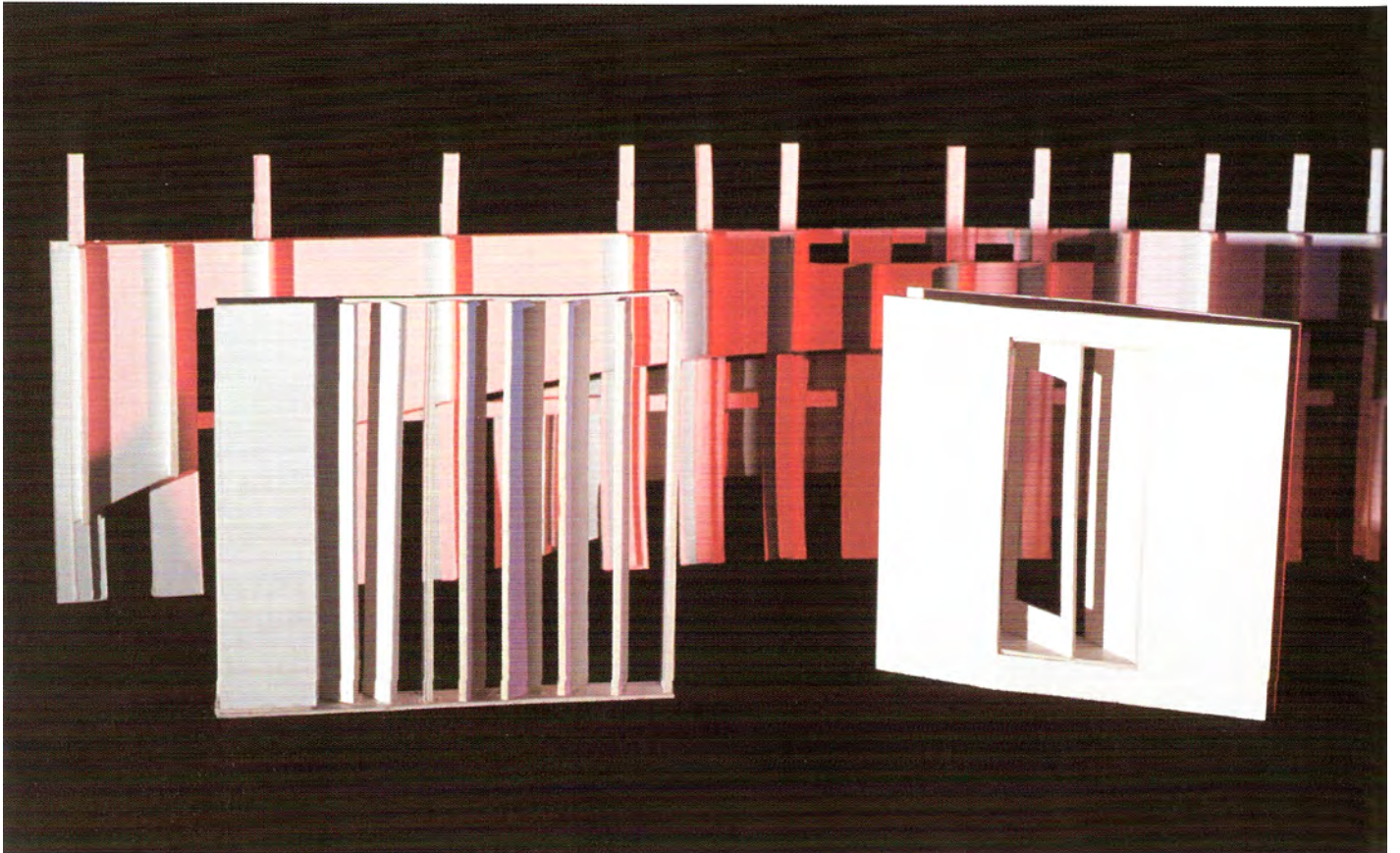


Figure 3: Students treated the wall as both boundary and threshold, and despite its inherent linear and planar qualities, considered it as a vessel of meaning and a place to dwell.

Project: Jason Hepworth

Photography: Authors



*Figure 4: The outcomes showed a high degree of technical skill and a diverse palette of forms for novice designers.
Project: Jason Wong
Photography: Authors*

Students carried over the experimentations with repetition, shifts in scale and modularisation they had explored with the material walls on the beach. Essentially all walls in this series were limited to a single material (sand, body, card) albeit materials capable of demonstrating complexity and variation. The range of responses varied from richly detailed, complex and dynamic models to elegant, beautifully crafted and composed designs. Most became adept at creating elaborate multifaceted textures and integrating their perceptions into both sides of the wall, recognising its inherent linearity and duality. Some compositions suggested patterns of coming together (eg the wall as a permeable element – openings for glimpses through or light to penetrate), and conversely patterns of coming apart (eg the wall tells a different story on either side). Other students elected to explore patterns of everyday ritual as common threads to underpin their design (eg considering datum of habitation; sitting level; reclining; ascension; storing and display as critical zones). Students managed to extrapolate beyond the reality of the white card considering and anticipating structure and material in their design rather than working the card only as a pierced or decorated planar material. Some of the less successful submissions relied heavily upon predictable representation, treating the wall merely as surface rather than a spatial and structural element. Others took safety in symmetry, with the wall acting as a pair of disconnected two-dimensional skins viewed from a distant vantage point rather than a walked experience.

In setting the second part of the project, the palette was restricted to white card deliberately. Its intrinsic qualities made it highly reflective; homogenous; readily available; cheap; easy to work and photograph. The project was reviewed en masse using slides of the schemes and critiqued sensitively with an emphasis on positive comment. This enabled the students to see their very first schemes in the best possible light, instilling a sense of pride in their achievements and a value in their work.

Rationale

At the outset the students were asked to consider Knight's question, 'what is a wall?' In its most basic physical form they regarded it as a banal and ubiquitous building element. In philosophical terms they understood its significance even if they couldn't articulate as eloquently as Unwin does its multiple readings:

Defending armies have their backs to it; athletes hit it; the weakest go to it; teachers find themselves talking to it...or putting another brick in it; ancient kings see the writing on it; children hide behind it...parents bash their head against it; drunks walk into it; nursery rhyme characters sit on it...and then fall off it, or fly away; the desperate urinate against it; the self-deluded paper over the cracks in it; equivocators position themselves on it;

businesses are driven to it; religious people worship at it; the mad go up it; absconders go over it; the frustrated are driven up it; you can encounter one of silence, sound, heat, hostility...; or ride one of death.

Plurally, they have ears, and tongues; secrets are kept between 'these' four of them; eaves droppers put their ears to them; lovers, or vandals, scratch their initials into their surfaces; those with whom no one will dance stand by them, as '-flowers'; the wicked are put behind them; witches were immured within them.⁷

However, by the time they completed the project they had begun to understand and manipulate the physical possibilities, poetic resonances and spatial nuances. In particular, they had made first steps towards translating abstract and metaphorical preliminary design explorations into expressive and tangible design responses. This in itself is an important fundamental lesson, not merely because it equips them with newfound confidence and essential design skills but prepares them to reevaluate all the seemingly commonplace elements for design in a more holistic and powerful manner.

End notes

- ¹ C.R. Knights, 'Manipulating the Light of the Earth' in *2000 Tools: 15th National Conference on Beginning Design Student* UCLA 1998.
- ² M. Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking,' in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 343–363.
- ³ S. Unwin, *An Architecture Notebook*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 14.
- ⁴ P. Pholeros, 'Learning form the Great Unmade Places of Australia,' in *Proceedings of the Conference on Emergent Paradigms in Design Education*, eds. Catherine De Lorenzo, Tim Laurence and Rob Samuels, Sydney: University of New South Wales, 1997, p. 29.
- ⁵ P. Von Meiss, 'Design in a World of Permissiveness and Speed' in *Educating Architects*, ed. Martin Pearce and Maggie Toy, London: Academy Editions, 1995, p. 111.
- ⁶ Some of these texts most useful to students include the following:
 - D. Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Vintage Press 1991.
 - C. Alexander, et al, *The Timeless Way of Building and A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press 1977.
 - G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press 1994.
 - F. Ching, *Form, Space and Order*, Van Nostrand Reinhold 1996.
 - C. Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self*, Conari Press 1997.
 - R. Krier, *Architectural Composition*, Academy editions 1988.
 - D. Lyndon, & C. Moore, *Chambers for a Memory Palace*, MIT Press 1994.
 - W. Rybczynski, *Looking Around: a journey through architecture*, Penguin 1993.
 - S. Unwin, *An Architecture Notebook*, New York, Routledge, 2000.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. 13.