

# New Paths – One Try

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## **It was a new experience at the beginning...**

During 2009, I was a guest lecturer at the University of Sydney (USYD) in the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning. There, I had an opportunity to participate in teaching the first semester curriculum. Prof Dr Ross Anderson, the subject coordinator lead 180 students through the course with a team of ten studio leaders including Dr. Claudia Perren. The Design program refers back to the teaching concept developed by Prof. Marc Angéilil, who taught at the ETH Zurich several years ago and published his ideas in a book "Deviations". To learn about these instructional ideas in Australia inspired me in such a way, so that upon my return I suggested trying the same program in Oldenburg. Up until this point, we had independently taught projects using our own teaching concepts which was different to the other lecturing systems in the school. With the concrete experience from Sydney, a reorientation of the preparatory courses in Oldenburg suddenly seemed possible.

## **The Structure of our Staff**

The path to the introductions of the new Transformations curriculum was not easy. After numerous discussions with Faculty, we decided to start a test run of the program over the course of the next four years. I managed the role of class coordinator and together with my colleague Andreas Oevermann, we put together a team which included Birgit Remus and Julian Krueger as well as a group of student tutors. This was financed with the help of the "Hochschulpakt 2020". It was a great pleasure working with people who share the same ambitions and who work together as a whole rather than as individuals.

## **Classifying the Program in our Curriculum**

The new curriculum needed to be embedded into the existing curriculum of the Architecture Degree in Oldenburg. The three subjects which were previously separate – Design, Free Drawing and Spatial Sculptural Design – were combined with the intention of encouraging the students to learn conceptual thinking, creative and illustrative skills at the very beginning of their studies. In order to show the background of the new teaching framework, we decided to keep the English titles of the exercises.

The exercises change on a weekly basis and build experience systematically. A tight schedule emerged from this. With small steps and a clear set of rules the students found their own space for design practice. They experienced the development of their own learning process which was consistently built upon each week and were able to check and critique their work in each exercise. The thought process, the drawing and the built model were used each week to explore iterations. In this way design is experienced as a process. The structure of the new course evolved gradually to inspire other subjects as well. By closer coordination with Construction teachers, a stronger syn-

chronization of ideas and outcomes was possible. Exercises such as **Circulation**, which deals with vertical access and movement through space, helps clarify ideas about stairs – both as a concept as well as a constructed element. The first learning modules were tested so that the new teaching concepts could be used as fundamental steps towards the new, better integrated module.

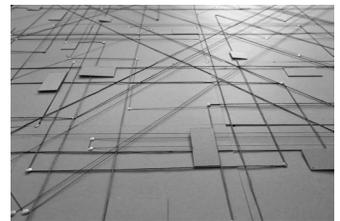
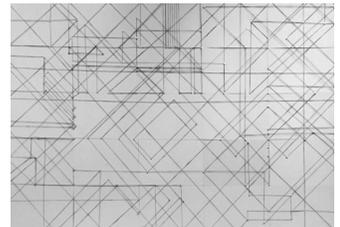
### The Structure of the Content

The assignment, along with its mutually coordinated topics, is divided into individual exercises which build on each other and form a continuous chain of action over a course of 18 weeks. This is the same for each studio group. The year group will learn together as a community, but the instructional exercises, the daily working schedule, the studio methodology and the individual consultations are shaped by the studio leader for each group.

In the first week, the students are welcomed and divided into their 4 individual groups. This includes the introduction of the program, the city of Oldenburg and the University facilities: cafeteria, computing labs, library, studio labs, workshops, supply store, student council office, photography studio and the “AStA-Infothek Café”. The semester starts with the construction of a timber presentation frame for each group’s models, as well as the explanation of reference literature, supply lists and the “Starter Kit” providing basic tools for drawing and modelling. An introduction of the weekly exercises is also presented. The transparency of a rigorous timeframe enables the formation of a personal time management system in appropriate proportion to the students’ workload. After two tests of the program, the introduction was complimented by a five days Pre-Course Session, which proved beneficial in many ways. It opens up their minds, it offers the chance to take a first insight into a range of topics in terms of architecture and how to make it. Students can find out more about their own interests, abilities, potentials and limitations.

The four group projects, each with 25 plots of land which correlate to the size of an A3 sized sheet of paper complement each other as parts of a large overall group model. Each student receives a plot of land to work with individually. After five weekly exercises, the midterm presentations take place in each studio group. Critique and suggestions for improvement inspire the work undertaken in the later part of the semester. The final presentations, which take place at the end of the semester, are followed by a public exhibition of all the projects. This allows for many glimpses into what is an imposing and stringent design workshop. Large presentation panels are displayed alongside purposefully designed portfolios (as books, folders of works, concertina books or individually designed works).

The first semester is thematically dedicated to experiencing ideas of space, path, surface, body, volume and space. Shape modification, rhythmic variances and connections between different plots of land are fore grounded in design thinking. The **Daydreaming** exercise demands disintegration of the planes or levels in order to achieve a transformation between the lands-



preparations for the exercise Daydreaming



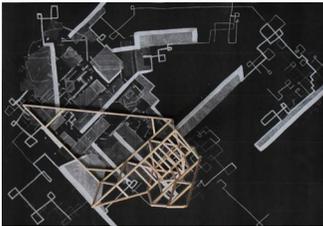
Daydreaming

cape and the formal space of a room. This allows certain ways of looking at or into topographical elevations, reductions and shadows.

The tension introduced with the topic “the space between” in the exercise which is called **Frozen Performance**, transforms rhythm and dynamics, shape modification and variance into a sculptural form. This three dimensional structure considers the laws of gravity and formal qualities of bodies in motion, ever shifting, time based, ambitious space which is defined by two dancers in motion.



Reflection



Reflection + Structure



Structure



Structure + Envelope + Terrain

The spatial form which emerges from the exercise titled **Contextual Composition** is subject to a highly organized, rational process in the exercise which follows – **Structure**. A sensible primary support framework is developed for a more sculptural-spatial composition of parts. In the subsequent exercise **Envelope**, the initial façade system is introduced, with attention to materiality and the composition of the character and appearance of the built form in its landscape. These exercises are based on a schematic process of abstraction in order to assist in the transformational design process. This series of gradual changes maintains a focus on the exercise to follow which creates a new context with more significance and specific brief requirements.

In the final exercise, **Collective Palimpsest**, the students learn the local classification of their plot of land. The plots are brought into an overall spatial context by combining with neighbouring site models (landscape and built

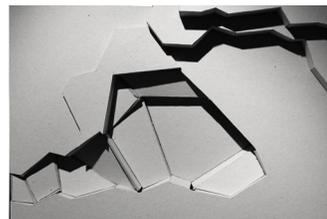
forms together). During this exercise, the students realize that the production of architectural space is always a collective process that attempts to maintain focus on the whole as well as the detail.

The assignment expands in the second semester by the incorporation of selected programmatic requirements and a specific location within an artificially assembled **Continuous City**. This consists of six to eight typical large urban districts (selected from Tokyo, Amsterdam, Madrid, London, Paris, Jerusalem, Copenhagen and Istanbul). The different urban densities shape the components of the **Continuous City**. The districts are joined together despite the social and historical differences, using the cultural aspects of place to orient oneself and to enrich it with diversity. This determines the structural response more than any specific parameters, standards or typologies. The urban location undergoes subjective perception, appropriation and transformation. Its qualitative features characterize the individual concepts. This is the single time in the entire Architecture Degree where the built form is allowed to define its location and to create a landscape which complements it. The maximum volume is defined by a difference of scale. The **Continuous City** emerges at 1:200, the building design develops at 1:100, and the space articulation section model is built at 1:50. The assessment of each weekly exercise depends on criteria such as ingenuity and innovation, conceptual clarity, decisive design, technical implementation and the final presentation.

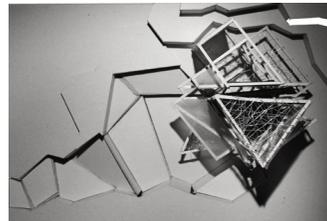
Previously, the introduction of function and spatial program as an assignment then led to 20 different city libraries. Now, the function is not the primary concern, but combines the location and the design process. The procedure of design development is the same for all students, but the programs and the design content is individually defined and unique. The context of the function thus takes on an entirely new meaning. The distinctive context of the specific urban location inspires and offers an occasion to test new ideas and to experiment. The structural response of the location defines itself as a part of a cultural identity and an existence as part of a real city. The students gain experience as part of a social community in their studio group, and of the year group as a whole.

### The Daily Schedule

Wednesdays, which are the teaching and learning days, start with an internal staff meeting. All the participating teachers and tutors are briefed on the weekly exercise and related topics as well as working methods, materials, visual aids and planning ideas. Following this session is a lecture attended by the year group, where a "keynote speech" is presented to explain the theoretical background and to introduce the topic of the week. These lectures are given by the studio tutors. Then, the supervised working process of the weekly exercise begins in the studio groups. The doors are open to enable thoughts to flow and the exchange of ideas to occur. There is a stimulating art studio atmosphere which is supplemented with much online research. The exchange between other students leads to mutual development of ideas and the participation of students in the work of the other groups is



Terrain



Terrain + Structure + Envelope

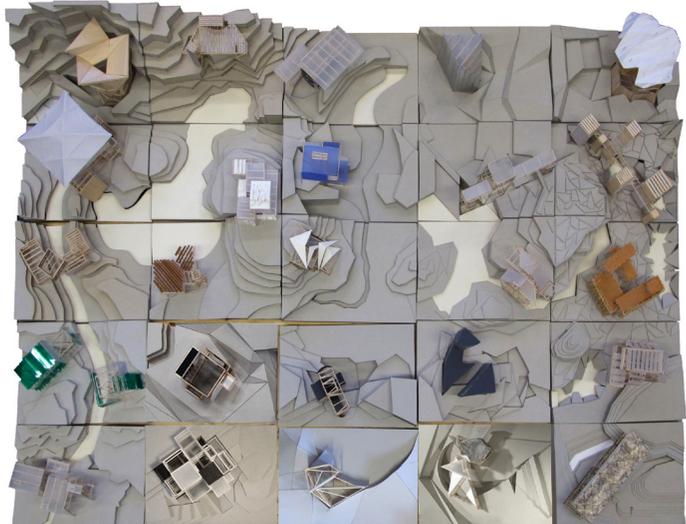


Terrain + Structure + Envelope

encouraged. Teachers and students gain an overview of their progress by observing other studio groups' work in development. Discussion of similar issues, interaction in challenging, intergroup discussions is beneficial for all. The students learn to argue and defend their position and they are amazed by the fact that the categories of "good" or "bad" are more important than "right" or "wrong". This inspires the struggle for quality and complexity. Rather than preset templates, the learning process comes to the fore ground, accompanied by the instructive demonstration of each learning stage and based on intensive discussions within the group.

At the end of the studio day, each group presents their results together with all the other groups. Some of the designs are further discussed. This weekly overview forms the basis of a continuous evaluation in which the works are questioned and discussed, associated and compared, corrected and developed. The students remain challenged and eager to continue. Colleagues from other professional fields are welcomed as guests.

At the beginning of the second semester, over the course of five days, a joint excursion travels from Oldenburg to cities and regions with a high density of quality architecture. Attendance is compulsory and the trip is funded by the university. The excursion supports the identification with the Jade University and improves the social cohesion of the group, creating a joy of architecture. The students learn to understand architecture as a language and are aware that architecture is something intensely visual. An excursion leader and a series of small presentations from the students at specific locations are included in the itinerary, which is enriched with some exercises "on the road".



Final Presentation, first semester

New relationships and contacts emerge outside of the small group dynamics, as well as improved social skills. Strong fundamental ideas about perseverance and dedication within the student council and the Faculty of Architecture are developed, and this has a positive effect on the life of the students.

### **What remains**

The students have learned the basics as an entry into the degree and as a transition process. They have grown with numerous substantive and human encounters and were allowed to discover new worlds and perspectives. They are more ready to respond to change and to shape the future.

Essentially, the subsequent achievements of the new curriculum can be summarized as follows:

Architecture requires blood, sweat and tears. Sovereignty and independence enable on to their own way and guarantees an increase in quality, one step at a time. Good time management and a degree of pragmatism help to survive. Each action makes more sense against a theoretical background whilst structural details can lead to a whole. Being part of a larger group strengthens the team spirit and makes it possible to draw parallels and to see comparisons. Our instructive approach makes it possible to take a majority of students along the way and provide them with a good chance of success. This brings great pleasure. Some can even outgrow their own expectations and it is wonderful to witness how practically they learn to swim in the "deep ocean". A lot of imagination soaks out and intensely creative designs emerge. These are currently being processed with an extraordinary passion to find out "what the building wants to be", in the words of Louis Kahn.

Many of the designs are intended to have a vertical structure and to show an amazing spatial complexity. These qualities clearly emerge through the special compositional process of transforming design. This formal and spatial design approach could be established at other universities, playing a central role in the systematization of the design lesson within the architectural degree – particularly in the fundamentals of education. It characterizes the professional discourse of those who consider instructional concepts and question the essence of the mediation of design competencies.

Whether this design method approaches "architecture of empirical form" as Prof. Miroslav Šik from ETH Zurich describes in "the Project on the Path from a Spatial Body to a Structure," or if it is comparable with a revitalizing process of "pattern strategy" as taught by Dagmar Jaeger, this process does not need to be conclusive at this stage. What we have achieved and experienced is demonstrated by quality. The results of this are joy and inspiration simultaneously.