Resilience in Design Pedagogy:
In Conversation with David L. Hays

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Design pedagogy today struggles between a desire of jettisoning the crutches of predictable, fixed modes and responding to a changed world where not only do we look at the disciplines and their inter-relations differently but also where new technologies of production of design is impacting the way we think about them. In this free-ranging conversation with David L. Hays, we explore issues of disciplinarity, innovation, open-ended and experiential modes of design thinking, role of history and theory and much more that excites and informs how we teach design. We acknowledge the contribution of Prof. Amita Sinha in helping to frame some of the topics of this conversation.

DALVI

In your introductory essay for *'(Non-) Essential Knowledge for (New) Architecture'*, you suggest that design innovation is no longer a preserve of the experts; it can come from anywhere and is likely to adopt lateral thinking and lateral methods. Can you elaborate?

HAYS

To innovate is to change something through new ideas or approaches. But how does innovation come about, and who are the innovators? Experts have authoritative knowledge. They know the conventions of their respective disciplines, whether practical or theoretical. Expertise makes evident both what is known and the limits of what is known, the *terrae cognita*e and the *terrae incognitae*, and that understanding has great value for innovation. However, new ideas and approaches are not located inside a disciplinary body of knowledge. Innovation requires something else, something from beyond what is known.

As I noted in *(Non-)Essential Knowledge for (New) Architecture*, disciplinary knowledge is typically conceived as if a coherent body defined by two lines: one central - the sequential process through which core knowledge is obtained, leading to mastery - and the other marginal - the “front line”, where limits are tested and new knowledge is formed. In that way of thinking, disciplines are corporate entities, and disciplinarity is a territorial enterprise. The two defining lines guarantee both productivity (occupying and elaborating) and integrity (circumscribing and defending). To be recognized within that framework, new knowledge must be contiguous with normative

understanding - meaning, it must be proximate to the “front” line. If it is too far beyond that line, its relevance will not be discerned.

In the bodily model of disciplinary knowledge, the outer margin, where new knowledge is formed, is called the “front” line, not the “side” line. The sideline is lateral knowledge—lateral meaning, literally, “of, at, toward, or from the side or sides.” Lateral knowledge is framed as either enriching or digressing, but it is not linked either to core knowledge or to innovation. In other words, the traditional model sidelines lateral knowledge. But being sidelined can have strategic advantages, especially when situations are dynamic, as so many are now.

Reconceiving lateral knowledge as a path to innovation challenges the traditional spatial model of disciplinarity as a corporate entity and territorial enterprise. In theory, the traditional model ensures disciplinary stability by figuring ideal forms. Yet, when situations are in flux, such rigidity can have negative consequences, just as the stiffness of a building’s structure can contribute to its collapse during an earthquake, or proceeding “full steam ahead”, despite apparent obstacles, can sink the largest ship in the world.

When lateral thinking is prioritized, the “front” is no longer a continuous, outer, boundary line but a distributed condition of emergent possibilities. Lateral thinking is non-hierarchical and leads to unexpected yet relevant juxtapositions. Compared to the traditional approach, it is more flexible and opportunistic—and, therefore, resilient.

DALVI

How do you view current approaches in design pedagogy? Do you see them veering towards flexibility as you describe?

HAYS

In the United States, as in many other places, studio teaching in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design is now dominated by a sense of urgent, large-scale problems pertaining to the sustainability of natural and built environments, particularly in urban situations. At the same time, there is large interest in digital fabrication: the making of objects, such as models or building components, using computer-driven machines. Although those may seem very different concerns, the significance of both to our moment is undeniable, in part because they are information driven (a priority of our time) and depend on digital tools to determine results. Such mediation is “globalizing” and has become a basis for interaction between and among disciplines, but it also warrants consideration.

As prosthetic extensions of the human body and mind, tools are empowering. Digital tools have remarkable capacities, but they are not transparent, and their use comes at a price. Specifically, they distance users from haptic and other non-visual forms of experience, and therefore ways of knowing, making them magical in the modern sense of performance that defies explanation. Users learn how to employ digital tools, but few understand how they actually work, and fewer still can make them. That incapacity is significant, particularly so considering the ubiquity of digital devices, and it seems deeply ironic in design given, on one hand, the premium snow being placed on technical solutions to physical challenges and, on the other hand, widespread preoccupation with the production of tangible objects. Digital tools rehearse an idea that tangible engagement is a function of consumption, not of production. It is a reward that comes at the end. Haptic ways of knowing have no place in digital design development. They are literally and figuratively out of reach. Material aspects are treated as an eventual concern of others: principally, engineers and builders.

Addressing new challenges using new technologies implies openness to new possibilities and approaches. Current design pedagogy is certainly well beyond the prescriptive certainties of the past. Yet, putting a premium on problem solving is not the same as embracing the unexpected. Too often, efficiency takes precedence over risk and discovery, even in the academic studio. For example, digital fabrication tools can be used to explore materials and discover new potentials, but they are more often

employed as labour-saving devices, facilitating the production of known entities, such as base models.

In education, the primacy of digital media over other ways of learning and knowing also results in situations such as the following. Several years ago, I served as a critic on an M. Arch. studio review at which a student presented images of a vast, swooping structure he designed using digital media. When asked about the materiality of the complex form, he would have been right to answer “ink on paper”, but instead he said “concrete”. Given the broad spans, thin proportions, and expansive dimensions of the form, there was no way it could have been realized with concrete, at least given contemporary materials and methods, but the student neither understood that nor cared. To him, concrete was as fluid and mysterious - as magical in the modern sense - as the digital tools he used to produce forms and images. Yet, his work failed to inspire the confidence or interest of the jurors; because his proposal lacked grounding, it came off as arbitrary and cliché.

DALVI

We encounter the arbitrary and cliché in our situation as well, both in framing of studio problems and in design responses. There is a constant struggle to break out from conventional modes. What has been your own experience in the design studio?

HAYS

In teaching and critiquing design, I advocate for grounded speculation. Speculation is projection without a secure basis. It is risky because the results cannot be guaranteed. Given that condition, the expression “grounded speculation” might seem to be an oxymoron. Being grounded implies a basis of understanding, of knowing how things are and how they work. If speculation is undertaken with such a secure footing, is it still speculation? Where is the risk?

Risk is inevitable because the future is subject to chance. As Ellen Hartman noted in *(Non-) Essential Knowledge for (New) Architecture*, following Jacques Derrida and Rosalyn Diprose, the

Kyle O'Connor, Transforming concrete edgers, from “Relevant Form” (studio), Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2006. *Photos © Kyle O'Connor. Reprinted with permission.*

real future is the one we cannot predict. Being grounded is not a guarantee against the unforeseen, but it leads to more interesting speculations because it is a check against the arbitrary and the cliché. Accepting the real future means being comfortable with anomaly - yet, digital culture is predicated on the eradication of anomaly. Although digital technology thrives on a promise of personalization, whether through preference tailoring or do-it-yourself production (*your* music, *your* publication, *your* dream), it reduces information to binaries, so everything is repeatable *ad infinitum*. Digital methods leave as little as possible to chance.

In the design studio, I encourage material exploration and experiment as a form of research. Experience is a great teacher. I am reminded of that every time I think I know how something works, then discover through experience that I was wrong. “Making” is now a popular trend in design education and practice, but much of that work is being undertaken with digital machines (e.g., CNC routers, 3-D printers), tools that have proliferated in schools, maker labs, and the private sector. As with analog processes, digital fabrication requires designers to think about materials and to discover some of their properties through experience. Digital tools can be used to investigate materials and discover new potentials. Nevertheless, digital fabrication prioritizes visual over haptic forms of inquiry and

understanding. Ideas are rendered using digital media, and data-driven machines perform physical acts of shaping or forming while “makers” watch from a distance. Between maker and matter, the machines are an interface that runs interference. Haptic experience is engaged only through the consumption of end products. In contrast, analog tools are indexical, in the sense of correlating matter and experience, and magical, following the older sense of magic as understanding the ways of nature. Making use of analog tools means discovering unexpected realities, such as unseen properties, and learning from anomalies.

DALVI

Can you suggest ways in which design pedagogy can be built around the practice of “grounded speculation”?

HAYS

Grounded speculation is a research-based approach to design. It means understanding and implementing the ways of the world around us. Design pedagogy supports grounded speculation by insisting on experience-based understanding. It eschews marketing - the idea that good marketing can sell *anything*. Being grounded is not about selling. Instead, it is a check against the arbitrary and cliché.

The idea of design as marketing is deeply problematic because it contends that what is being sold does not matter. Yet, it is pervasive in design education and practice, with disappointing consequences. For example, at an M. Arch. studio review a few years ago, a student presented her design for a parking lot meant to double as a detention basin after heavy rain events. In introducing the project, she remarked with a laugh, “I don't know if this would actually work.” Her instructor jumped in to assure her (and everyone else) that she did not need to know since the work was “just an idea”. To the reviewers, however, the student's disclaimer and the instructor's response signaled a problem.

It was, of course, perfectly reasonable that the student did not know if the proposal would work; short of building it and seeing what would happen, how could she? But she also did not avail herself of pertinent information. She did not investigate nearby parking lots, even those in which she parked her own car. She did not observe rainfall on permeable or impermeable surfaces, despite frequent opportunities to do so. Instead, she gleaned information from websites and rendered her ideas using digital media. So far as I could tell, she never left her laptop. My guess is that she did not pursue experience-based understanding because it did not matter to her whether the project could work or not. She did not see that as her responsibility. Material and technical aspects could be sorted out by engineers. Instead, her task was to sell an idea. Ironically, she failed at the latter because she missed opportunities to discover the unexpected through experience - for example, by observing how surface textures condition the movement of water over them, producing specific optical events - and thereby to produce work both convincing and new. Instead, she marketed a cliché.

A premise of grounded speculation is that experience engenders understanding, which in turn fosters the imagination. Consequently, the most innovative ideas emerge from a foundation in experience. Following that idea, I typically ask design students to make work at full scale rather than to produce representations. That means assigning projects with accessible dimensions, both spatially and temporally, such as event-based installations. Making work at full scale means engaging with materials, systems, and conditions as they are. There are no stand-ins. If a material is meant to be wood, it should be wood, not chipboard. If it is meant to be attached with nails, it should be attached with nails, not with tape.

Tangible engagement throughout the design process reminds students of the ultimate objective of their studies, and it helps them think about factors such as materiality, craft, scale, process, and economy in ways that lead to more meaningful outcomes. For example, in a studio I taught called “Test Plots”, students were given an opportunity to realize work at a 1,500-acre historic estate about 30 minutes west of our campus. Through research, consultation, and extensive physical explorations, starting in the dead of winter, they learned about the property's past and assessed its potential as a place of

recreation, education, and experiment. They then conceived and realized site-specific interventions, negotiating their work with the site's managers and confronting the change of landscape from winter through spring to early summer. Both of those conditions - cultural and natural - introduced a strong reality check but also became a basis for innovation.

DALVI

There is a growing interest among architects and pedagogues to engage with critical thinking and cultural theories. How can we bring theory and design together in meaningful ways? To use your terms, can you elaborate on linkages between "thinking" and "making"?

HAYS

Interest in critical thinking and cultural theory is not new among architects and design educators, but appreciation has never been universal, and it has varied over time. To some, theory is a preserve of "intellectual" schools and practitioners. I have heard "practical" students and professionals say, "I just want to do it, I don't want to think about it." Admitting to such a lack of curiosity - and, even more, taking pride in it - still astonishes me, but there is another way to understand the declaration, however it is intended, and that has to do with prioritizing experience on the path to understanding.

Theory is a practice of anticipation, and it can be - indeed, perhaps always is - integral to all practice. Yet, it is often framed as a set of esoteric ideas accessed through a set of difficult texts. Within academic curricula, theory is usually set apart as if a complement or optional support to practice. The implication is that theorists have done the important thinking already and the work of students is to absorb and apply those ideas.

To me, however, it seems essential that designers come to theory through their own interests and questions. To encourage that and to subvert the idea that theory is esoteric, I teach our graduate-level introductory theory seminar without a syllabus. We begin with a conversation about what matters now, in general terms, and consider how those concerns pertain to

Anna Hochhalter, Making nymphlets, for "A Nymphlet Exploration", from "Between Matter and Experience" (studio), Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011. *Photos © Anna Hochhalter. Reprinted with permission.*

design. Based on the first discussion, we decide what topics or questions to pursue for our next meeting and how best to prepare for that (e.g., reading, looking, watching, listening, making, visiting). In such a way, we build the course together over the course of a semester. The syllabus is completed at the end as a record of ideas explored and activities undertaken.

Teaching without a syllabus is unpredictable. The content of the seminar varies from year to year, in keeping with students' changing interests. If one thinks of theory as a set of discrete ideas to be encountered through reading and applied through practice, then the course is an outright failure. To me, however, introducing students to a canon without pertinence to their own interests is a risk of a different sort, in part because it denies them agency over ideas and suggests that what matters is not up to them.

DALVI

You have talked about "Landscape within Architecture" to refer to landscape pedagogy within programmes of architecture. What are the issues, opportunities and challenges involved in inter-disciplinarity regarding fields of architecture, landscape and urban design?

HAYS

There is widespread interest nowadays in inter- and other

relational forms of disciplinarity (e.g., trans-, cross-, multi-). That reflects a sense that the contexts of work are changing rapidly, so disciplinarity ought to be changing as well. Among architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design, a significant challenge for inter-disciplinarity is the assumption that those fields already have much in common - even more, that they are aspects or variations of a single discipline. Some academic programs in the United States have been testing that notion by consolidating architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design into "environmental design" units. Administrators assume that those fields are natural siblings and so can be elided easily. In their contemporary forms, however, they are predicated on vastly different concerns, objectives, conceptual frameworks, scales, temporalities, materials, methods, and paradigms - one might say very different dreams, even. Bringing architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design together for inter-disciplinary experiment ought to be predicated as much on differences as on similarities.

Thinking about similarities and differences together can reveal unexpected synergies between and among disciplines. To test that idea, I co-taught a studio called "Performing Space" with choreographer Tere O'Connor, a colleague at the University of Illinois. The course was predicated on our sense that dancers and landscape architects come to the same situation, site-specific performance, from different directions - meaning, different disciplinary expectations and methods. Dancers feel that they can respond to a site through movement but should not modify it physically. Landscape architects feel that they can transform sites physically but should not tell anyone how to respond to them. For the studio, O'Connor and I brought together dance and landscape architecture students and had them engage in site-specific installation and movement experiments, with everyone undertaking the same activities. For the main project, we divided them into groups of six, each with three dancers and three landscape architects, and asked them to develop site-specific installation/performance works on our campus. We gave a single-word—yet overloaded—program, "Darfur," and challenged the students to produce credible, meaningful responses to events that were both extreme and remote.

Analog Media Lab (Champaign-Urbana, Illinois), Filling a window with honey, 2010.*Photos © Analog Media Lab. Reprinted with permission.*

There were many lessons from "Performing Space". For example, the main project forced participants to think synthetically about history, politics, media, design, and performance; for some, that helped ground the idea of critical thinking and practice. Ultimately, the idea of discrete disciplines was maintained, but the perceived scope and potential of each was transformed. For example, engaging in movement exercises and working closely with dancers helped the landscape architecture students think more generously about the eventual users of their work.

DALVI

You mentioned earlier that studio teaching is currently dominated by issues of sustainability of natural and built environments. How in your view has this raised awareness and influence of environment and ecology had an impact on ground? Has it played a role in thinking and making of architecture and landscape?

HAYS

The priority of sustainability in design education is a response to real world challenges: from devastating events, such as the impact of storm surge on coastal cities, to insidious conditions, such as the consequences of pollution in its many forms. In

many contexts and at virtually all scales, modern approaches have not only failed to anticipate current problems, but they have also exacerbated situations, and those crises have raised interest in the environment and ecology. In the meanwhile, the distinction between natural and built environments has become less certain. “Nature” is, of course, a cultural construction, but even those faithful to the nature/culture opposition and who frame the former as forces beyond human control have begun to recognize that nature can no longer be regarded as wholly natural. During the past few decades, the plausibility of independent nature or wilderness has been undermined by a sense that humans have impacted the environment of the entire globe, that even places never visited by humans - the so-called “true wildernesses” - have been negatively affected by industrial pollution.

In such thinking about nature, influence by humans is framed as corruption or loss, but in ecological thinking, the “presence” of humans is assumed. Popular culture tends to equate ecology with nature in general or with concern for nature, but its meaning is more specific: “scientific study of the relationships between organisms and their environment, including other organisms”, and those “organisms” include humans. Understood in ecological terms, nature is a system of dynamic relationships in which humans participate. Ecological design treats natural and cultural systems synthetically not because ecology is “nature” and design is “culture” but because ecology already treats natural and cultural systems synthetically.

Growing interests in ecology and sustainability have encouraged designers to think in terms of dynamic systems, relationships, and “life cycles” (which pertain as much to raw materials as to organisms), and that has led to reassessment of familiar types and the recognition of new opportunities. In architecture and landscape architecture, one of the most interesting developments has been an expansion of “ground” to include engineered surfaces: both platforms, such as roof decks, and vertical planes. Until recently, such situations were at best a specialized concern, if not thought entirely out of bounds (e.g., how could there be landscape architecture without *land*?), but they are now widespread - particularly in cities, which are under enormous pressure to function well even as they become larger and denser. In the contexts of ecological design and sustainability, engineered surfaces have become a vital “meeting ground” for architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design.

DALVI

As a landscape historian and an architect, what do you see as the role of history in a design studio? Can knowledge of history lead to creativity and innovation?

HAYS

Among designers, attitudes about history go through cycles. Under modernism, history was dismissed as a burden or limit. Then, during the late-1960s and 1970s, new interests in history emerged as part of a broad reaction against modernism. In the 1980s, I often heard it said that history was requisite to good design, but by the late 1990s, historically-minded work had come to seem outmoded.

In recent years, history has been relatively undervalued in design, as if overshadowed by the priorities of urbanism and sustainability. In most academic programs, it is an expected part of the professional design curriculum, yet its relevance to design - not to mention to larger contexts of life - is not apparent. Most design historians maintain that understanding the past is essential to good design because it teaches time-tested principles or how to think in a detached, critical way. In contrast, many designers believe that “true genius” lives in the present; that design should be oriented to the future; and that history can be a fetter on the imagination, as well as a refuge for the less creative. Related to that idea, in popular language, to “be history” means “to be perceived as no longer relevant”.

Do designers today need an understanding of history to do their work well? If so, why is history relevant and how might it impact design? For example, are historically-informed designs more interesting, more intelligent, better grounded, and/or better resolved? Given that potential, how should history be taught to designers? Or, is history irrelevant to contemporary

design, perhaps even a liability, as many modernists believed?

The potentials of history relative to design have been limited by a broad misunderstanding. “History” and “the past” are often conflated. Many use those terms interchangeably, but they refer to very different ideas. “The past” refers to events or conditions that have already occurred and cannot be altered. In contrast, “history” is the way the past is represented, interpreted, and understood. History is not an objective body of knowledge. Instead, it is subjective, polyvalent, and constantly renegotiated. To paraphrase geographer Denis Cosgrove, it is “a way of seeing” - meaning, it is subjective, contextual, and contested. As in science, truth in history is a matter of consensus.

How you make history depends on who you are, when and where you are, what motivates you, and what media you employ. Just as there are many ways to practice design, there are many ways to make history. Like design, history is always made in the present, and understanding it as subjective interpretation of the past, rather than as an objective body of knowledge, changes its meaning for designers.

History is not objective, yet, like theory, it is often objectivized within academic curricula as a supporting complement to design, a foothold “over there” or “back then” upon which one might ground new work. Understanding history as a *strategy*, rather than as a body of knowledge, undermines that approach. As a strategy, history is as flexible and opportunistic as design. Also, as a strategy, history is not restricted to literary media. Curiously, many people think of history as a word-based discipline even in the arts, where historians prioritize a rich range of non-verbal sources. Professional historians tend to express themselves in words, but they don't hold a monopoly on the production of history.

History and design share a basis in grounded speculation, and exploring the two together can lead to new directions and possibilities. Most of my upper-level studios involve some degree of historical research. For example, in a studio called “Spatializing the Marvelous,” students learned about the culture

Analog Media Lab (Champaign-Urbana, Illinois), Retrofitting a Rococo armchair, 2009.
Photos © Analog Media Lab. Reprinted with permission.

of marvel in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe and speculated about how a sense of marvel could be cultivated today. Our research led us into an off-beat sort of local tourism, visiting “curiosities” within a 100-mile radius of our campus. The students worked in groups of two or three to develop their ideas through full-scale, site-specific projects. For example, one team used performance, installation, drawing, mapping, video, and web media to relate the ingredients of a conventional apple pie to their widespread places of origin. As part of their project, they baked twenty-four apple pies, each following the same recipe but using a different type of heirloom apple grown at a local orchard. They then brought the pies to the orchard and served free samples to the owners and visitors, along the way collecting stories about apples from peoples' life experiences.

Design can also inform seminar-based historical work. For example, a graduate seminar I taught called “Making History,” overlaid two threads: 1) a general survey of historiography from the mid-nineteenth-century to the present - from Hegel to Manual de Landa - and 2) focused study of three Renaissance polymaths who made significant contributions to European garden design: Pirro Ligorio, Bernard Palissy, and Salomon de Caus. For the term project, I asked each student to “make history”, implementing his or her understanding of the course content by interpreting any aspect of it for a contemporary audience. The focus and format of

that work was left entirely up to each student.
Five of the participants were Ph.D. candidates, and fifteen were master's-level students in architecture and landscape architecture, so I expected that five of the projects would be scholarly papers and fifteen would be “creative” responses. Instead, I received one scholarly paper and nineteen practice-based responses in a wide range of formats. For example, an MLA student wrote ten original poems, in English and her native Spanish, inspired by Ligorio's garden iconography, Nietzche's theory of antiquarian history, and hydraulics at the Villa d'Este. A Ph.D. candidate interested in Palissy's description of an ideal garden attempted to depict that vision through painting while experimenting with transparent and semi-transparent glazes, as Palissy did in his own ceramic work. An MLA student interested in Palissy's theory that stone could be grown organically, attempted to make a machine that would simulate that. An M.Arch. candidate from Serbia became interested in how Ligorio's credibility as an antiquarian allowed him to pass off fakes. Emulating that approach, and also wondering how people understand places they have never visited, she produced a book of Serbian folk idioms, which presented both real and invented sayings, images, and traditions. Lastly, Palissy went on long walks in the countryside collecting natural materials that he then cast in his studio. Inspired by that practice, an MLA student went on a long walk in a public nature preserve. Each time she found a piece of trash, she gathered it up and recorded its location. Back in studio, she cast the pieces of trash, making white plaster replicas of each, and returned those to the places in the preserve where the originals had been found. In general, the work produced by the students demonstrated more interest in designers' ways of working and being (approaches) than in tangible traces of past work (artifacts).

DALVI

Designers, as you describe them, “make history”. Can you elaborate?

HAYS

History is a way of framing the past in relation to the present.

Consequently, all designers make history every time they intervene in the world. Intervention is a form of interpretation because design never takes place in a void. Design is inevitably about preserving, transforming, or eliminating something that exists, something that supports meaning. Making history through design can mean adding, subtracting, or otherwise transforming, but it can also mean preventing change. Just as preservation, a practice conventionally associated with history, is an active form of design, all design is a practice of history.

DALVI

That's an interesting thought while we think about linking design and history, leaving us to ponder on possibilities in our respective pedagogical practices. I thank you for sharing your ideas and experiences. ■

Smita Dalvi

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Her area of special interest is Islamic architecture and aesthetics. She has lectured on these topics extensively in India as well as in some foreign universities and cultural centres. In 2007, she was awarded the fellowship of 'Fulbright Visiting Specialist: Direct Access to the Muslim world'.

Her research areas are in Architecture, History of Art & Culture, Urban Heritage and has read and published papers and essays in conferences and several architectural and cultural journals. In her research, she explores syncretism and inter-sections in art, architecture and society. She is an avid traveller and photographer. Currently, she is pursuing her doctoral studies at IIT- Bombay.