1992-93 recipient of the Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture

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Notes on the Methodology

The statements composed in the centerfold section of this publication have been compiled from two lectures delivered at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign by Thom Mayne, recipient of the 1992-93 Distinguished Plym Professorship in Architecture Professor Mayne delivered “Blips and Its” September 16, and “Recent Work” November 12, 1993 Exerpts. Exerpts from these public lectures have been (re)moved from context and (re)constructed into a new text by the editors

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K.H.
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1968  Bachelor of Architecture
      University of Southern California

1978  Master of Architecture
      Harvard University

1972  Founding Board Member
      Southern California Institute of Architecture

1975  Co-founder and Principal
      Morphosis Architecture
      Santa Monica, California

1986  Professor of Architecture
      Columbia University

1987  Rome Prize Fellowship
      American Academy in Rome

1988  Elliot Noyes Chair in Architecture
      Harvard University

1991  Eliel Saarinen Chair
      Yale University

1991  Visiting Master Teacher
      Clemson University

1992  Professor of Architecture
      Vienna Academy of Applied Arts

1992  Award in Architecture
      American Academy and
      Institute of Arts and Letters

1992  Plym Distinguished Professor
      University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
This is not only the first important public event at the School of Architecture of the 1992-93 academic year, but it is a very special occasion being the first public lecture by the Plym Distinguished Professor in Architecture, Thom Mayne.

Before I introduce Mr. Mayne, I would like to say a few words about the Plym Professorship. For many years the name Plym has featured prominently in our annual awards program. Mr. Francis J. Plym was a 1897 graduate in architecture. After several years of practice he subsequently founded and later became president of the Kawneer Corporation. In 1911, with the University of Illinois Foundation, he endowed the Plym Travelling Fellowship in Architecture which is open to graduates of our school who attained a distinctive record of achievement in practice during the first decade or so since their graduation. This has become a renowned award and indeed is one of the finest postgraduate fellowships in the field of architecture in the United States. Over the years, Mr. Francis Plym added to his endowments and today at Illinois we have three major fellowships in his name for graduate study and a series of Plym Prizes for undergraduate design.

Mr. Lawrence J. Plym, Francis' son, continued the family tradition of generosity towards the University of Illinois and in particular towards the School of Architecture. In 1981 he established, in his own name, the first endowed chair in the School, the Lawrence J. Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture. Mr. Plym continues to be an outstanding benefactor of the School and two-and-a-half years ago donated one million dollars for an auditorium to be built as part of the proposed building named in honor of another of the School's distinguished graduates, Temple Hoyne Buell. This project, Temple Hoyne Buell Hall and the Plym Auditorium, is currently in the final design phase and will accommodate major portions of the School of Architecture and the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Urban and Regional Planning.

Introduction

From Professor R. Alan Forrester’s introduction to the first public lecture by Thom Mayne, the Distinguished Plym Professor of Architecture; Urbana, September 16, 1992.
Returning to the Plym Professorship, it is important to note that this is not an annual appointment. The Professorship is a visiting type of position in the School to be held by a distinguished professional for a period or periods during one semester of the academic year. Mr. Mayne will be the sixth recipient of the Plym Professorship.

Thom Mayne received his Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1968 from the University of Southern California and his Masters degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1978. He is a founding member of the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SciArch) and has been on its faculty since 1972. Along with Michael Rotondi he established the practice Morphosis in Santa Monica in 1975. The partnership was dissolved last year but Thom Mayne continues with the practice with name Morphosis and he is the sole principal of the firm. Over the years he has been a visiting professor at innumerable universities, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Washington, Cincinnati, Texas, and overseas as well, especially in Vienna. In the course of his professional career, Thom Mayne has received many AIA awards, including the National Honor Awards in 1986 for the Bergman Residence and in 1988 for the Kate Mantilini restaurant in Los Angeles. Almost on an annual basis, Thom Mayne has received Progressive Architecture awards ranging from a citation in 1974 to a recent award for the Vintage Car Museum in West Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited widely, not only in California, but also at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, and the Deutsche Architektur Museum in Frankfurt. Examples of his work have also been exhibited in Japan. A major monograph entitled Morphosis, Building and Projects was published in 1989 by Peter Cook and Rizzoli.

I consider that we are indeed fortunate to have Thom Mayne as our Plym Professor this semester and I ask you to join me in welcoming him here, not only to his first lecture, but to his first session on campus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
In all the work, which I didn’t talk about at all, and I don’t know how to talk about it, I’m just inherently interested in oppositions.

I have a hard time talking about it, cause no matter what I say about it I can say it’s opposite. I’m just as interested in it’s opposite. But all the work is dealing with oppositions. It goes without saying maybe. In every situation there’s a counter-situation. It’s Thom Mayne’s contribution to my thesis work has little to do with more or less intuitive my project and has more to do with an understanding of what think at that level. It’s it means to be an architect who simply loves architecture. just an impulse. When we spoke of architecture, there was always an impassioned fervor in his voice, as if architecture were an almost religious pursuit that I as a student should completely immerse myself. He inspired me to see architecture not as a profession, but as a state of mind, as a passion and energy deep within that unexplainably drives us.

Observations

Several fourth-year students decided to take a weekend journey with Thom Mayne through unexplored design terrain.

Mayne acknowledged that the paths would be hard to follow. Trails would not be marked clearly by the usual limitations, the first impulses were only arbitrary impulses. You start with an preconceptions, or precedents. Furthermore, the uncleared arbitrary movement, totally arbitrary. (I) doesn’t mean any-paths would not necessarily lead back to better known av-thing. The whole endeavor is to prove that it does mean enues. The ways were to be appreciated not for what they something in the end. Because it doesn’t. You just say it goes would connect to, but for the aesthetic process of finding, something and you proceed on that. But you also challenge clearing, and marking the paths themselves.

Throughout the weekend, Mayne, the Master Pathfinder, led the students surefootedly along tracks which seemed almost nonexistent. As the journeys progressed, some of the students My primary interest is, again, like just about all of our work, it’s gradually began to see the paths under their feet. Others use as a departure point. I’m not at all interested in the notion turned back, confused and bewildered. Still others continued, of any idealized form in its original condition. I’m interested in unsure of their footing, but determined or trusting. Mayne’s strong and steady pace proved a powerful source of surrogate energy for those who stayed with him.

I was there to see them off and to welcome them back. As that we re-interested in is finding a conflicted condition of the work is actually transclural or it’s allowed to move over time. In fact, it’s reinterpretable through something which is time given new paradigms, new philosophies. It Jeffery Poss

Fourth-Year Design

I was also there to hear the tales of the journeys as told by Mayne, and then retold by the Odysseans in the following weeks. officially, the reflective and responding di-Palladio, it just gives one a different perspective. It’s no longer attached to it’s meaning system. To a reality from its conditions to value system, to a philosophical system.

I think there’s even an issue whether philosophical work is demographics, site conditions, grounded in meaning. My hunch, my suspicion is it’s not in a very literal direct sense. It’s wrapped up in its meaning but the meaning and physical conditions, is more inherent within the essence of the work.

It’s now seen as detached from that. It doesn’t alter the nature of the artifact, the fact that we see it as post-Capenicus, post-Darwin, post-Nietzchean, however you want to discuss it.

Sean Gallegger
Graduate Student
If straight line is the shortest distance between
There’s a lot of discussion today having to do with chaos.
Two faced and inevitable points digressions will
having to do with deconstruction. I think any of these are kind
lengthen it. And if these digressions become so
of grossly misunderstood. (Chaos) represents itself. In my mind,
complex, so tangled and torturous, so rabid as to
high levels of organization.
hide their own tracks, who knows, perhaps death
may not find us. Perhaps mankind will lose its way.

And perhaps we ourselves remain concealed
Thom Mayne participated in my studio during the development
of the first two projects of the semester. His insight was funda-
mental in confirming and reaffirming what the students (in the
scientifically and empirically) had begun to suspect.
I was aware that architecture is an enterprise that is
escapable projects in all black, and more realistic kind of lightwork, having to do with
beyond its reach (supposed) borders.
Mayne shook the entablature of their constructions by system-
You move to continually challenge the decisions you make
tally questioning every aspect of their projects, presenting
When we produce architecture, we produce the inside
 the opposed point of view, a variance, an alternative, always
taking a different viewpoint. We rearrange the table and
opening new paths, new possibilities, new interpretations, al-
try to destroy it. And by destroying it we test the pieces that
ways of dreaming aloud. Moreover, Mayne brought to the studio
survive and we test the pieces that don’t survive. And that’s
a desire for architecture and an intensity of engagement that
how we get to the next idea that becomes the piece that
not only surprised the young students, but also motivated them
desire an Edwards that includes the desired, challenged,
to find their own architectural desires.
reconfigured. It’s the whole method by which we can
collectively move forward. There’s still a privacy or an
(He left them dreaming.)
autonomy to the domain of the work. Somehow you’re
working towards that domain, it’s fuzzy, it’s complicated. It’s
Alejandro Lapunzina
difficult. Because it’s always difficult to articulate. You can
Third-Year Design
articulate it through the mechanism of how you work,
because that’s your language. That’s ultimately how you
can commit yourself.

I’m starting to sense that I actually have questions or I’m some-
what devoid of particular position philosophically.
We could no longer kind of complacently talk about the design
of something as simple as a plaza or public space without
I’m not in any way a philospher. I’m completely committed
asking questions: what are the things that mean in today’s culture,
to the work. There’s a relationship between the vagueness
of the idea and the commitment and the explicitness and
I’m very interested in notions of redefining public spaces that
the procession of the execution. My commitment is to the
define not idealized or platonic conditions but the interstitial
work whether it means what I say it means, is becoming
between lines of both represent possibilities, more and more transparent to me that it isn’t. You can say it
(never returning to a) historic kind of traditional framework,
means any number of things and it doesn’t matter.

When asked to expound on his theory or ideology, Thom
I don’t draw perspectives. A few little pieces there, I’m somehow
Mayne has repeatedly stated that he prefers instead to "speak
falsely interested in that. It’s not because I’m trying to be nasty or
to the object." The "object," after all, is the primary:vehicle
I don't wanna show you, or I am social. I'm just honestly not even
through which the architect expresses ideas, and, conse-
interested in it. It does not at all interest me in what it looks like.
quenty, the "object" must "speak" for the architect. Architec-
ture, therefore, is the crucible of architectural intent and ideal.
Our interest is, in fact, a very primitive one and a very simple one;
ogy, which is essentially organizing and giving coherence to the status
quo. The status quo is whether we term it chaos or synarchy, the
The first, tentative steps toward a new design project are
undifferentiated, whatever terms you want to put it.
Our interest is always taken with a certain amount of tepidation.
Unerect to continually attempt to rationalize the irrational. Actually, recently
tainty, however, soon yields to exploration and inquiry as
I've become more aware of the somewhat ironic situation of its
students push the limits of the program and "interrogate the
truth" in the course of the class.
I was previously aware of that. There’s a kind of absurdity
"object", through the design process.
the paradigm for the Tower! The students were stunned. They
had been working on the Tower for two weeks, and Mayne had
All of you are at least once bilingual. They’re all
rejected every idea carte blanche. Mayne’s criticism was that
connected. They all talk to each other.
students were relying too literally on familiar prototypes of
(It is) the inner relationship of a series of strategies which produce
,towers (lighthouses, guard towers, windmills, oil derricks, etc.)
more complicated series of inner relationships, the idea being that
rather than exploring what their Tower might be. Each study
model, in effect, circumvented the entire design process of
exploration and investigation by proposing a preconceived;
(also) has to do with allowing each of the systems to work within its own
prior Solution. The Inhabited Wall, on the other hand, had no
terms and to develop the relationships of the pieces in between. This
familiar typological associations. The students were required
is something that’s more at a level of an aspiration. It’s a resolution in
to deal with the project exclusively on its own terms without
re Gurce to conventional models.

Paul Armstrong
to the specific work at hand.
It’s the next place we’ll take the work.
Second-Year Design
Chiba Golf Complex

The Chiba Project: A Truce with Nature was exhibited at the Temple Buell Architecture Gallery, School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, from September 15 to October 2, 1992; and at the I-Space Gallery in Chicago, Illinois, College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, from November 3 to November 17, 1992.

Drawing courtesy Morphosis
Moe Berg, the multi-lingual catcher of the Boston Red Sox who in 1939 batted .273, was walking in Zurich five years later with a .32, but could not allow himself to assassinate Germany’s leading Nobel Prize Winning Physicist — a scientist who was at work on the development of the Atomic Bomb. Heisenberg was the scientist who had earlier demonstrated the principle of uncertainty, that there can be no fixed point of perspective...a contribution to the stream of events which would erode the perception of a static world. Concreteness of change is the new given. What is expressed in this new value for the ephemeral, the transitory, and the celebration of the dynamic is the longing for an authentic present...one which a short time ago was the avant garde — exposing itself to the risks of sudden and shocking encounters, conquering as yet uninhabited futures and orienting itself in an as yet unsurveyed terrain. Concomitant with this is a more incremental and cautious sensibility which replaces the heroic aspirations, the hopes and dreams of our modern heritage with its pursuit of unity and salvation. We now join one another by joining in speculation of the unknown. We do not fear this essential condition of the world as it exists today. We have no option but to live in the present...it is clear that our comfort cannot be found in the past (Estragon’s “don’t let’s do anything, it’s safer” or Yogi Berra’s “It’s déjà vu all over again”).

A rejection of past paradigm’s has led to an increase in work today which reveals itself as a means of satisfying self-inventions motivated by personal ambition within some theoretical framework of freedom. But what is required now are limitations — an understanding of our work as part of day-to-day ordinary activity, building on what Stravinsky called a “resisting foundation.” Our freedom consists in our ability to establish and impose new frames of reference. Architecture rests upon the immutable givens that compose it; places, histories, characters, and the forces of our planet. One of the possibilities of our work is to investigate architecture’s investment in the provisional and contingent circumstances of these conditions; which for us start with impulses regarding oppositions and conflicting relationships within our culture. Rather than reinforcing dominant values we seek recombinations and juxtapositions that might appear to be contradictory — allowing the unrepresentable to be perceivable. Our work moves away from stable alignments toward open-ended affiliations.

I have no interest in making this world perfect...rather, I am interested in contributing to, and sometimes preserving its imperfections while aspiring to make it somehow habitable and better. Because architecture is worldly and its meaning communal, no single view can dominate. What one alone thinks he wants it to be, it will not be. The forces are complex, there is no clear path and no fixed goal. The commitment required of architects today is to work and to continue to work in an authentic manner, it is through the experience of remaining in the game, of staying committed that the forms of our work will join us to our time and to its consequences. None of us knows with any certainty the fruits of our labor...we labor because we have no choice and because we have faith (faith which has nothing to do with what is normally called optimism) in the intrinsic qualities that are found in the work. We accept that those things we commit to will not always be pleasing, but by staying, and only by staying, we will learn something of the truth...and that the truth, maybe, is a good thing to know given that it is always both different and larger than we imagined.
In all the work, which I didn’t talk about at all, and I don’t know how to talk about it, I’m just inherently interested in oppositions.

I have a hard time talking about it, because no matter what I say about it I can say its opposite. I’m just as interested in its opposite. But all the work is dealing with oppositions. It goes without saying, maybe. In every situation there’s a counter situation.

It’s more or less intuitive, I think, at that level. It’s just an impulse.

The first impulses were only arbitrary impulses. You start with an arbitrary movement, totally arbitrary. (It) doesn’t mean anything. The whole endeavor is to prove that it does mean something in the end, because it doesn’t. You just say it does something and you proceed on that. But you also challenge it. That’s probably the most important part, actually. If you just proceed with it, you’re probably going to continually get yourself into problems.

My primary interest is, again, like just about all of our work, its use as a departure point. I’m not at all interested in the notion of any idealized form in its original condition. I’m interested in using that as part of the structure which becomes, in the end, part of the subconscious structure of the work.

My sense is that the work is always going to be broader than the specifics of a philosophical position and that ultimately the aspect of the actual essence of the work is actually transcultural or it’s allowed to move over time. In fact, it’s reinterpretable through time given new paradigms, new philosophies. It doesn’t invalidate the Pantheon or the Parthenon or Palladio, it just gives one a different perspective. It’s no longer attached to its meaning system, to a value system, to a philosophical system.

I think there’s even an issue whether philosophical work is grounded in meaning. My hunch, my suspicion is it’s not in a very literal direct sense. It’s wrapped up in its meaning, but the meaning is more inherent within the essence of the work.

It’s now seen as detached from that. It doesn’t alter the nature of the artifact, the fact that we see it as post-Copernicus, post-Darwin, post-Nietzschean. However you want to discuss it.
If a straight line is the shortest distance between two faded and inevitable points digressions will lengthen it. And if these digressions become so complex, so tangled and torturous, so rabid as to hide their own tracks, who knows, perhaps death may not find us. Perhaps mankind will lose its way. And perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in these shifting hiding places.

I'm never really totally interested in how a work looks. To me it's already there on its own. It's there by itself. Because of that, in a way, I think after it's completed, after it's done, I'm very much a viewer and I'm seeing it like you are.

I like this particular (statement), to take something that's so scientifically elemental and reposes the problem which is somewhat less scientific, less empirical, much more humanistic, and more realistic kind of framework, having to do with the nature of how one survives this world we live in.

At the same time, I think I'm a bit detached from the work. I think a lot of this has to do with a connection to a process and a methodology and that I have an interest and a belief and an engagement of that process. And understanding that process will propel and give thrust to this endeavor. And it'll essentially uncover the basic essences that are itself the work.

You move to continually challenge the decisions you make. When we produce one of those pieces my interest is in taking it apart, not validating it. We sit around the table and try to destroy it. And by destroying it we test the pieces that survive and we test the pieces that don't survive. And that's how we get to the next model, because the pieces that don't withstand that inquiry are altered, challenged, reconfigured. It's the whole method by which we can collectively move forward. There's still a privacy or an autonomy to the domain of the work. Somehow you're working towards that domain. It's fuzzy, it's complicated, it's difficult. Because it's always difficult to articulate. You can articulate it through the mechanism of how you work, because that's your language. That's ultimately how you can commit yourself.

I'm starting to sense that I actually have questions, or I'm somewhat devoid of a particular position philosophically.

I'm not in any way a philosopher. I'm completely committed to the work. There's a relationship between the vagueness of the idea and the commitment and the explicitness and the procession of the execution. My commitment is to the work, whether it means what I say it means, is becoming more and more transparent to me that it isn't. You can say it means any number of things and it doesn't matter.

I think today, particularly, that it's not useful that we're all trained in seeing and experiencing the world within such a homogeneous, kind of linear, manner. I think it also has to do with the nature of the knowledge that you bring to your work, and that for myself, the data, the information is much more connected to direct experience. It's not an abstract of information. It has to do with what you can bring to the work of your experience today. It's an educational setting. It seems there's a separation between general knowledge, philosophy, ideas, concepts, and the relationship of those ideas to the task at hand, to your work. And for myself that knowledge is only valuable when you're able to personalize it and bring it to bear to the specific work at hand.
There's clearly a parallel track that deals with the pragmatic and utilitarian, the accommodation kind of aspect of the work as well as the conceptual framework of the work which has to do with really the questioning and exploring of the problem. All the thesis people I'm working with, it seems like the major goal is really to define the problem. That's the hardest thing, really. What's the problem? It's not what the solution is. How do you know what the solution is, you don't even know what the problem is?

Only at the time that you can define the problem can you ever actually attach yourself and engage yourself with that problem.

I suspect that in any activity that has a high degree of creativity, that requires decision making, that comes out of some type of heuristic process,

its essential to develop methods of supporting and contributing to ideas of diversity and idiosyncratic characteristics of our world versus uniformity.

There's going to be a number of roots by which you can attack the problem. I'm not interested in proselytizing or telling anybody that I have any knowledge of knowing the way I do it. In my experience of teaching, I would actually say there are many roots and that I think there are relationships between these, and that very possibly what I'm talking about is useful or could possibly be useful to your own... nature of working.

I think there are a lot of different methods.

I think that the instinct... part of it is inbred and you're just born with it, and part of it is empirical, is knowledge-based. Your instinctual abilities increase with your increase of knowledge.

You shouldn't be producing something that takes twice the staff to maintain. It should be the opposite. You can use more of your resources for architecture. You're having those discussions continually. We're having a series of discussions with how we're violating the rules.

It has to do with the reality of producing work.

I don't think it's enormously simplistic to think that you operate under any one single kind of method.

Ultimately they're much more integrated. You work with any number of processes, maybe preferring or having preferences to particular (processes), because you could look at one architect and say, Well it's clearly an operation that comes out of topology.
Although the relationship to architecture, to its immediate context, its political and economic context is elusive and complicated, I think we have no choice but to frame it within the realities of our world.

Our association with our neighbors is no longer based on common interest within these physical and geographical localized domains, these conventional neighborhoods, but are based on this broader global condition.

I remember being in this little town below Marrakech, Morocco in the middle of nowhere and then observing this little boy coming out of this village house with a very up-to-date Walkman. As I got closer I could hear it kind of leaking out of his ears and it was, of course, Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. That's extremely interesting to me because what Mick Jagger is talking about is probably a bit more influential than anything we'll do in terms of changing things.

You can go to the absolute remote place in the world and it's astounding to observe this kind of phenomenon.
There's a lot of discussion today having to do with chaos, having to do with deconstruction. I think any of these are kind of grossly misunderstood. (Chaos) represent(s), in my mind, high levels of organization.

I think we all suffer from a series of problems that has to do with the difficulty or the complexity in how we... the limited way in which we uncover problems.

In chaos theory, it’s a strange kind of word, because its colloquial means the opposite. Organisms that have orders move beyond our visual kind of appearances which represent more complicated orders. But really, no matter where you look today in science, medicine, etcetera, you'll find work that has to do with essentially redefining our world in more complicated orders. I think architecture is very much a part of this.

All that we're interested in is finding a conflicted condition between something which is reflexive and responding directly from its conditions to demographics, site conditions, and physical conditions.

We could no longer kind of complacently talk about the design of something as simple as a plaza or public space without asking questions: what these things mean in today's culture.

I'm very interested in notions of redefining public spaces that define not idealized or platonic conditions but the interstitial betweenness of objects which of both represent possibilities (never returning to a) historic kind of traditional framework.
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I don’t draw perspectives. A few little pieces there. I’m somehow totally disinterested in that. It’s not because I’m trying to be nasty or I don’t want to show you, or I’m asocial, I’m just honestly not even interested in it. It does not at all interest me what it looks like.

Our interest is, in fact, a very primitive one and a very simple one; which is essentially organizing and giving coherence to the status quo. The status quo is, whether we term it chaos or cacophony, the undifferentiated, whatever terms you want to put to it. Our interest is to continually attempt to rationalize the irrational. Actually, recently I’ve become more aware of the somewhat ironic situation of its hopelessness. I’m vaguely aware of that. There’s a kind of absurdity, absurdity of a compulsion to organize, to rationalize in the face of the magnitude, in the scope of the problem today having to do with incoherency.

There’s no such thing as typical because each project has its own absolute personality.

All the elements at some time are bilingual. They’re all connected. They all talk to each other.

We could no longer kind of complacently talk about the design of something as simple as a plaza or public space without asking questions; what these things mean in today’s culture.

I’m very interested in notions of redefining public spaces that define not idealized or platonic conditions but the interstitial betweeness of objects which of both represent possibilities (never returning to a) historic kind of traditional framework.

(It is) the inner relationship of a series of strategies which produce a more complicated series of inner relationships, the idea being that each strategy can operate within its own set of terms.

(It) has to do with allowing each of the systems to work within its own terms and to develop the relationships of the pieces in between. This is something that’s more at a level of an aspiration. It’s a resolution in this case.

There are times where we virtually reach over and pull off the shelf another work, and it has virtually nothing to do, literally, with the project, but it has to do with an aspiration of the space.

The discussion has to do with the conditions in a project. So that I can leave this and say that the nature of that endeavor remains an aspiration. It’s the next place we’ll take the work.
All the drawings that I’m interested in, the models are all methods of unleashing the more irrational kind of forces that talk about a more active engagement of these elements.

The rational approach in itself, much of it is very much interested in analysis/synthesis. I work within that format. It’s more complicated today. I don’t think you work under any single format. I’m interested in type, I’m interested in grafting. I’m just part of all those notions of working. I’m interested in more neutral phenomenological approaches.

I think always, within competition, you’re working on hunches and you’re working on estimates of situations, especially when a preconceived idea will influence the future.

I would like to emphasize the nature of the strategy of building pieces, which I think really takes place and goes back to our earliest work, which has to do with an idea of departing from an idealized element to the periphery and using the periphery of element to talk about the specific situation of the site.

Again, it’s a condition which has been a preoccupation in a series of projects; this in-between condition very much parallels the relationships of the earth structures and the various mechanisms which talk about the edge conditions, the boundary conditions.

I work with these in a very detached manner from reality; it’s not that I’m not connected to that reality, but it starts showing as I realize the slides I’m showing you. I somehow purposely detached them from slides of the actual fabric, etcetera.

The way I’m showing the work is accurate. It just talks about my interest.

(There is) the need to define and interpret our time-authentically. The question is what authenticity means. My suspicion is that architecture itself is participating always in defining (in) terms of that authenticity.

Maybe for myself, anyway, it’s somewhat clear that architecture’s recent intoxication with this literal historical precedent as kind of mechanism for making our world is somewhat hopeless and it represents the most regressive strategy at the time when we face the largest problems with the magnitude and complexity our students are challenging us to resolve these problems, and the past, and the use of the past, not the use of the past in terms of what it teaches, but the intelligence that allows us to have its abilities for us to understand that we’re part of the broader, longer continuity. But it’s the literalness of that task which is seeking safety, is a completely and totally hopeless condition. It’s one, which for myself, is about the political situation of architecture.

I’m extremely interested in the nature of the vertigo and the nature of one’s balance within it; the nature of light and pursuing the emptiness of the space as one traverses it.
In modernism, early proposals situated architecture’s role within a social economic framework which very much advocated standardization and single production as part of the universal area. I think today, again, we’re in a very different position in that our society, which is subject to such enormously and complex stimuli, its erotic, political, economic life needs to deal with, to constantly counteract the codes...or unity that have shaped our culture to cope with the importance of diversity.

I think in the U.S. today there’s essentially a general lack of will to confront our contemporary problems and to confront them squarely and clearly, and although the relationship of architecture to its immediate context, its political and economic context is illusive and complicated, I think we have no choice but to frame it within the realities of our world.

Los Angeles is within this new condition. It represents this collection of infinite events, movements, objects... We understand this metropolis as unstable and dynamic; always an enigma. We try to remember, but it’s too complicated. Its identity is continually disappearing within its own presence.

I think it represents a modern metropolis and, in many ways, the prototype of the new city. And I’m not bragging. I’m just saying it just as a statement of fact in terms that it just (exists) the way it does.

We try to remember but its too complicated. Its identity is continually disappearing within its own presence. Most of us observe this city today with fascination and fear. At the moment, as our political campaign (makes) so evidently clear, the latter. Gone are the conditions of boundary, inside, outside, history, coherency. There’s little consciousness of the virtue of public life; not the existence but even the need for it. Los Angeles has little memory and nothing to recollect. I think, in a specific way, it represents a unique place in that its the first major metropolis in history in which everyone is a minority. There is no majority culture. And because of this it’s based on the conflictual condition of these various groups. Large parts of L.A. burn every 20 or so years. The repercussions are the existence of this conflict, which I think is otherwise so fundamental in a modern city. I’m still not sure it’s that different than this place. The future (of) any place. It reminds us, at least this particular moment in time, of the difficulty of understanding and defining ideas.
I'm just inherently interested in oppositions.
There's clearly a parallel track that deals with the
All the drawings that I'm interested in, the models are all
pragmatic and utilitarian, the accommodation
methods of unleashing the more irrational kind of forces that
The first semester of the design thesis year was a time of
talking about what we are learning, of movement through these
treading jagged paths, venturing literally into the
realm of altered terrains. My investigation into the liberative
the rational approach in itself, much of it is very much inter-
and creative possibilities of movement went through a critical
evaluation of the state of the work, the time of establishing direction. It was a convoluted journey past
consideration, what do you think, don't think you work under any single
peripheral issues—toward a clearer conceptual impetus and
I'm interested in type, I'm interested in grafting. I'm just
design method. problem? It's not what the solution is. How do
part of all those notions of working. I'm interested in more
what you know the solution is, you don't even
neutral phenomenological approaches.
what the problem is?

On the other hand, the Plym Professor Thomas Mayne gave an
I think, always, within competition, you're working on
essential critique which dynamically impacted the en-
and you're working on estimates of situations. Especially when
exploration. During the review of the full-scale steel stair, Professor
a week later, it was the evaluation.
I suppose Mayne made a convincing argument for continuing to design
and create full-scale pieces. This one-to-one method would
I would like to emphasise the nature of the strategy of building
offer a certain intimacy and detail in the work, but moreover it
toies, which I think really takes place and goes back to our
would allow for physical interaction and movement—an expe-
rerience which is about the state of deforming from an
tential testing by participants. It would provoke conceptual
questions of the essence or notion of the thing itself, the
architecture. In the case of the steel stair, it was not only
movement sequences which were challenged, but also the
Author's note: condition which has been a preoccupation in the
'finish' of the stair. Its treads and risers are a continuous,
successful effort for me, for the whole time, and it was a dis-
tfolded, vertical terrain analogous to a cliff, which offers the
relationships of the earth structures and the various mecha-
climber phenomena of balance, risk, and security. Similarly,
isms which talk about the edge conditions, the boundary
conventional notions and uses of walls, floors, and apertures
conditions
could be questioned through the making of such constructions.

Mayne suggested that the final work might be an additive
work with these in a way that really is more than just
installing of these testpieces, which could virtually present
that I'm not connected to that reality, but it starts showing as I
myself. Thinking about is useful or could possibly be useful to
realize the slides I'm showing you. I somehow purposely de-
your own... nature of working
attached them from slides of the actual fabric, etcetera.

I think there are a lot of different methods
I think that the instinct... part of it is inbred and you're
The way I'm showing the work is accurate. It
just born with it, and part of it is empirical, it knows
just talks about my interest.
edge-based. You're instinctual abilities increase with
your increase of knowledge.

You shouldn't be producing something that takes
(There is) the need to define and interpret our time
with the staff to maintain. It should be the oppo-
authentically. The question is, what authenticity
site. You can use more of your resources for
continually. We're having a series of discussions
authenticity. with how we're violating the rules.

Maybe for myself, anyway, it's somewhat clear that
architecture's recent intoxication with this literal his-
torical precedent as kind of mechanism for making
our world is somewhat hopeless and it represents the
Thom Mayne's emphasis on the linkage between making and
the empathic directive of the building. It's the
conceptual work gave rise to the current direction. For me, the
the largest problems with the magnitude and comp-
pulsion of the project at full-scale became necessary to the
complexity; our students are challenging us to resolve
these problems, and the past, and the use of the
past, not the use of the past in terms of what it
The design process has been further guided by Professor Mayne,
teaches, but the intelligence that allows us to have
who is an empathic directive to build, react, design, and build
it's abilities for us to understand that we're part of the
— rather than the typical tracking of design, followed by
broader design continuum; and the interaction of
construction. This affirms a critical linkage between concept
that are seeking safety, is a completely and
and making.
totally hopeless condition. It's one, which for myself,
is about the political situation of architecture.
Finally, Thom Mayne was a strong proponent of the constrained
icehouse site. He supported the notion of an indirect potential
intervention in that the nature of the condition
which might be derived from a condition which initially seems
the nature of one's balance within it; the nature
to contradict the objective of mobile freedoms. His conviction
of light and pursuing the emptiness of the space as
strengthened my own, and his influence helped to open doors
and traverses it
for an atypical experiment in an improbable scenario. To
intervene in a lifeless void, to create possibilities in a catatonic
— these are cliffs to scale: a proving ground for a thesis
This has to do with the reality of producing work
on movement and liberty.
I don't think it's enormously simplistic to think that you operate
under any one single kind of method.
Benjamin Nesbitt
Graduate Student
in modernism, early proposals were situated architecture’s role within a social economic framework which very much advocated standardization and single production as part of the universal area. I think today, again, we’re in a very different position in that our society which is subject to such enormously and complex stimuli it’s erotic political economic life needs to deal with, to constantly counteract the codes...of unity that have shaped our culture to cope with the importance of diversity.

I should describe Thom Mayne’s two visits to the studio as architectural wake-up calls (calls some responded to enthusiastically, others sluggishly). Professor Mayne challenged our contemporary paradigms and to confront them squarely and clearly, students to think about architecture and its role in society as well as their own ideas with respect to the studio and their future profession. Professor Mayne wanted to challenge the complacencies into which people often drift.

Los Angeles is within this new condition. It represents this collection of infinite events, movements, objects...We understand this metropolis as unstable and dynamic; always an enigma. We try to remember but its too complicated. Its identity is continually disappearing within its own presence.

Professor Mayne encouraged students to think and take responsibility for their education.

I think it represents a modern metropolis and, in many ways, the prototype of the new city. And I’m not bragging, I’m just saying it just as a statement.

Kevin Hinders
Third-Year Design

We try to remember but its too complicated. Its identity is continually disappearing within its own presence. Most of us observe this city today with fascination and fear. At the moment, as our political campaign (makes) so evidently clear, the latter. Gone are the conditions of boundary, inside, outside, history, coherency. There’s little consciousness of the virtue of public life; not the existence but ever the need for it. Los Angeles has little memory and nothing to recollect. I think in a specific way represents a unique place in that its the first major metropolis in history which everyone is a minority. There is no majority culture. And because of this its based on the conflictual condition of these various groups. Large parts of L.A. burn every 20 or so years. The repercussions are the existence of this conflict, which I think is otherwise so fundamental in a modern city. I’m still not sure it’s that different than this place. The future (of any place) it reminds us, at least this particular moment in time, of the difficulty of understanding and defining ideas.

I had a unique opportunity to observe and experience Professor Mayne’s participation at the school during his tenure as Plym Professor.

Although the relationship to architecture, its political and economic context is elusive and complicated. I think we have no choice but to frame it within the realities of our world. As a design teaching assistant I saw him thoroughly bewildered a class of sophomores with his carefully controlled diatribes on the future of the profession and their work as students. The results appeared to be mixed, some were incited, others apparently indifferent. Many sophomores, at this first year of design, were continually challenged to understand where Mayne was coming from given their own rather limited architectural experience.

Observations

As a student involved in my own thesis project, I found Professor Mayne’s critiques seemed to come at a point where I needed to make critical thesis decisions. They helped reveal some deficiencies in my approach and also the strengths.

When I appeared to be going nowhere, which seemed more often than I’d like, he was very quick to suggest other directions, as he did in the case of many other projects. Mayne took the role of inquisitor in critiques for many projects, revealing sometimes great weaknesses in their hypotheses. At many times our level of unpreparedness was similar to the sophomores’.

Whether some of us realize this or not is at times frightening.

It was, of course, Mick Jagger and the Professor Mayne took his role of advocate and inquisitor very seriously on a lot of different levels, and he managed to shake things up quite a bit here before, during, and after his presence. His long-term effect is uncertain, definitely positive, and definitely memorable. Mayne’s intensity is inspiring, especially when you consider his role as practicing architect as well, riding the line between intent and execution. To say that he gave hope to a few cynical students about to go out into the profession seems a little extreme, but still...

Ged Trias

Graduate Student
M
Thom Mayne
1992–93 Recipient of the Plym Distinguished Professorship

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The Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture has been endowed through a gift made to the school of Architecture in 1981 by Mr. Lawrence J. Plym of Niles, Michigan, past President of Kawneer Company and formerly director and officer of other companies and institutions prior to his retirement. Mr. Plym and his family have a long association with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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Lawrence J. Plym, 1906 — 1993

This book is dedicated to the memory and generosity of Mr. Lawrence J. Plym, friend, alumnus, and benefactor to the School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.