

## ***On the Uselessness and Advantages of Studio***

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Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 text, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, described an age of "hurried empiricism" in which we no longer ask if knowledge is true, but rather of "what use is it?" In a more recent essay, the architectural critic and professor David Leatherbarrow echoes this evaluation in architectural practice and theory, when he describes what he sees as a shift "from what the building is to what it does."<sup>1</sup> The recent proliferation of performance-themed conferences, symposia, and publications, and even a few built projects, certainly support this condition. Concomitant to this turn in architectural epistemology is a shift in the expectations of the studio. The research-based studio has recently re-emerged and with it a renewed fascination with fabrication, bio-mimicry, information-based design, and all things parametric often under the guise of performance. At best, perhaps, is a new awareness achieved by grafting the techniques of the natural sciences onto architectural production in the hope of providing a new "utilitas," by way of material efficiencies, form-making, fabrication techniques, responses to ecological crises, and even a renewed sense of the discipline of architecture. Despite these noble intentions, most architectural studios still, however, produce work that does not get built and is not inhabited. Further, the model of studio as mimicking professional practice with studio instructor acting as client and coach to an individual designer is inherently flawed. Practice, in all its various guises, simply does not work in the same way. While I would not argue that any of this is entirely useless, I would argue that is not always useful in the manner intended. Studio is simply not useful in the same way that architectural practice may claim to be so. What if a studio project recognized it's own uselessness? What if a project was not intended to be anything other than the artifacts produced – drawings, models, writings – not "of" a future oriented production, but valuable in and of themselves? What might be the use of that?

## ***On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life***

The title of this article, references Nietzsche's seminal work, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche describes three approaches to history with both positive and negative affects. His essay is referred to as untimely as it acts "counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come."<sup>3</sup> While not intending to compare Nietzsche's essay to this one, there is a certain untimely quality to my thesis that will become more apparent when the work is shown. Nietzsche begins the essay by comparing ourselves to cows in the field. Cows, he argues, are happy because they have no memory. We, however, are burdened by the weight of history. We cannot escape it. It is clear from recent decisions by NAAB and other well-intentioned bureaucratic bodies, architecture school is far from any risk of being burdened by history. Studio, however, and all of the student performance criteria covered therein is certainly entrenched in our curricula. I am not aware of a professional school of architecture, for example, that does not have studio as the focus as evidenced by both the units earned and hours spent. Can the uses and advantages of history outlined by Nietzsche be used to more clearly define the use of studio?

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<sup>1</sup> David Leatherbarrow, "Unscripted Performances." *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009): 43.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UPress, 1983). Darden bought the book while he was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UPress, 1983): 60. Nietzsche is arguing for the study of the classics.

The first approach to history was termed by Nietzsche as Monumental. He uses the metaphor of a mountain range. The peaks of the mountains are akin to the great acts of history. The use of such an approach to history is positive in that we are reminded that, as a culture, we might again be great. Taken solely as the acts of singular men, however, the context, richness, and depth of those acts are lost. As Nietzsche states clearly:

Monumental history deceives by analogies: with seductive similarities it inspires the courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism: and when we go on to think of this kind of history in the hands and heads of gifted egoists and visionary scoundrels, when we see empires destroyed, princes murdered, wars and revolutions launched and the number of historical 'effects in themselves,' that is to say, effects without sufficient cause, again augmented.<sup>4</sup>

The architecture studio similarly benefits from a clear, even heroic, vision. It is not clear, however, what is gained by the studio in which the rationale, rhetoric, representation and even aesthetic of the students' work is driven solely by the interests of the professor. While the work may be valuable in that it presents a well-defined position, that position often lacks the depth and richness of the original source. Worse, perhaps is the non-critical use of precedent in which projects are reproduced or simply, copied.

The second model of history according to Nietzsche is the Antiquarian and he explains this approach with a metaphor of a tree. The antiquarian historian focuses so much on the roots of the tree that they fail to recognize that the tree has limbs and bears fruit. Nietzsche lauds the intense focus and careful study but he condemns history for history's sake. As he clearly states, "Antiquarian history itself degenerates from the moment it is no longer animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present."<sup>5</sup> While the fascination with the minutiae of history is more of an issue in graduate programs, his critique also bears light on the current fascination in architecture schools with all things performative. Of course, architecture is inherently technological and a strict focus on the technical may produce work that is indeed performative. But how is this performance tested? Often, much of this work has the look of technical expertise, but in reality very little is known of the performance of the work. The extreme focus on building systems, often represented as construction documents and exploded axonometrics, reduces the inherent complexity of the experience of architecture to material assemblage often argued as professional, or, even worse, comprehensive.

Nietzsche names the third mode of history as the Critical and it is this approach to history that is in the service of life. A critical history is one that recognizes any use of history is for the present. This is not, in the terms of Tafuri, operative.<sup>6</sup> It is, rather, one that knows of history in the fullest sense, but is able to overcome it. Again, Nietzsche says it better than I am able. "If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it, and finally condemning it."<sup>7</sup> As stated at the beginning of this essay, the studio is not an analog to practice; the work presented at reviews is not a precursor to built form; there is no budget; the professor is not the client, or subcontractor; and, the site is often much more negotiable in a studio than in the professional world. If one takes away all of these tropes, what is left of the studio? What is actually taught in the studio? When compared to other courses such as history, structures, or environmental systems, courses that each have measurable learning outcomes, what is the use of studio? I will, again, posit that architecture studio in these terms is useless but there is an inherent advantage to this uselessness.

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UPress, 1983): 71

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UPress, 1983): 75

<sup>6</sup> See Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Tr. Giorgio Verrecchia. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UPress, 1983): 75

I will propose through the remainder of this essay that the work of Douglas Darden offers an exemplary model for the advantages and uselessness of a studio project. Darden organized each of his projects into the following categories: *pre-texts*, *con-texts*, *texts*, *sub-texts*, and *archi-texts*. I will organize the remainder of this essay similarly.

### ***pre-texts***

Though very little has been written about Darden, his work is well-known, mostly for the exquisite pencil drawings produced for various shows and for his text, *Condemned Building*, published in 1993.<sup>8</sup> An obvious debt to Lequeu, Piranesi and Duchamp is seen in the first two images of *Condemned Building*.<sup>9</sup> In the frontispiece Darden has rendered himself similarly to Lequeu, as a bare breasted nun. The self-portrait sits within a rotated arch that bears a striking similarity to another drawing from Lequeu titled "He is free." Darden asks on his own frontispiece "Is he free?" Darden's hinging of Lequeu's arch mimics a strategy employed by Marcel Duchamp in much of the surrealist's work. Duchamp also rendered himself as a woman. Rose Sèlavy was famously photographed by Man Ray in 1921. The name, a pun, and identity of the subject can both be read as hinged; Duchamp's identity is both male and female; Rose Sèlavy is both a name and, when pronounced in French translates to "eros is life." In Philippe Duboy's study on Lequeu, Duchamp is photographed under his own arch.<sup>10</sup> Duchamp's *Water Mill* is rotated ninety degrees counter clockwise to more closely match Lequeu. Darden's frontispiece rotates Lequeu's original ninety degrees clockwise. An added affect of Darden's hinging is that his arch forms the letter "D."<sup>11</sup>

Above Darden's head may or may not be a guillotine. The frontispiece is followed by a title image that is indeed a guillotine. It is not clear, however, if the guillotine has caused the architectural ruin below or if the semi-circular form has been cut to fit the executed person's neck. (Or, is it a rotated "D"?) The metal bowl beyond the concrete situates the viewpoint – the reader is looking into the guillotine. Within the darkness beyond, Darden has rendered the second state of Plate IX from Piranesi's *Carceri* etchings. Duchamp's *Large Glass*, though not a direct representation of a guillotine, was indeed understood as a section cut. Darden connects the two as seen in the construction of the supports of his own guillotine. Darden's image also includes initials of each of the projects contained in the book. The only project missing is the *Sex Shop*. Into the block of wood that might contain the initials has been carved a provocatively ovular hole, similar to that most famous peephole in Philadelphia – that of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, which may be read as the inverse of his earlier *Large Glass*. The quote written on the side support of the guillotine "How many, think ye, have fallen into Plato's Honey Head and sweetly perished there?" is from Melville's *Moby Dick* and it concludes a section in which Tashtego is rescued by Queequeg.<sup>12</sup> Tashtego has been given the honor of "bailing the case" – cutting an incision into the sperm whale's head and

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Darden. *Condemned Building*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993). After graduating Magna Cum Laude with degrees in English and Psychology from the University of Denver in Colorado in 1974, Darden spent two years in New York at Parsons and then, from 1979-83 in Cambridge at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Although he graduated with distinction, his time at the GSD was not particularly rewarding, with the exception of a studio with Stanley Tigerman in his final year. Tigerman's witty approach to, and critique of, architectural agency, as seen in his *Versus: an American Architect's Alternatives* (1982) written while Darden was his student, is an obvious inspiration. Clearly so, as Tigerman, along with Darden's parents, receive dedication in Darden's book.

<sup>9</sup> An earlier study for the frontispiece contains the following books: *La Boite Vert* (Duchamp), *Architecture Civile* (Lequeu), *Bouleè* (sic.), and *Le Carceiri* (sic.) di GioBattista Piranesi.

<sup>10</sup> See Philippe Duboy, *Lequeu: An Architectural Enigma*. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987): 96-97.

<sup>11</sup> It may seem an odd or, even, superfluous comment. Darden and Lequeu both scatter their initials throughout their work. Note the initials "DD" on the frontispiece.

<sup>12</sup> The events are described in chapter 78 of Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, the Whale*. (New York: Bantam, 1986).

then repeatedly plunging a bucket attached to a twenty foot pole into the hole to retrieve the prized spermaceti. The head of the whale was suspended half over the boat and half over the water. After a sudden shift, Tashtego falls in the hole he's created and then the head, with Tashtego inside, falls into the water. Queequeg dives in to save him and does so by pulling Tashtego out of the hole by his hair. Melville lauds Tashtego's skill in midwifery and argues that it should be taught along with fencing, boxing, riding and rowing. Birth is related to death with a bit of sexual connotation in the middle. None of this is lost on Darden. The final "t" in the quote is obscured in shadow and, as such, the "there" also reads as "here."

Within these two images, Darden is establishing both the theoretical landscape as well as his methodology. In the first image, Darden replaces Lequeu's bird with a turtle, in both recto and verso. A note in the contents written by the "Dweller by the Dark Stream" explains, "I am inclined while watching the turtle to turn it over and study its underbelly. From this unnatural position I see how this platonically solid creature makes its way through the world."<sup>13</sup> This approach continues through the projects. Each building begins with a canon of architecture. The building, then, is the reverse of the canons, and as such reveal the underbelly of architecture. The work, however, should not be seen as only referential. Almost recounting Nietzsche, Darden posits his understanding of history when he explained that, "While history exists only in relation to the questions we ask of it, we must put history to work, not for its own sake, but for the meanings it can provide our lives."<sup>14</sup>

### **con-texts**

Although Darden grounded the work in a theoretical landscape, each building is specifically sited. Many echo Darden's own life situation. While living in Baltimore after graduate school, Darden completed the *Museum of Imposters*, sited in Maryland, and the *Night School*, located in Washington DC. Darden was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome between 1988-89, and two projects, the *Temple Forgetful* and the *Confessional* are sited in Italy. The sites, however, do not simply follow Darden's address. Each is fertile with cultural, historical, and architectural import. A decommissioned church, an abandoned water filtration plant, the address where Melville wrote *Moby Dick*, a mysteriously unnamed city in Quebec, a massive open pit copper mine, a dam that forced the relocation of 120,000 people, and even the original wall of ancient Rome all act as sites. In many ways, the site is considered as a found object latent with a surplus of meaning.

### **texts**

Darden's text is titled *Condemned Building*. It is important to note that this is not the plural building"s" nor is it even a noun. Rather, it is a verb. It is, for Darden, the act of building that is condemned. The building presented is not a precursor to some sort of built form. It is an end in and of itself. Building is drawing. This allows the drawings to be more than an objective representation of something in the world. Darden explains by way of the distinction between drawing and photography.

Unlike photography, drawing neither asks us to accept its images as wholly "real," nor is it proliferated as a simulacrum of the real. In other words, drawing is never perched above the level of human artifice. It is intended as a device of representation, and as Picasso quipped, "mis-representation" (unavoidable interpretation) but never of re-presentation.<sup>15</sup>

What is important to note, is that the drawing presented in the book demonstrates a clear assembly of building parts (even if absurd as in the case of the stairs of the *Museum of Imposters*). Darden is

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Darden. *Condemned Building*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993): [7]. The "Dweller" is, of course, Darden.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Darden. "Melville: an Architect's Reading of *Moby Dick*." *A+U: Architecture and Urbanism* 272 (1993): 56.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Darden. "Architecture in the Age of Spatial Dissolution." *Oz/Journal of the College of Architecture & Design, Kansas State University*. Vol. 9 (1987): 22.

not ignoring the conventions of architectural representation. He is working within, and, I might argue, overcoming them. It is also interesting to note that the preparatory collages that precede the final pencil drawings are also constructed. The layering of trace, notes, images and drawings provide for the mis-representation to which Picasso refers.

### **sub-texts**

*Condemned Building* contains ten buildings. Each begins with a canonical statement and the “turning over” (similar to the aforementioned turtle) of that canon. At core of each of the canons is the purpose of the building and as such Darden understands this same turning over as it relates to the building’s utility. Darden explains,

USE brings together our cultural understandings or the gestalt pattern of a building with our individual associations. Once the architect asserts in a work of architecture that it is space for a specific activity, we experience the architecture through a set of expectations rooted in how we live collectively on this planet and how we move through it as individuals. These expectations revolve around the central questions of how we orient ourselves in space...the expectations can be manipulated in a work of architecture to shape dramatic action. This ability to choreograph dramatic action can allow the architect to reflect not only on the nature of space, but on the culture in which architecture is situated. Such an activity may subvert “use” and distort architectural tropes and traps into a form of architectural critique.<sup>16</sup>

The word trope, from the original Greek τρόπος, meant “to turn.” The trope offers a more productive strategy for studio work than feigning some sort of professional model in which drawings and models are understood as pictures of an as yet realized built work. Rather, this manner of approaching a project forces the student to frame a problem rather than solve problems. I would argue that it is exactly this sort of architectural agency that should be taught in studio.

Darden refers to the projects as parables and allegories, and describes them as rhetorical. For each of the projects, Darden collected materials in boxes. The final form of these clippings is shown in *Condemned Building* as discontinuous genealogies. For each project, Darden collages four images that combine to help inform the form of each building. The collages act as a visual metaphor and work in a way similar to the definition of the trope from Aristotle, that is, that “a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.”<sup>17</sup> The ability to make metaphors relies upon our imaginative and not only rational faculties. It is through metaphor that one may recognize the latent potential in language to be both/and, a hinge. It is just this surplus of meaning that allows for the strange utility of Darden’s work. This, in turn, may also legitimize the role of architecture, especially as a studio project. Darden explains,

Such work will allow us to recover the colossal vitality, which endorses our imagination and our lives as physical beings. In reaching past the silent glistening wires of our technical operations, we may touch again our architecture, assuring us that we will be touched, in turn, by it.<sup>18</sup>

### **archi-texts**

I will conclude this essay with a closer look at one project, the *Oxygen House*. The project, a house for an injured rail worker, acts as a breathing device for the inhabitant as well as his final resting place. Darden turns Le Corbusier’s famous dictum on utility, a house is a machine for living, into his own, “a house is for dying.” The project includes a fictional letter from Abraham, the client, to

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<sup>16</sup> Douglas Darden. “Tropes and Traps: two Projects.” *University of Tennessee Journal of Architecture*. Vol. 10 (1988): 40.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle *Poetics*. 1459a 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Darden. “Architecture in the Age of Spatial Dissolution.” *Oz/Journal of the College of Architecture & Design, Kansas State University*. Vol. 9 (1987): 23.

Darden, the architect, which weaves Faulkner's text *As I Lay Dying* with the program of the project and also with Darden's own life. *As I Lay Dying* is the story of the Bundren family who gather from across Mississippi to bury Addie, the family's matriarch. Jewel and Addie, characters in Faulkner's novel, are also characters in the letter to Darden. The project is sited in Frenchman's Bend, as is Faulkner's text. The letter Darden receives is signed "Burnden Abraham" and on the same date as Faulkner died, 06 July. *Father Abraham* is the title of an unfinished work by Faulkner, set in Frenchman's bend, published posthumously in 1984. The letter that Darden received from Abraham explains that in the summer of 1979, a train jumped the track and sent a piece of metal flying into the air that punctured Abraham's lung. Three years later, Abraham bought the land on which his fatal accident occurred and requested that his house be built there. Darden began his M.Arch at Harvard following the summer of 1979. His time served at the GSD was a similar three years.

The building is situated at a series of physical site crossings. Running east/west, "life lines" contain a road for nurse and visitors as well as a finite supply of oxygen. Diagonal to that are trees and a lift. The broken rail track runs north/south and this axis is termed the "death lines," the diagonal to which is a dried up wash. Both axes are mediated by the vertical axis that is occupied by the Visitor and Nurse's movements, up and down. The form of the project is derived from the Dis/continuous Genealogy that contains an American Civil War engraving of a steam powered rail car, a Caboose water cooler and basin, a Westinghouse train brake, and an engraving of the Hindenburg Zeppelin. Each of which add formal as well as allegorical import. The final building is in fact a tent. Oxygen is piped in and regulated by Abraham who lays dying on the chaise lounge. A small handle adjacent to the chaise operates a metal lever that regulates the oxygen/air mixture in the chamber. He looks out of his ribbon windows that frame the bluffs beyond. The tent, similar to a lung, is stretched taut by trusses that taper at the top. The section shows a clear understanding of the technical assemblage of parts. Darden once commented that he "knew where every nut and bolt was (sic)."<sup>19</sup> Upon death, as shown in the "post-mortem section" the tent collapses and Abraham is wrapped in the fabric. His body is buried in the base of the elevator. The adjacent willow tree is replanted in the base of the drum. The remaining structure of the drum is dismantled and relocated over the wellspring. The post-mortem section has been mirrored from the anatomical section. Here, again, we have the pairing of death and life.

Darden included a chest x-ray in the final publication of *Condemned Building*. In 1991 he was diagnosed with lymphoblastic Leukemia the same year that the Oxygen house was first published. The chest x-ray is part of the evaluation for leukemia to assess the effect of the disease on the condition of the lungs. Darden died of in 1996 after a five-year struggle with the disease. In a strange way, the house allowed for Darden to reflect on his own life and death. Such reflection, on the knowledge of oneself, was, according to Nietzsche, exactly that to which the use of history may be an advantage.

### **Conclusion**

There is certainly use value in Darden's building, but not in the model of professional activity or of the natural sciences. Darden's building offers a lesson for the uselessness of studio in that it is inherently aware of its own uselessness. The work is not a prelude to, or representation of, built form. Rather, the work is related to discourse, but is not referential; situated but with no intention of construction; rhetorical, but not informational; technical but not practical; autobiographical but not solipsistic; and finally, performative but not necessarily productive. Herein lies the strange utility of Darden's work and, I would propose the work of studio.

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<sup>19</sup> The comment was made to Jean LaMarche prior to a lecture that Darden gave at the University of Buffalo. See LeMarche, Jean. "The life and work of Douglas Darden: a brief encomium." *Utopian Studies* 9 (1998). Darden's approach to making also resembles Cash's construction of Addie's coffin in *As I Lay Dying*. Cash's chapter on p. 126 explains why he made the coffin "on the bevel."