After teaching studios for five years as an adjunct, I was fortunate to land a full-time load at Clemson teaching graduate thesis. At Clemson, thesis was a two-semester 18-credit load in which an advisor worked full-time with 6-10 students. In this tradition, every student selected a unique program and site, and conducted the thesis as a terminal project with extensive documentation.

Five years into my own practice, this was a perfect assignment. I saw thesis as exactly what I was attempting in practice: to craft a compelling theoretical position and develop an architecture that manifested it.

Consequently, I altered Clemson’s thesis model: each student researched and articulated a unique theoretical position (in a lengthy treatise), and, as a studio, they worked on one site and under one program. Consequently, they designed and built as a team one site model, into which individual projects were plugged.

Given a commonality of site and program, the projects seen relative to each other revealed the individual thesis positions more clearly. And besides, it was better training: when does an architect ever get to select a custom program and site to fit a particular bent? It made more sense to teach them to stake out a theoretical position in hostile circumstances—just like in practice!

Lastly, the “thesis machine” as it became known was component of this pedagogy that was to manifest the student’s theory. This was the first project type I developed that was, not an analogue, but its own ultimate end.
portfolio of academic work
THESIS 1991

PROJECT:
Museum and Archive for Glenn Gould

SITE:
campus of Ohio State University,
Columbus, OH.

GROUP SITE MODEL:
medium density fiberboard, coated
with trunk paint; square module for
removal
Glenn Christner
Museum and Archive for Glenn Gould
campus of Ohio State University,
Columbus, OH

Christner’s thesis investigated the ethical and philosophical issues surrounding restoration, renovation, and re-creation. In the digital and post-photographic age, how is one to distinguish between the original and the copy; the authentic and the replica? Every form in Christner’s architecture was made from replicas of archetypal buildings or projects, altered in scale and application, but true to the original form and orientation, including here: Kahn’s Kimball Museum; Silvetti’s Tower for Leonforte; Venturi’s Football Hall of Fame; and Meier’s High Museum.
Following his own natural and uncontainable fascinations, Wright’s thesis explored the inevitable connections and unlimited associations of ideas. He developed the first mechanical interpretation of his topic in a series of writing machines—devices that mechanically side-tracked the writer onto a course other than intended.

Examining the context of Ohio State University, Wright found innumerable instances of this principle around which he developed his design (finding the same qualities in his client, eccentric pianist Glenn Gould).

Wright’s final presentation was made by suspension: all of his nearly 100 study and final models were hung from the ceiling, allowing the whole series to sway as viewers passed through the gallery.
Dullea’s thesis derived from his experience of being trapped between layers of the Berlin Wall in the days just preceding its demolition. From this experience, he developed an architecture of between-ness. The plaster construction is a model of a fugue by Bach in which the musical structure as well as the tone of the piece are transcribed into form.

Examination of this model, and light studies developed from it, also contributed to the later architectural development. Treating the campus at Ohio State like a musical score, Dullea developed an architectural notation system that also accommodated the Gould archive.
portfolio of academic work
PROJECT:
Piedmont Park Conservancy

The thesis project involved the landscape design and a headquarters for the Piedmont Park Conservancy. As the Conservancy was then planning the re-design of Atlanta’s largest urban park (in a pseudo-Olmsted style), our project was a critique of contemporaneous proposals.

SITE:
Piedmont Park, Atlanta

GROUP MODEL:
This model allowed for individual members to plug-in replacement modules involved in their respective designs. The vertical stand held the modules when not in use. The model’s base allowed it to be set flat, or tipped up on its side so that the proposals could more easily be viewed in plan. The long pipes allowed the model to be hoisted and carried by four people.
Robert Lipka
Piedmont Park + Conservancy

Lipka’s thesis was based on the principle of collage—that by placing common objects in new contexts their significance is awakened. But, Lipka noted that over time these compositions, too, become banal.

This principle was developed through a series of machines. The final one re-contextualized three sections of PVC pipe, placing them in tension, compression, and counterweight fittings. Upon activation, a crank emitted a metronome-like drone as the mechanism was wound, imperceptibly, into a state of stress. The drone, at first abrasive, became background noise. At maximum stress, the machine erupted so that the PVC fittings were catapulted,righting themselves in a different context—thus becoming components in a new collage.

In Piedmont Park, Lipka placed a megastructure over Clear Creek (an existing open sewer). The project contained a multitude of recreational and service functions and re-created the act of parking as a recreational activity. The underpinnings of the urban park were recast as recreational and educational by treating the park landscape as one, great, collage. The parking elevator became an amusement ride; the exit ramps a full-blown go-cart course; the water treatment facility a water park; and the roof a roller blade course. Architecture as collage presented continual, strange, and awakening juxtapositions.
Brentwood Jolley

Piedmont Park + Conservancy

Studying the effect of media culture on architecture, Jolley’s prosthetic mask was a physical depiction of media: it altered the sensory reception of the world as well as the way one was perceived by that world. For Piedmont Park, he reinvented the late twentieth-century urban park as park(ing) lot: a passive recreational infrastructure that accepted the automobile as a central means to natural experience. Nature was thus mediated through the lens of the windshield and Olmstedian nature was shown to be dependent on human artifice. Western culture’s obsession with, and domination by, television led to the organization of the auto park around a gigantic video wall—his entire building became an inhabited video screen. The park’s stables were located on top of the wall creating a surreal image of horses on a television set (rivaling the scenarios common to TV).
Matthew Davis  
Piedmont Park + Conservancy  
Davis’s work sought to reconcile his personal angst over the relationship between the physical and metaphysical worlds and question of verifiable correspondence between them.

In his machine-work, he developed a complicated and delicately poised steel fabrication over a massive concrete foundation. A lead counterweight (attached to the steel arm and a simulacrum of the concrete pedestal), suggested a perhaps illusory, perhaps verifiable, relation between the two realms.

For Atlanta’s major 200-acre park, Davis read the site as an overlay of two systems: in intellectually derived invisible grid over the corporeal and sensuous contours of the landscape. The program for the Conservancy was contained within pavilions spread across the site and described by the planning grid (but compromised by the registration of the contours).

The language of Davis’s architecture became a rigorous dialogue between the ideal and the sensuous; the sacred and the profane. Where the site was essentially flat, the architecture became an expression of the ethereal grid; as the landscape became broken and hilly, the architecture assumed a Dionysian nature.

Davis’s work was remarkable for its ability to sustain double and contradictory readings.
PROJECT: Cold War Global Park

SITE: Various intercontinental ballistic missile sites throughout the northeastern United States. The studio converted the dozen abandoned ICBM silos of the Atlas system into a global park and research center. This studio, conducted around the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, considered the passing relations of East and West. Devoted to environmental, cultural, and societal problems resulting from the Cold War, this project sought to convert the architecture of war into an architecture of peace.

GROUP MODEL: None. Rather than make a single model, the studio appropriated the gridded courtyard of the School of Architecture as a to-scale matrix on which to locate the multiple sites of the ICBM missile silos.
GLOBAL PARK: Various intercontinental ballistic missile sites throughout the northeastern United States.

Stephen Denton
Abandoned Atlas Intercontinental Ballistic Missile sites, Vermont.

Denton’s thesis transferred writer Italo Calvino’s notes on literary strategies for the next millennium to the domain of architecture. His machine embodied qualities of the late twentieth century in a mechanism that is indeterminate and open to self-destruction. As its pendulum swung, balls were routed to a network of raceways. Chance determines which of several courses would be available at any particular intersection, at any particular time. Some tracks merely re-circulated the balls; some caused the machine to change its internal structure; and one combination triggered internal collapse.

Denton’s project was a global nuclear power monitoring facility with educational and research wings.

His translation of Calvino’s literary strategies to architecture:
lightness  paradox
quickness  time
exactitude  defamiliarization
visibility  simulacrum
multiplicity  recontextualization
consistency  consistency
Robert Tallarico
College for Urban Studies (Atlanta);
Public Space in the New American City competition

Tallarico’s exceedingly personal, idiosyncratic, and at times wacky sensibility was applied to the issue of destabilization. Participating in a competition to consider the definition and principles of the New American City, Tallarico proposed an architecture/urbanism that endeavored to create traditional urban form while simultaneously exploiting the weaknesses in traditional urbanism due to the automobile and contemporary urban life.
David Jones  
College for Urban Studies (Atlanta);  
Public Space in the New American City competition

Jones’s thesis translated the vertiginous and altered worlds of Piranesi, de Chirico, Soane, and Barragan into machine and architectural worlds.

In his machine, a single ball dispatched from the top ran through a number of optical and aural illusions. At one point, the ball appeared to roll up-hill while, at another, it appeared to the ear as if it were moving at high velocity while to the eye it seemed to be barely moving.

Among the competition site choices, Jones worked on the original terminus, or Zero Mile Post, in downtown Atlanta, now the site of Georgia State University, Underground Atlanta, and its parking decks. Jones interpreted the three exposed levels that converge at this brutalized part of the city as a kind of modern-day Piranesian carcere.

The program consisted of a College for Urban Studies, with retail commercial space, parking, and a cultural billboard. Jones reinvented the program as a multi-tiered series of elements that were inter-connected with the various levels of the city fabric.

In a disorganized, brutalized, and disoriented urban zone, Jones found connection with the architectural visions of Piranesi, de Chirico, Soane, and Barragan. Transforming the design principles of these masters of visionary architecture into spaces and illusions that could be constructed in the physical world, Jones made an architecture that connected to, and hyperextended, the urban environment that he found on the site.
Sidney Mullins investigated the status of authenticity in a thoroughly mediated world. His machine re-presented a gun shot as both a simulacrum as well as an intensification of the real thing. The machine was engaged by firing a toy gun after which several stages of a gun shot were hyperextended in the mechanism: cocking, anticipation, triggering, release, acceleration, impact, detonation, and combustion.

Mullins chose to work at the original railroad terminus, or Zero Mile Post, in downtown Atlanta. He found the site, especially the new mall-like Underground and the adjacent World of Coke, as a colorized version of Atlanta history.

Working with a College for Urban Studies at Georgia State University, with retail commercial space, parking, and a cultural billboard, Mullins composed an architecture that intensified overly mediated themes. He used the billboard as a primary organizing element, employing four variations on the billing board in the education of the public and students.

Mullins proposed that architecture become a form of media, a simulacrum of history and of architecture itself. Swatches of presumably authentic architecture (James Stirling’s Leicester Labs, Robert Venturi’s Learning from Las Vegas, and Peter Eisenman’s Biocentrum) were re-presented while, at the same time, hyperextending their original principles. Thus, Mullins’s work was both less, and more than, the originals. This threw into question originality and authenticity in a mediated world.
portfolio of academic work
Richard Kemp
Museum/Archive for H. L. Mencken; Allied peninsula (former chromium plant site) on Baltimore Harbor

Investigating the history of the avant-garde, Kemp proposed that such a condition was untenable in Post-Modern culture (where the shocking and new have become standardized and expected). His insightful historical and theoretical work were applied to architectural design by developing a language of form that was inevitably a parody of other pseudo avant-garde architecture.

The studio worked this year on a site on Baltimore Harbor that, having once housed a chromium facility, was environmentally disastrous. Reacting to a developer’s proposed plan to encapsulate and ignore the site’s history and environmental problems, Kemp and others worked to show the futility and ignorance in glossing over fundamental urban and environmental issues.

Following this attitude, the studio proposed to occupy the site with a park and a museum dedicated to the irascible H. L. Mencken, native of Baltimore.
Kenneth Huggins
Museum/Archive for H. L. Mencken; Allied peninsula (former chromium plant site) on Baltimore Harbor

The thesis work of Ken Huggins investigated systems of order. Studying Godel, Escher, and Bach, he noticed that such systems, when taken to their logical extreme, verge on disorder. Looking also at the influences of the computer on our culture, he sought to develop works that inevitably explored the margin between order and chaos.

Modeling the currency of knowledge in a consumer society, Huggins's machine was a Zen reading of consumerism. Activated by the insertion of a coin, an electrified track measured the absolute roundness of the currency. Read-out from the track was processed and resulted in the ejection of one or more gum balls. The consumer then had a chance to clear the treasury by guessing the code generated by the roundness of the coin. A clever consumer could beat the system by reading the code in the color sequence of the gum balls.

Huggins's project for H.L. Mencken and the chromium site consisted of a large—vastly over-sized—parking facility and container warehouse. Exceedingly organized and efficient, the storage of vehicles and products obtained a kind of insane yet attractive aesthetic. Mencken's Museum, meanwhile, was situated in a wheat field on the point, a design that told the history of Mencken's idiosyncratic life in the architecture.
portfolio of academic work
PROJECT
Showroom for fashion designer Yoji Yamamoto

SITE:
Two locations: Tokyo and Paris
The project and site were based on the film by Wim Wenders about fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto, entitled Notebook on Cities and Clothes.
In the film, Wenders examines the traditional medium of film vis-à-vis video as a parallel investigation to Yamamoto’s own ideas about tailoring relative to fashion. In his documentary (made for the Pompidou Center), he follows Yamamoto back and forth between Paris and Tokyo, examining the growing sameness of places around the globe and of cities in particular. These basic issues—permanence vs. transition, design vs. fashion, city vs. exurbia, custom vs. mass production—are all issues relevant to architecture and became the subtext of the theses.

The studio took Yamamoto-as-presented-by-Wenders as the client, and developed a showroom for both sites.

GROUP MODEL:
The group model grafted the two sites into one mobile structure. Paris (depicted as being stable and ancient) was made of concrete; Tokyo (seen to be in constant flux to the point of chaos) was made of foam. Tokyo became the handle by which the model of Paris was wheeled about, forcing a mutual relation between the two sites and throwing into question the notion of place.
The Paris model (including buildings) was poured into a Plexiglas form with a hollow plywood interior.

*Working with opposition as a thesis topic, Launstein interpreted Yamamoto’s east/west influences and the problems presented by the Tokyo/Paris sites as prime material for his design investigation. In scale, material, program, and architectonics, Launstein made innumerable confrontations and inversions and developed a personal language of design.*
SEAN TAYLOR

Studying relativism and uncertainty, Taylor looked for the virtues of ambiguity as a philosophical and aesthetic value, as opposed to distinction and clarity. Working from the legacy of the Open Work, Taylor found that indeterminacy suited well the cultural predisposition of late Capitalism.

For his project, Taylor found the placelessness portrayed by Wenders as, not foreign, but typical to American urbanism. Embracing the qualities that were critiqued in the film, Taylor formed an architectural language and method out of purposeful ambiguity. His plans, for example, were never simply plans but were also simultaneously models and diagrams. His models were not only analogues for his proposed architecture, but actual constructions in their own right (with structural members, for example, that provided their own support). Thus a real tire track (running across the bottom of his plan/model) symbolizes traffic in analogue while also being evidence of a real car.
portfolio of academic work
THESIS 2000

PROJECT:
Intervention to Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

SITE:
An industrial complex, inhabited and renovated in the mid-1980s. The project and site were actual: the Art Center had commissioned a masterplan that was aborted when dramatic changes in leadership and staff stalled the process. This studio accepted the very real challenges facing the Center, and explored them as the setting for thesis investigation.

GROUP MODEL:
The group model endeavored to capture the multiple layers of industrial development and redevelopment that were apparent in an oblong district bounded by a railroad gulley and a major road. The existing facades were photomontaged onto the model; the blocks lifted out to allow the insertion of individual projects.
Joshua Allison

Intervention to Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

Studying the historical tendency for methods of representation to influence cultural perception and the built environment, Allison made a critical examination of computer methods upon the contemporary grasp of the built environment. Using two antithetical design methods, he designed the ground plane and below grade traditional galleries by traditional hand methods; and an elevated multi-purpose technical gallery by computer methods. His presentation techniques put these two approaches in opposition.
Kimberly Kraft

Intervention to Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

Examining the history of the district and the turn of the century buildings now occupied by the Art Center, Kraft discovered a continual pattern of boundary and enclave-making which she likened to the traditional paradigm of the artist’s enclave. Building layer upon layer, shell within shell, the project proposed that the center become a world-within-a-world, accessed by three circuitous tunnel entrances. Points of orientation were inserted into this fabric in the form of light wells and towers.
THESIS 2000

Thomas Reidy

Intervention to Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.

After sifting through the history of the site and the Center, this exploration into narrative architecture told specific stories while also creating environmental situations based on the properties of narrative structures.
Brian Couch
Intervention to Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

Applying Eastern paradigms (particularly the Japanese principle of Ma) to Western architectural production and technology, Couch developed an internally focused visual courtyard as a vehicle for organizing the plethora of existing buildings of the Art Center.
Rob Moehring
Customs Center; Miami, FL

Observing the impending opening of the US-Cuban border, Moehring examined national perception and cultural integration in this Customs facility. Working from the site of an abandoned Naval base, the project reconsiders national iconography (like the Statue of Liberty) as a means to propagandize and welcome immigrants and visitors to the United States.
Nikos Katsibas
Intervention to Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

Investigating the influence of merchandising on cultural development, this thesis eschewed the professions lack of marketing savvy and sought, instead, to re-think design by learning from the I-Book and the New VW Beetle. Re-constituting the art center as an entertainment complex, the project added elements (such as glass-encased bowling alley and carwash) that would attract patrons who do not normally frequent art centers. The project was presented using both walk-through, and drive-through, sequences, and done in a mode that blended advertising with conventional architectural representation.
PROJECT: satellite school of architecture Charleston, SC

SITE:
Students were allowed to choose between two facing sites on George Street, using either or both in combination:
Site A: A parking lot sandwiched between a B&B (single house) and a four-storey office/bank;
Site B: Grounds of the Spoleto Festival USA (Middleton-Pinckney House).

The project and site were actual: the School of Architecture was planning to hold a competition for a new 25,000 sf branch architecture facility.

This studio explored the site, program, and various pedagogical approaches.

GROUP MODEL:
All models are based on certain genre conventions. The George Street group model examined positionality. In vertical position, the model allows the site to be read perpendicular to the ground plane and from a distance. Yet the model also swivels to allow eye-level views (for all heights viewers) from all the areas into the actual site where such viewing is possible.

Water tanks at the bottom both stabilize the armature during these swings, but also refer to the high watertable at the site.
Kelly Gordon
satellite school of architecture
Charleston, SC

Working from an initial encounter with a bathroom designed by Philippe Starke, Ms. Gordon examined the built environment as a vehicle for mitigating/amplifying tensions. From gender and race to common functional criteria, this project makes apparent the ways in which confrontation is regulated by building. As a means of graphic documentation, Gordon developed method of merging multiple drawing conventions into a hybrid genre that combined experiential and analytic modes of depiction.
Examing the effects of the proliferation of computers, this project develops around the qualities for which computers are most noted: repetition, copy, surface, permutation, and series. Removing studios from the building in lieu of personal computer modules around the city, the building proper is a nexus of video stations from which the remote units are orchestrated.
Exploring a haptic architecture, this project demoted sight in favor of the other senses, in the design as well as presentation. To avoid drawings, model techniques were developed to handle plan and section conventions.
Amy Clement
satellite school of architecture
Charleston, SC

Questioning the supposition that Charleston is a truly historic city that is merely frequented by tourists, Clement examined the ways in which the city is constructed by tourism. Making a hybrid school/visitor’s center, the scheme was built around the paradigm of a parking deck, a structure used here for parking as well as markets and the very school. The carriage tour routes were marked on the city streets and the horses were stabled on the roof of the school.
portfolio of academic work
Examining the built environment’s hegemony over its occupants and the relationship between quality and flexibility, Kohl developed an urban/architectural design that was both less oppressive and of greater quality than is common. Showing that breadth of scope works counter to qualitative flexibility, the project advanced a set of three prototypes, each with a different audience and nature. The project is comprehensive in its treatment and linkage between urban and architectural strategies.