

Precedent and Influence: An Urban Design Studio Project

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ABSTRACT: An 8-week vertical studio project investigates the uses and limits of precedent in architectural and urban design. Setting aside issues of originality, historical and contemporary precedents were utilized as direct source material for student works. Combining overtly appropriated precedents with collage techniques such as cut-up, sampling, and remix, students explored alternative design methods toward the development of a heterogeneous and inclusive urbanism.

Design prompts required short iterations developing high-density housing, articulated municipal networks, ecological systems, and cultural spaces. Prompts and readings indicated the historical breadth and relevance of appropriative and collage techniques and methods.

Students given license to become 'active readers' of history, to work transparently and forcefully with precedent, encountering the history of the discipline as a cultural commons of knowledge, revealed that appropriation enriched the range of their methods, resulting in transformed, engaged, and paradoxically, original works.

KEYWORDS: Pedagogy, Inclusive, Urbanism, Collage, Precedent
PAPER SESSION TRACK: Inclusive Urban Landscapes

1.0 INTRODUCTION

"By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote." (Lethem, 2007, p 68)

In the *Journal of Architectural Education* issue, "Beyond Precedent," editor George Dodds notes that within architectural education, "the use of precedent has become pro forma—as ubiquitous as it is often perfunctory" (JAE 2011, p 5). The *JAE* issue is a response to and meditation upon the *Harvard Architectural Review* issue, "Precedent and Invention," published 25 years previously (Harvard Architectural Review 1986). Dodds is especially interested in the discursive and pedagogical engagements of the precedent/invention binary; paraphrasing Colin Rowe, he writes, "precedent is little more, and nothing less, than the verso to the recto of invention." (JAE 2011, p 5).

This paper, an overview and assessment of an 8-week vertical urban design studio project, continues that exploration. Using collage and appropriation to press the limits of authorship and originality, the studio investigated forceful uses of precedent toward alternative design methods and the development of an expanded engagement with history, ecology, and the city.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

An excerpt from the studio project brief reads as follows:

Investigating the historical role and limits of 'influence' in art and design processes, students will further their abilities in architectural design as cultural critique and projective practice. Techniques such as collage, cut-up, copy/paste, and appropriation will be used to generate alternative methods of architectural design. Architectural precedents, historical and contemporary, will be utilized as raw material for the design work.

In addition to developing experimental housing as strategic interventions, students will identify supporting programming toward the development of a district, designing for multiple networks: transportation, culture, ecology, recreation, and production at multiple scales.

The project site is a typical U.S. suburban district. The 170-acre area includes 4-lane arterials with traffic counts of 50,000, strip retail and big box stores totaling 220,000 square feet, 1,400 surface parking spaces, and, aside from roadway attached sidewalks, zero square feet of public space. Adjacent but disconnected are single-family neighborhoods: 3-bedroom dwellings on 0.16-acre lots. The program brief required 75 acres of new open public space, 15,000 housing units, and 300,000 square feet of retail, business, and cultural space. (Figure 1)

RESILIENT CITY
Physical, Social, and Economic Perspectives

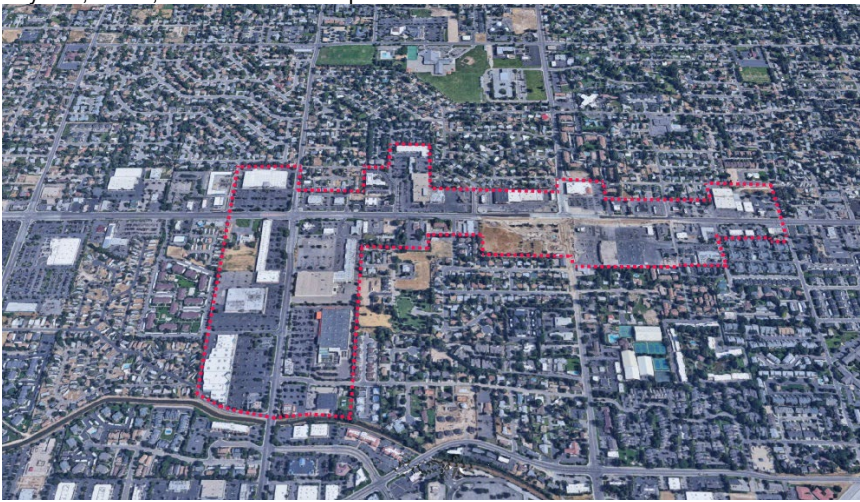


Figure 1: Aerial view of district with 170-acre project area marked. Source: (Google Maps)

The objectives of the project were:

- To understand precedent as a cultural commons of architectural knowledge
- To utilize appropriation as a strategic engagement of heterogeneity and inclusivity
- To deploy collage in explorations of resilient, ecological, social and cultural networks
- To use collage techniques to facilitate experimental design at multiple scales

3.0 METHODS

3.1. Precedent and Authorship

Studio readings initiated a discussion regarding authorship and originality by opening up the tensional field of 'precedent and invention' with a straightforward proposition: appropriation. Students were encouraged to experiment with precedent without fear of charges of plagiarism. As Winy Maas states, "In contemporary Western culture, the act of copying is seen as dishonest, immoral and even illegal." (Maas 2018, p 98). Proffering a corrective to this ideology, Jonathan Lethem writes, "Finding one's voice isn't just an emptying and purifying of oneself [...] but an adopting and embracing of filiations, communities, and discourses" (Lethem 2007, p 61). (Lethem will reveal to readers at the end of his essay he 'plagiarized' this particular quote from George L. Dillon and furthermore, the essay is entirely composed of 'plagiarized' quotes from beginning to end.) As both Lethem and Maas point out, our collective obsession with originality is a recent development, a rejection of traditional understandings of the continuum of knowledge in favor of its privatization and commodification.

In response to these critiques of originality, students embraced their 'creative filiations' with the understanding their precedent selections should be born of deliberative research, that the particularities of selection require analysis, and knowledge of the community and its discourses. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: Student Work, Site Analysis. Source: (Kelsey Ramsey, University of Idaho)

3.2. Collage

Collage, as a generalized method, emphasizes process over product, the contingent over the systematic, the fragmentary over the synthesized, the inclusive over the exclusive, the simultaneous over the sequential. In her book *Collage and Architecture*, Jennifer A. E. Shields identifies broad categories of collage techniques: 'Papier collé and found materials, collage-drawing, photomontage, and digital methods' (Shields, 2014). Mies van der Rohe's body of work alone provides a span of examples. His affiliations with Dada artists Kurt Schwitters, Raoul Hausmann and others utilizing collage and photomontage techniques in the 1920s are well known (Shields, p 72). But as Martino Stierli points out, Mies's 1910 photomontage for a Bismarck national monument competition predates his encounters with the Dadaists (Stierli, 2010 p 65). For Stierli, the technique is crucially ideological: "photomontage was a response, not to romantic concepts of artistic invention, but to the new possibilities of mechanical reproduction" (Stierli, 2010 p 64). Neil Levine also explores how Mies's collage works include political content and later, facilitate a shift toward "readymades" and monumentalizing technique (Levine, 1998, pp 92 - 94). Both authors argue that Mies's collages are inextricably inclusive of social and political content.

In *Collage City*, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter propose collage as a method of historical inclusion. The model for the architect-collagist is a *bricoleur*, an assembler of heterogenous elements of the city. Their discussion of *bricolage*, borrowing dialectical pairs from both Claude Levi-Strauss and Isaiah Berlin, argues for the necessity of the inclusive and empirical *bricoleur* as a remedy to modern architecture's privileging of the exclusive and rational engineer, a pluralistic 'fox' as the necessary counterpart and remedy to the monistic 'hedgehog' (Rowe and Koetter, 1978, pp 86 – 117).

The studio poses the following: If inclusivity is fundamentally plural, then must a city attempt to account for all its inhabitants, all of its histories, even if such a task is impossible? Might an inclusive city necessarily be agonistic, fragmentary, and contingent? Collaged iterations of appropriated district plans, cut, sampled and remixed, provide the initial visualizations for design at the district scale in response. (Figure 3)

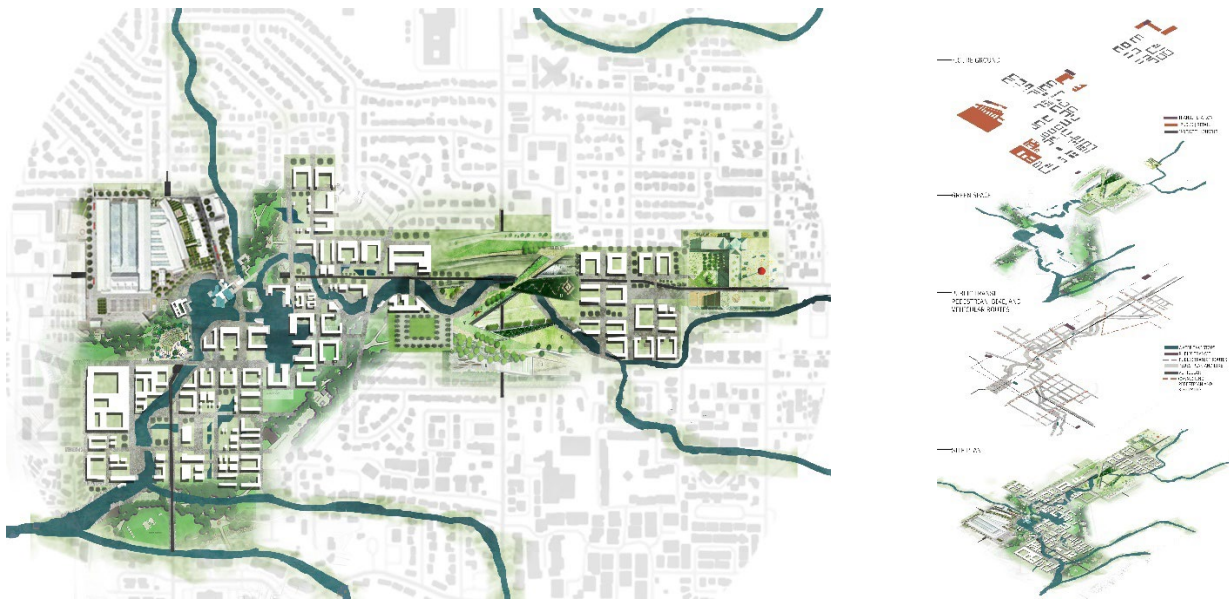


Figure 3: Student Work, District Site Plan and Exploded Axonometric. Source: (Samantha Jesser, University of Idaho)

3.3. Scaling Appropriations

In addition to collaging precedents at city and district-scales, the studio explored techniques able to more finely transform quoted materials. The literary technique of 'cut-up' as well as the musical analogs of 'sample and remix' were applied by students to building-scale works. These concepts allow for a finer grain of appropriation, cutting selected precedents into smaller portions, quoting elements at the scale of buildings or their elements: room, stair or wall.

Two exemplars of this practice are Daniel Libeskind's thesis work at the Cooper Union and James Stirling's "Red Buildings" and later works. In the case of Libeskind, collage is the vehicle for both the dissection of precedent and its transformation via reassembly. Jennifer Shields points out the procedure is reminiscent of Bernhard Hoesli at the University of Texas Austin where he would "cut apart and reconfigure the drawings of his students" (Shields, p 78). In "Architecture as a Continuous Text," Alan Colquhoun states that Stirling's use of "historical fragments" are an acknowledgement of the loss of a singular *zeitgeist*, typological elements are used as "readymades," and "figural fragments make no pretense at reconstructing the organic conditions of their original appearance" (Colquhoun, 1993, p 19). The two bodies of work demonstrated to students several building-scales of thinking through historical precedent. (Figure 4)

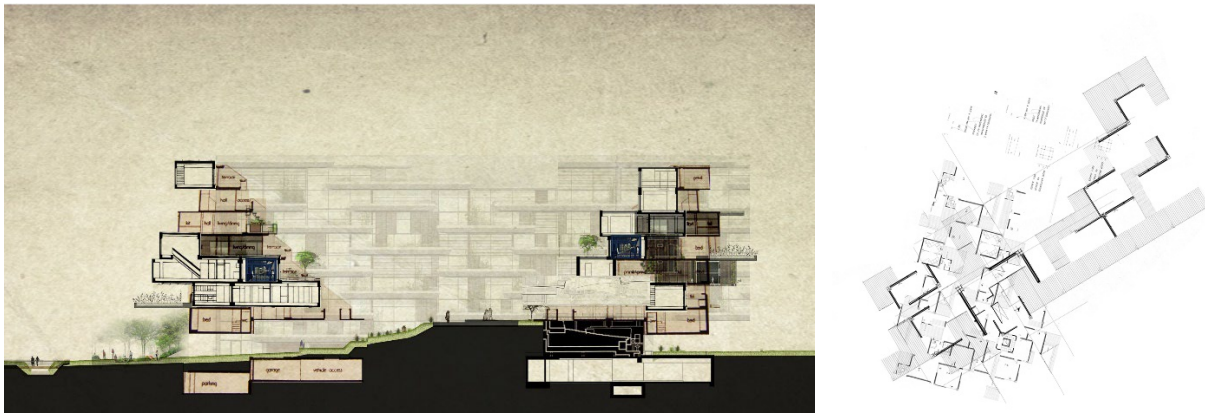


Figure 4: Student Work: Building Section, housing; Public Building Plan, 'cut-up' study; Source: (Kayla Duclos, left; Samantha Jesser, right, University of Idaho)

3.4. Thinking through History

Placing the remote in proximity, collage insists upon a nonlinear understanding of historical time. It is a method for visualizing the event of simultaneity. Randall Teal explains Martin Heidegger's concept of *geschichte* in his essay, "Foundational History;" he writes, "*Geschichte* [...] presents a view of history that is distinguished by the suddenness and coming to presence of a past that has not really passed away" (Teal, 2011). Such a view of history does not support nostalgia nor mere recapitulations of static, historical form.

Students investigated the cultural/social and physical histories of the site and then proposed the projection of those attributes 'that had not really passed' onto its future. Agriculture and irrigation works from the late 19th and early 20th century are reimagined as 21st century performance landscapes, or more distantly, geological formations and imagined rituals are proposed as new programs for public space. (Figure 5)

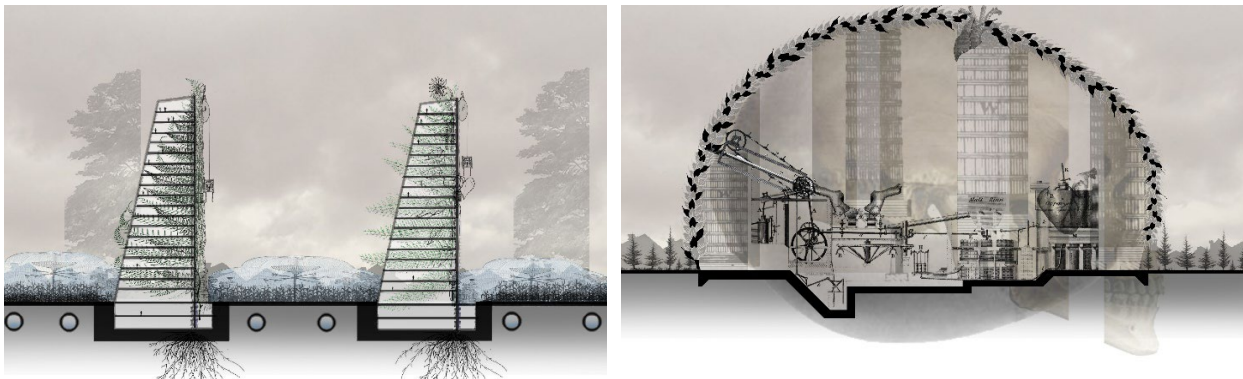


Figure 5: Student Work: urban agricultural production structures. Source: (Lauren Johnson, University of Idaho)

3.5. Programming Ecology

Overdetermined programming is one of the principal causes of the continuing demise of suburban districts such as the one under study here. Single-use zoning at the scale of the city, streets and parking engineered for no purpose beyond the vehicle, and single-use buildings and sites continue to be the primary mode of development. As Anthony Vidler writes, "a contemporary sense of program would imply the radical interrogation of the ethical and environmental conditions of specific sites" (Vidler, p 59). In "Ecology and Design: Parallel Genealogies," Reed and Lister write, "adaptation, appropriation and flexibility" are "the hallmarks of 'successful' systems" and "that an ecosystem's ability to respond to changing environmental conditions makes persistence possible." (Reed and Lister, 2014).

Students deployed collage methods to speculate on alternative concepts of public space programming, combining ecological systems, infrastructure, and networked cultural and production spaces. In one studio example, the regional irrigation system is excavated and revitalized toward new public space networks. In another example, new nodes of agricultural production are imagined as public commons as well as primary locations for energy production and resource renewal. (Figure 6)

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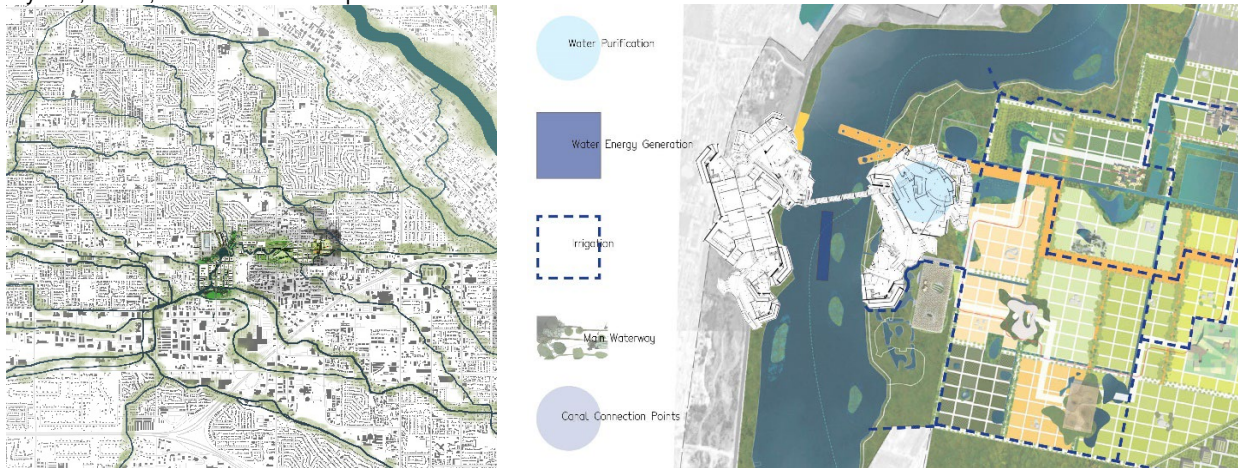


Figure 6: Student Works: Regional Irrigation Network Study; Detail of District Plan, Source: (Samantha Jesser, left; Lyndsay Watkins, right, University of Idaho)

3.6. Tectonics

In “Form without Utopia,” Joan Ockman writes that Rowe’s pedagogical methods, while historically complex, perhaps amounted to little more than “eclectic connoisseurship,” remaining merely a “figure-ground method [...] closer to Beaux-Arts pattern making” (Ockman 1998). The studio attempted to avoid this problem by embracing section.

Building and site design via collaged iterations of appropriated section became a central and favored method of the studio. (Figure 7)

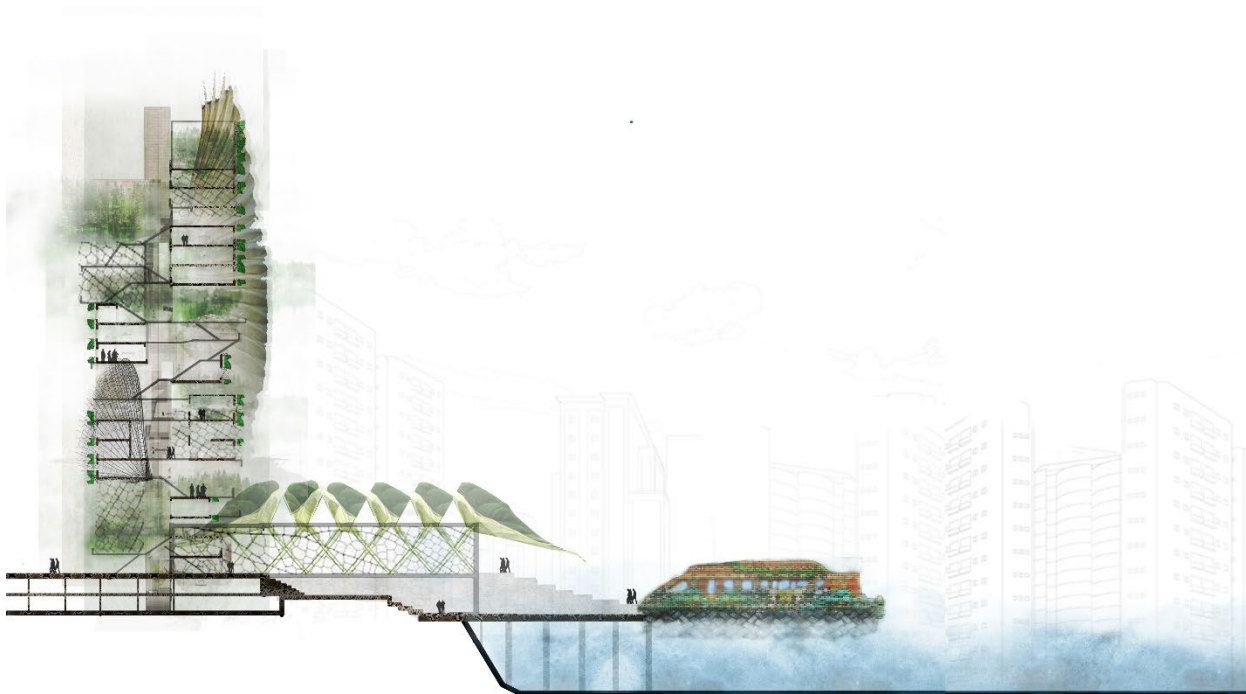


Figure 7: Student Work: Building/Site Section Source: (Samantha Jesser, University of Idaho)

4.0 OUTCOMES

The design methods described above expanded student abilities to inclusively engage history, ecology, and the city at multiple scales. The comments below are based on discussions with guest reviewers, participating students, and my own observations and assessments.

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Physical, Social, and Economic Perspectives

Students, freed from issues of authorship and originality, were seemingly able to query architectural precedents more thoroughly, without 'anxiety,' and to apply that knowledge experimentally. Students reported a sense of deeper understanding of the precedents under study as well as developing abilities to apply and transform discovered elements of urban and architectural design.

Collage techniques enabled students to document, visualize, and incorporate disparate histories into their analytical and design works, testing ideas of heterogeneity and inclusivity through rapid and vivid design experimentation. Students were also able to design and visualize resilient ecological, infrastructural and public spaces at district and building scales.

Engaging appropriation and collage facilitated students' willingness to experiment and take risks. Furthermore, these techniques assisted the students' ability to 'think through history,' utilizing a cultural commons of precedent toward discoveries of individual filiations and projective, communal innovation.

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