

Distance Learning: The Remote Studio

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In this paper I propose an alternative to the conventional studio model. The differences can be recognized in form content, developed to provide a better context for students creative development along with their awareness of and responsibility for the world.

While conducting research on creative development it became clear to me our educational system, which is better suited for teaching students a pre-determined system of knowledge than encouraging creative development, is supported by a paradigm that underlies our cultural identity. The paradigm, that I call the Cartesian paradigm,¹ discourages any knowledge other than that gained through rational and discursive means. The outcome is that we teach and are taught to deny intuition and sympathetic experiences that provide the “creative spark” for all art. Let me elaborate. We typically gain knowledge through experiences of spontaneity or anticipation. These two experiences are vastly different and effect not only how we comprehend content, but how we incorporate such knowledge into cultural artifacts. I will explain these two experiences through a story Jack Turner relates in, “The Abstract Wild: A Rant”.

Turner was to meet up with a friend in the canyons of Utah for a hiking trip. He was in the canyons at dusk searching for his friend which led to his unanticipated discovery of ancient Native American wall paintings. When Turner came upon the painted images in the canyon he spontaneously responded to them. They came fully alive, blurring the perceptual line between static artifact and living thing. He says, “my usual mental categories of alive and not-alive became permeable. The paintings stared back at me, transmuted from mere stone as if by magic . . .”² Turner’s lack of discursive preparation for the paintings left him completely open for the immediate, non-mediated experience of the paintings, his knowledge of the paintings occurred intuitively not rationally. James Taylor, a scholar of philosophy, calls this poetic knowledge, “a sensory-emotional experience of reality.”³ Turner’s ecstatic experience of the paintings merged him with the world, producing a poetic image, a connatural knowledge that relays the full sense of the world.

In contrast to Turner’s first experience of the paintings consider his experience of the paintings some time later. He writes that he returned to the canyons anticipating the experience he previously had. Anticipation requires the use of rationalization; the consideration of and desire for an experience that can be measured against previous experience and knowledge. Turner went armed with a camera and the desire to record and gain “information” of the paintings and the place.⁴ Turner was immersed in the modern activity of gaining knowledge, which he readily admits.⁵ Because of his objective anticipation Turner fails to have a poetic experience during his second visit. He says that he “studied the pictographs” that “were still wonderful, but now they were just things we were visiting . . . I tried unsuccessfully to recapture the magic of those first moments.” He goes on to say, “I took

notes, but they exceeded my power of description. I kept photographing. . . [b]ut what I sought could not be captured with photography or language.”⁶ The loss of the unexplainable power of the paintings that Turner experienced is the result of the limiting process of discursivity.

In addition to the experience of spontaneity and anticipation there is a third experience, brought on by adventure⁷, that I call wonder. Similar to spontaneity, wonder allows the individual sympathetic relation with the phenomena of the world. Wonder occurs not by focusing on the objective and discursive characteristics of the situation but instead the wholeness of the experience that in turn provides an emergence between the individual and the phenomena. During Turner’s final trip to see the paintings he was able to regain their poetic power when he recognized that it was not the paintings that had lost their magic but that his objectifying frame of mind had limited his full experience of them. Although he knew they existed, and he was not afforded the spontaneous experience of their discovery, he came to them in wonder. By not objectifying the paintings through anticipation, and instead letting the experience *be* his relationship with the paintings, he discovers the painting’s magic again. Turner says that he meditated for a while and occasionally gazed at the “mysterious visages. In the silence of the evening light some of the presence returned.” Wondering intently upon the paintings, Turner returned to the poetic mode afforded by intuition. Turner writes, “I saw the figures as a work of art, a group portrait - the shaman, the goddess, the hunter, the gatherers, an extended family including the birds and snakes and rabbits and insects. . .”⁸ In these words Turner recollects his sympathetic knowing of the painting, he becomes the painting, embodying the narrative.⁹ This experience results in poetic knowledge that engenders the fullness of the world and full sense of being in the world that in turn serves as a guide from which to consider life in relation to the larger condition of the world. The outcome of Turner’s experience of being in the world and a corresponding poetic image of the world serves as the creative spark that led to his short story I am drawing from. What is important to recognize is that Turner’s process from wonder to poetic expression is the process that is required of all creators.

Poetic knowledge helps to confirm our participation in a greater continuity and inspires us to express this continuity in our art. The problem for architecture students is that in the conventional studio model the engendering of such experiences is lost because our studios focus on the reduction and objectification of our experiences in the world. As educators we are preoccupied with imparting a particular scope of knowledge upon students rather than encouraging them to develop creative abilities.

The Remote Studio has developed out of the interest of providing students the opportunity to develop their creative abilities through personal experiences in the world. These experiences occur through adventure, combined with periods of contemplation, discussion and the opportunity to express their experiences through artifacts and architecture. The immediate goal of this studio model is not to build architecture or to teach students direct applications for the urban context, but rather to

help them learn to think about the world in a broader context, to allow them personal experiences with nature and making, and to re-engage their understanding of creativity with creative intuition. The long term goal of this model is to provide students with a holistic and bound way to consider the world and architecture by reconnecting nature and culture through the simultaneous embodiment of wildness and a civilization's particular cultural patterns.

Before describing the activity of the Remote Studio, potentially valuable insight may be gained by pointing out that the underlying pedagogical position for this program is developed through the platform of deep ecology. This position affects the studio in a number of ways. First, is the belief that we belong to a reality larger than our own constructions. This reality includes plants, animals, places and things that all possess inherent values. The belief that we are part of a larger whole led me to research and reconsider in what ways we belong to the world and how these ways are manifest, in particular how this view affects the creative individual, and specifically the architect. This belief is also the driving force behind helping students learn about and engage in the world through their participation in it by hiking, camping and exploring. Second, because of my concern for the condition of the world, its health in general, I present in my studios the problem of our use and misuse of the world and the related consequences. The study of this global problem remains relative to the context of the design studio project and focuses upon the effects created by architecture and building. While the primary focus of the studio is to help students gain an understanding of poetic knowledge and develop the relationship of personal experience to creativity, the students also research environmentally sensitive materials, construction techniques and technologies, and materials of expression. The knowledge and applications of these materials, techniques and technologies are not blindly accepted as fail safe solutions. Students are expected to come to a personal position regarding the alternative directives of these materials and methods and to develop a personal responsibility for constructing and affecting the ecology of the environment in which they work. Lastly, these techniques alone will not have a great effect upon human use of places in the world without a deeper understanding of the effects of our cultural norms, assumptions and intellectual paradigms. Therefore, students are engaged in philosophical and theoretical discussions of philosophical ideologies and cultural practices.

The Remote Studio, as its name suggests, is a studio that is conducted in a remote location, removed from the distractions of modernity's objects and abstractions. It is distance learning gained through real rather than virtual distance in such locations as the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness. Students dedicate a full semester's class load to the remote studio in order to fully develop and experience the entire process of creative making. During the extended period of time the students engage in personal experiences to develop poetic knowledge, which as James Taylor states, "calls forth the subjectivity of the knower to become *engaged* with the object of knowledge."¹⁰ This process

aids in the full consideration of making architecture that is grounded, world responsive and engendered in poetic expression.

The location of the remote studio aids in the establishment of a student's personal experiences with nature. General lessons such as the effects of wind, rain and sun upon a specific ecology and a culture will be understood by living in the place, not from the removed and unsensed knowledge of a book or closed studio environment. They learn of the biological life of the area, and the habitat and living condition of the people, plants and animals. They experience and feel the fullness of the condition of the place by being in it, and reflecting upon it. From these experiences students learn about themselves and their potential relationship with the world that is made specific by being grounded in a place.

The student's poetic experience of specific places can profoundly change their attitudes and understanding of the world. The demonstration of these transformations, however, is difficult due to their qualitative nature. To break the personal transformation of the individual into quantifiable characteristics would be to deny the inherent relatedness of the person and world as a whole and deny the very purpose of this research. Therefore, the explanation of the benefits or changes of lives and beliefs will remain predominately in narrative, to gather together the holistic nature of the remote studio. In support of the studio I offer the evidence of the work itself, that testifies to the difference between the conventional educational model and the alternative. The students work presented here are from two studios I have taught. One for Texas A&M University and the other for Montana State University. I have condensed the two in order to present how such a studio is conducted.

The students engage in active experiences and periods of leisure such as hiking, camping, watching the sun set or rise, passing time in silence, following an animal trail. These experiences are similar to Turner's time in the canyon. They allow for the engendered experience between the intuition and the sensed world, replacing the distractions of modern life activities such as television, driving in traffic, and weekend parties with the time to explore their new home individually and in groups. Group camping trips are also undertaken with the interest of aiding in the knowledge of the place and the world. The simple activity of hiking and camping provides world experiences many of the students have never known; fatigue, blisters, and dehydration remind them that they are mortal. The sensorial experience of wind, sun and rain or snow combined with the place itself brings them into a relationship with spring meadows, frigid glacier run-off, startling a white-tail deer, observing a grizzly, or vast views of the valley from the mountain pass. They enter into a way of knowing that becomes an indivisible and necessary part of who they are. These experiences become intensely personal and later provide for the fruition of creativity. From these personal experiences, connatural knowledge often results. The truths the students discover can not be so easily erased and covered over by the constructs of the Cartesian paradigm. The experience becomes a touchstone to guide

them through their lives, to help ground and give place to their future choices, activities and developing practices.

Once the students have a sense of the place in which they are staying they are asked to consider their understanding of it through contemplative making, the merging of leisure and activity. Contemplation extends the state of mind gained through leisure into activity. The students undertake this process by making a series of vessels. Each vessel has specific conditions all given at one time so that the students may consider how the idea of each vessel's constitution relates to the other. However, the execution of each vessel occurs separately and with periods of leisure between them to allow time for the consideration of their expression of each vessel's condition. Each vessel is an expressive "sketch" from the student's creative intuition. The artifacts are then discussed with the group to provide an expansion and sharing of the personal discoveries made during the period of leisure.

The particular medium and scale of each vessel is determined by the student. In order to keep the students focused on the place and the act of making, the tooling of the artifact is restricted to hand tools and the primary materials are collected from the place. The first vessel is a challenge for the students, as they attempt to translate their intuitions to artifacts of expression. Because this process of poetic knowledge to intuition to expression is new to them the artifact that results is often clumsy and fails in its translation from poetic idea to artifact possessing beauty. The students tell me that they learn from the first vessel that care must be taken when selecting a material to embody the poetic idea, the material in its unmodified condition must be about the poetic idea. From the first vessel students come to understand the reciprocating relationship required between them and the world they modify. The subsequent vessels respond more specifically to the place they are living in, are more respectful to the materials modified, and are not as abstract or generalized as vessel one. The specified condition of vessel two brings the students to question how something can only embody physical qualities. They come to this question from their personal experiences of the world that they find to be not only physical but spiritual. Vessel three requires the specificity of place in its consideration, with the condition that the vessel locate the maker's sense of being in the world in a specific place.

I find the discussions of the vessel artifacts are the most profound I have experienced during teaching. The students are intent and invested in their ideas, and lose their inhibitions and insecurities. The discussion that occurs between the other students is personally expansive because each student cares for his/her classmates' thoughts and is invested in the particular time and place, participating as thoughtful individuals responding to the world around them.

A final vessel is undertaken by the group of students. This vessel, takes the form of architecture, and is introduced during the last phase of the remote studio. The intention of this vessel is to provide

students with the opportunity to develop the knowledge and understanding of the world gained earlier in the semester through a full scale project of architecture. The students develop their design ideas through a more grounded sense of being, holding onto the necessity of responding and making not only for human kind but the rest of the world. Their process is not only place-bound but also world extensive.

The example I will use to describe the final vessel process is a pavilion that was built during a Remote Studio for Texas A&M University. The pavilion serves as a place of observation for a rare species of quail that inhabits the hillside to the West of the pavilion location in Fort Davis State park. To most the pavilion appears to be no different that any other park structure. In fact, the artifact, viewed objectively and appropriated into an identifiable typology will only ever appear the same as all other things linked to such an objective category. Yet, the difference between this artifact and others is recognizable in three ways. First, is the understanding and transforming experiences and choices the students make during design and construction. Second, is how the students understand and apply their understanding of the world in relation to choices for construction. Third, is the experience and participation that occurs between visitors and artifact, that is only recognizable through personal experience.

The first two differences are comprehensible by a discursive explanation that can also be recognized in photographs and drawings. The logic of the decisions that were made can be explained when considered from an ecological point of view. The third difference is not so easily discernible in photographs or drawings because its uniqueness is not identifiable through discursive measures. What is different about the pavilion and what distinguishes the building is the experience of beauty. I will explain the first two differences and then follow with an explanation of the third difference.

The personally transforming experiences the students had while in West Texas along with their reflection and discussion upon these experiences support and encourage the consideration of the place and the developing pavilion. They no longer view the place as a distant landscape but are themselves participants in the place, the flora and fauna are not only recognizable but make sense to the place and its whole ecology. Over time the students develop a living relationship through the experience of sunsets, rain showers, sitting on hillsides, looking for cultural remnants of the Native American peoples, and spending time with new friends and the culture of this place. Their relationship is not one of mere observation, but one of *being in the world*. The result of this relationship is that their choices are noticeably different from the choices that inform those who work through the Cartesian method for designing and building. In order to make clear the differences I have provided the typical context from which their decisions differ.

The examples in Figure 4 only serve to show the ways in which the design and construction of the pavilion at the Davis Mountains State park was considered . Although the lessons learned and

applied may not be readily apparent they do make the pavilion unique when contrasted to the typical standardized constructions that have developed out of the architectural vision of the Cartesian paradigm. Greater than this single construction, or any of the vessels the students make, is the understanding they gain from the entire experience from leisure to wonder to activity, and the support of knowing through their intuition and the power of poetic knowledge. From these experiences their world is expanded, they become involved and inextricably related to the place they will call home and the place that extends from home. The students recognize that knowledge is not only found through rational processes but that it is their responsibility to act in a considered and reflective way. They can feel the difference between ego driven ideas and creativity, intuitive, world-centered ideas and creativity. They recognize that their participation in this poetic process is very different from the process supported by the Cartesian paradigm. These lessons will serve to inform not only decisions for future buildings, but also life decisions that share in an expanding vision of the world.

As stated earlier, the photographs of the pavilion do not necessarily serve to convince the reader of the success of the structure toward the goals of the remote studio. They can not do this because the photographs objectify the pavilion and cannot offer the experience of the pavilion and the place itself. The only evidence of the pavilion's success to the place I can offer are the words of one of its visitors. One morning when we were close to finishing the construction a visitor came to me and told me of his experience in the pavilion the night before. He said that he went and sat in the pavilion as the sun was setting to wait for the quail to come down from the hill. When sitting in the carved out place and looking at the surrounding land at eye level he said that he felt as if he were a part of the place. These few words accurately described the students' intent for design of the pavilion; to help people feel that they are a part of the place. The comments of the visitor were not of how pretty or well constructed the pavilion is, but how he felt that he belonged. The difference of this pavilion from other artifacts developed from the intellectual framework of the Cartesian paradigm is that it allows the inhabitant to participate in the world, to become a part of reality that is more extensive than our own constructs. I can not completely identify how the pavilion does this. This is the magic and beauty that occurs when an artifact is made that considers the art of making and the relation between the spiritual and physical qualities of the world.

The description of the process for the remote studio is not intended to continue unchanged. The studio itself is a process of learning about education and the support of knowledge gained through poetic experience and the intuition. The importance of the studio is in its values, with its organization potentially always changing as the teacher understands more about the world and the poetic knowledge that is denied in the current pedagogy of education. The program finds value in the necessity to discover and broaden the scope by which we come to know our world, and to instill this

necessity in the generation who will inherit the world as it is affected by our past and current abuses and ignorance.

The distance learning that takes place at the Remote Studio provides students with the opportunity to develop grounded, engaged and holistic beliefs and practices toward architecture and the world. These students can begin a transformation of the condition of architecture and the profession of architecture, changing the constructed reality of Western civilization. Such architecture and consequentially places of urban density, it is hoped, will be bind the world and human kind together, body and soul, through physical and spiritual dimensions. Architecture designed to participate in a reciprocal relationship of experience in the world can serve to inspire us to live more world-bound and expansive lives, thus returning our full sense of being in the world. Such intentions may sound utopian, but what is the value of our artifacts if they do not strive for the good and the beautiful ? Shouldn't all of our activities have these interests in mind? Is there an acceptable excuse for any other way of being?

Notes

1. Many critics and philosophers refer to this condition as the modern paradigm, modernism, or the modern world view. See Charlene Spretnak, James Taylor.

2. Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), p.8.

3. James S. Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 5.

4. Ibid., pp. 99-100. Refer to John Senior's explanation of the problem of education that requires only the learning of information.

5. Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), p. 11.

6. Ibid., p. 11.

7. Adventure, "an unplanned event," occurs from the unexpected, not pre-meditated activity. As Edward Abbey writes, through adventure we "experiment with solitude and stillness" and discover "the self in its proud sufficiency which is not isolation but an irreplaceable part of the mystery of the whole." Edward Abbey, *The Journey Home: Some Words in Defense of the American West* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 88. Adventure provides unmediated personal experiences through a state of wonder, a potential spontaneity that leads to poetic knowledge.

8. Ibid., p. 18.

9. John Senior, a professor at the University of Kansas who developed the Integrated Humanities Program, would find that this type of experience allows us to dream again. "[T]o discover the imaginative life based upon wonder of direct experience of things as they are. James Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education*, p. 100.

10. James S. Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge: The recovery of Education*, p. 84.