

THE ART OF ARCHITECTURAL STUDIES

With a new director, new studio, and new ideas, Pitt's Architectural Studies program provides a fresh perspective on design education.

The Cathedral of Learning: an icon for the University of Pittsburgh, an architectural masterpiece that has inspired and motivated the birth of many distinguished architects on our illustrious campus – wait a minute, what? Pitt has an architecture program? Let's be honest—no great architects have sprung from Pitt's Architectural Studies program. At least, not yet.

Enter Drew Armstrong.

In September 2006, Armstrong was appointed the new director for the Architectural Studies program, a division of Pitt's History of Art and Architecture (HA&A) department. Prior to Armstrong's appointment, Fil Hearn directed the program, overseeing a curriculum that focused mainly on history courses.

Senior Cole Kramer began his career in Architectural Studies while the program was still under Hearn's direction.

"People would ask me, 'What's an architectural studies major? Are you going to be an architect?'" remembers Kramer. "I couldn't say yes to that because I felt [the major was] more along the lines of architectural history."

Then Armstrong arrived, bringing with him a new approach to the subject. Kramer enrolled in Armstrong's History of Architecture Theory, a course that explores the development of aesthetic theories employed in architectural design throughout the course of western civilization.

"It was a lot more work than I had done in classes before, but just his knowledge and his interest in the subject made it a lot better," said



Kramer. "He's really enthusiastic and seemed really into talking to me."

Since Armstrong has taken over, seven new classes have been implemented in the program and—most notably—a design studio has been created in Thaw Hall. Used primarily for a two-semester course sequence taught by professional architects Jozef Petrak and Utkarsh Gildhial, the studio is housed in an old physics lab. It's a small room, with twenty drawing tables packed from wall to wall. Labels for "Rocket Parts" can still be found on drawers and cabinets, keeping the room's history alive.

Though the program's drastic update and its resultant studio space was a collaborative effort, it was

Armstrong who first proposed the idea in the summer of 2005, when he was a still a newly-hired professor at the University. Kirk Savage, chairman of the HA&A department, worked with Armstrong to convince deans at the School of Arts and Sciences that studio space was crucial to the program's development. With a studio, each student would have his own desk where he could work any time of day, an idea that stems from the standard architecture school model.

Savage and Armstrong gained the administration's support and by December 2006, just a few months after Armstrong's appointment, the space in Thaw Hall was dedicated to the program.

"The bottom line," according to Armstrong, "is that everyone wants Architectural Studies to be a successful, dynamic program."

The studio is accessible to students 24 hours a day, and most students in the program spend at least fifteen hours there each week.

Three critiques are held to evaluate the students' progress throughout the semester. Students present their portfolios to classmates and two outside professionals invited to participate in the process. The critiques give the students a chance to learn how to talk about and present their work in the same way that professional architects pitch their ideas.

During the week leading up to the final critique of students' work, senior Alex Dixon spent nearly 50 hours in the studio.

"I didn't even sleep," he said.

Shortly after plans for the studio were finalized, Armstrong was approached by Tracy Soska, a director of the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC), an initiative designed to help colleges and universities develop and sustain effective partnerships in order to rebuild communities. Soska contacted Armstrong about a site in Hazelwood (a neighborhood south of Oakland on the Monongahela) that they were interested in revitalizing. He brought Armstrong to the site, which is centered between Hazelwood Ave. and Johnston Ave. (the neighborhood's main commercial street) on Hazelwood's Second Ave. Armstrong applied for a Service Learning Grant with COPC, which the program re-



ceived, and Hazelwood became the new study site for his studio classes.

During the students' first critique of the fall 2007 semester, Petrak explained to the group how Pitt's studio differs from other architectural studios. "Our studio was motivated by something a little different..." he said. "Here, we've decided to replace the traditionally understood idea of concept with context."

Typically, in architecture design studios, students define a starting point from a narrative concept from which to build their designs. They use these narratives to formulate ideas that motivate their work. So when Petrak says that Pitt students are replacing "concept with context," he means that they are substituting the narrative for ideas based within a specific physical context—Hazelwood, in this case.

To effect that replacement, the students spent the first half of the semester researching the site to create contextual maps of the area. They studied both physical and abstract aspects of the urban context of the site to identify issues affecting the neighborhood's decline, as well as

the forces driving its deterioration, amenities necessary for community success, and resources that the area possesses but does not utilize. Based on their findings, the students then developed proposals for possible solutions, resulting in six potential sites in the neighborhood to revitalize.

The class was split into two groups, and each worked to create theoretical building plans for three different portions of the Hazelwood site. Each student analyzed the class research individually, defining aspects of the site—including physical or abstract influences like street configurations, derived thresholds, cardinal direction, and building setbacks—that they felt were most critical. They then reinterpreted maps of the area into "Force Lines," graphic abstractions of their original ideas. Overlaying the "Force Lines" of each idea, the students created a contextual map that dictated the angle, direction and location of walls, floors, ceilings and windows in their new buildings.

Above (L to R): 1) A cluttered desk in the department's new Thaw Hall studio, 2) Remnants of the physics lab that once occupied the space. *Opposite:* Drew Armstrong, director of Pitt's reimagined Architecture Studies department.

The mapping, which is completely accurate, can be used by professional architects in future development projects.

"This pattern can be seen as a catalyst for future development when things are going well in Hazelwood," said Gildhial. "You scratch the surface and the pattern is underneath. It can come out and form this other piece of architecture that is cohesive with the surrounding buildings."

The class's first group created plans for a police station, performing arts center and urban market; while the second focused on designs for an outdoor theater, community center, and storefronts for a hardware store, barber shop, and ice cream parlor. While the innovative designs are possible, they remain hypothetical. "Our buildings aren't practical," said junior Chris Preis. "We have no training in structure...so we couldn't propose these ideas and say 'This will stand.'"

Although the designs are theoretical, they will be given to the COPC

and presented to the township as ideas for solutions to the problems in the neighborhood. In other words, there is a chance that a future building along Second Ave. could arise from one of these students' creations. Who knows?—it could be the first step in the career of Pitt's emerging architectural legend.

The Architectural Studies program continues to move in a bright new direction. Petrak explained that the architect-professors want to remove themselves and the students from all preconceived notions about how architecture works.

They want to teach students to see themselves as designers, free from

the constraints of walls and windows.

"This way of introducing a studio is also the start in bridging the gap between our Studio Arts department and the Architectural Studies program," said Petrak. "Hopefully, in the future, there will be a seamless transition

between the two aspects [designing and theoretical thinking] that we have evident in our studio."

After only three semesters in the studio, there are still a lot of details that need to be worked out. Some of the students feel that tighter organization is needed, but overall, approval and praise for the reimagined program has been outstanding.

Justin Greenawalt, another senior-class veteran of the now-defunct Fil Hearn curriculum, applauds the new path the program has taken: "I really like the direction the program is going. I hope to see it expand into a full-fledged architecture school."

With the enthusiasm and approval that the changes have garnered thus far, Greenawalt's hope may one day become a reality. Perhaps in a couple decades, people will truly view the Cathedral of Learning as an architecturally divine and inspiring site for Pitt's young architects. And maybe a famous architect will be able to say, "I designed my first building in a physics lab that once housed rocket parts." ★

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