Urban Waterfronts. Projects in Portland + International Cities

Introduction

This is a design thesis studio of self-defined projects within the topical framework of Urban Waterfronts. The Winter + Spring design studio is preceded by a Fall term preparatory seminar in which students identify projects, conduct in-depth research and prepare a design program. The studio is a series of rigorous design investigations that focus on a strong theoretical foundation, creative design explorations, and a high level of architectural refinement through tectonic studies that integrate design with building systems. The emphasis of the academic year is development of a comprehensive architectural project backed by a strong research effort.

Portland Projects

The studio is the second year of a two-year collaboration with the City of Portland’s new Office of “Healthy Working Rivers”. For students who are interested in a Portland project, the primary focus area will be the "Central Reach" of the Willamette River, the Downtown waterfront between the Fremont Bridge to Ross Island. The City is currently in the process of preparing both the River Plan / Central Reach and The 2030 Downtown
Plan. The studio will provide students with an opportunity to contribute to the Plan and interact with City officials and the public.

The first year’s work (2010-11) focused on the North Reach of the Willamette River, the city’s industrial waterfront extending from the Fremont Bridge to the mouth of the Willamette at the Columbia River. Two review meetings with the Mayor were held, and the final work exhibited in the Portland City Hall Rotunda in June. A final publication is in preparation. The upcoming year’s collaboration with the City anticipates similar meetings, a public exhibit and final publication.

Central Reach of the Willamette River. Portland

International Projects

The studio also invites projects in other cities of the world. This will provide comparative study opportunities of design precedents that stimulate thinking about the potential of urban waterfronts in general, informing Portland and other cities. From past experience in thesis studios, about half the students want to do projects in Portland, half in other cities. The instructor will work with students to identify projects and sites.


Potential project and building types:

- Downtown riverfront public, mixed use and commercial buildings,
- Transportation and infrastructure projects,
- Education and recreation activities, with special relationships to water edge locations,
- Laboratories and scientific facilities,
- New project typologies

The design studies may include a component of urban design.
Most of the great cities of the world were born on waterfront settings. Although water transportation and defense often provided an initial force for development, the identity and spirit of countless cities is inseparable from their water edges. Paris is unthinkable without the Seine, Rome without the Tiber. New York’s history and identity is closely tied to the East and West Rivers of the Hudson.

Rivers and bodies of water evoke memory, cultural history, place and meaning. A great river, lake or sea often links a city with its larger ecological and psychological region, providing a physical and symbolic “gathering” of forces that transcend function.
Portland’s Challenge

During the past thirty-five years, Portland removed the Harbor Freeway on the west bank of the Willamette River to create Tom McCall Waterfront Park, built new mixed-use residential neighborhoods at Riverplace, the River District and South Waterfront, sponsored new waterfront public buildings such as OMSI and the Water Pollution Control Lab in St. Johns, and designed impressive recreational projects such as the East Bank Promenade. A prime opportunity during the next fifty years will be to redevelop a vast array of sites for new civic, living, workplace and recreational activities that connect the city with the Willamette in creative ways.

Project Selection and Precedents

The project must be visionary in the way it explores theoretical and real-world issues. Ideally, it should experiment with new building and site typologies. While the project may learn from precedents around the world, it should clearly demonstrate that it has probed critical design issues in an original way.

Urban design may be a part of the total effort, but the scope of the urban design study should be limited in time so the architecture can be thoroughly-developed.
The architecture of the historic Port. Genoa, Italy. Renzo Piano Building Workshop. Public spaces and paths of movement create a new symbolic and economic center to regenerate the historic harbor.

Is a Self Selected Project for You?

A self-defined design project may not be the best option for everyone. From past experience, most students who have been through this experience feel they benefited from the opportunity to select and define their own project, as opposed to a project, program and site being chosen by the instructor. However, a few students may have benefited from the latter option since they were not certain what they wanted to do. By national comparison, most of the best schools in the country have a self-defined design thesis, “capstone” or final comprehensive project. U of O faculty members each have their own opinion on the matter. I believe the self-defined project is a professional challenge and experience for the student, since it best prepares students for the professional world, encouraging research, creativity and resourcefulness.

Following project selection, research and programming in Fall term, the design studio process is rigorously structured during the Winter and Spring terms.

Site Selection

Students may propose sites in any city of the world. If you select a site outside Portland, you must have visited the city (not necessarily the site) at some time in the past, or plan to do so during the course of the school year while you are working on the project. It is highly desirable that you visit the site before the studio begins in January, although in some cases this may not be necessary. During the past few years, sites in my thesis studios have been located in Portland (approximately half), Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Detroit, Vancouver and other places in North America; and overseas in Berlin, Amsterdam, Rome, Spain, Cyprus, China, Vietnam, Korea and other locations.

The topic holds the studio together, while the diversity of sites creates a rich mix of places to compare and contrast.

Preparation During Summer

Studio participants should arrive at the beginning of Fall term with a preliminary project proposal (1-2 page statement), including a general description of the topic, building type and city where the site is to be located. The specific site may be selected during Fall
term. The preliminary proposal will serve as a basis for discussion with the instructor, and we will work together to finalize the location and project selection.

**Thesis Preparation Seminar: Fall Term**

All students in the studio are required to enroll in the Arch 407/507 Thesis Prep Seminar (3 units) scheduled for Fall term. The seminar will focus on the theoretical and conceptual issues of the studio, and provide an opportunity for preparatory research. A “Thesis Statement” and Program document are prepared as a product of the seminar. Additional credits may be earned for project-related research by enrolling in independent studies with the instructor.

**Studio Structure. Winter + Spring Terms**

- Regular design studies with pin-ups take place every week to ten days during the term.

- Media selection is generally up to the student, with study guidelines issued for each pin-up and phase of work. In addition to the use of traditional and digital media, physical study models at different scales, including tectonic models, are emphasized throughout the design process. Study models will serve as important study tools for the studio. For persons who do not want to build study models, this studio is not your best option.

- During the studio terms, each student will have a specific, regular individual critique time each week. The regular weekly schedule enables the student to know exactly when she/he will meet with the instructor, timing preparation of drawings and models for the conference. Additional critique times are always available by appointment.

**Project Book / Monograph**

A project monograph / portfolio presentation is prepared as a final product at the end of Spring term, in addition to the traditional gallery review.

In addition, a class publication is anticipated with grant support. This will be a scholarly and graphically-imaginative monograph that documents the work of the studio as a whole.

**Information / Questions**

You are encouraged to contact me with any questions you may have, or if you want to discuss your interests, before studio preferencing, and during the summer. It would be helpful for me to know student interests in advance of the studio placements, as well as individual interests as projects are considered over the summer.

Gerry Gast

geraldgast@gmail.com

Gerald Gast is an architect and urban designer, a member of the University of Oregon Portland Architecture faculty, and Visiting Associate Professor in the Program on Urban Studies at Stanford University. He is a founding principal of Gast-Hillmer Urban Design in California. Current projects include design of the new Stryiskyi Park campus for the Ukrainian Catholic University in Liviv, Ukraine.

Research interests focus on recent seminal and controversial urban design work, including a comparative study of projects in Vancouver, Baltimore, Berlin, the German Ruhr, Barcelona and Curitiba, Brazil. Recent professional work on wateredge design includes the San Diego County Government Center, the Oregon Science and Technology Park (OSTP) in Gresham –Troutdale, OR, citywide and district urban design studies for San Clemente, Dana Point and San Diego, CA.