The new city: buildings, social equity, production

a thesis project in a common framework

To be successful, cities of the twenty-first century will have to be inclusive and socially equitable, making it possible for people of different means and backgrounds to participate in the economy and benefits of urban life; they will have to regain the ability they once had to be sites of production rather than only consumption; and they will have to do it all with innovative architecture that can elevate the human spirit.

In this thesis/terminal studio, students will design individually-programmed buildings within these ideas. Each project will incorporate the following three features:

1. a contemporary production facility for food, goods or ideas (this may be an “urban grange,” to support local agriculture; a small factory for bicycles or food-processing equipment; a facility for digital prototyping or energy-technology start-ups; or ...)

2. a means to involve people of diverse backgrounds, occupations and incomes to participate (this may be, for example, a school or training facility, a place where start-up businesses associated with the production facility might locate, or...); and

3. a public component to make the work of the building visible (this may be an exhibition space or gallery, public garden or gathering space, public retail market, public outdoor space that is not part of the facility, or...).

The exact uses and mixture of uses for each student’s project will be determined during a fall seminar, as part of the thesis/project development.

The site will be in one of two districts of Portland, west of the Willamette River: either Old Town/Chinatown (the area to the northwest of the White Stag Block) or “Uptown” (between I-205 and the West Hills, to the north and northwest of the baseball stadium).

Each program will be developed to include roughly between 50,000 and 70,000 square feet. This will allow for two desired characteristics of the terminal studio: architectural complexity and a wide variety of program spaces on the one hand, and the ability to thoroughly develop the project and its parts, on the other.

The fall seminar will allow students to develop individual thesis statements within the overall theme, for investigations of the history and contemporary issues of the chosen district, for architectural/precedent studies, and for program development. An important result of the seminar is the ability to “hit the ground running” with the studio itself, allowing for intensive design investigations of the building itself from the very beginning.

The design of the project will begin on the first day of winter term, moving through two complete design cycles toward schematic resolution of the project by March. Spring term will be devoted to the development of important spaces, the technical/detail attributes of the project as a whole, and a detailed area/topic of the student’s choice. Important emphases of the studio will be the development of new, hybrid building types that recognize the importance of social equity and production within cities, and, within those types, how construction, craft, and materials can be seen as important generators of building quality. This concern will be introduced in the first part of the first term.

A New York trip during spring break will allow first-hand understandings of a city which grew largely because of many small businesses rather than large ones, and which remains an important innovator with respect to creative industries and social inclusion. Apart from visiting projects relevant to the studio, we will see important examples of the city’s 20th- and 21st-century buildings and urban designs.

The development of the building will be conducted in a way that reinforces the intentions of the building and the designer. In this way, the ideal of the terminal studio being a comprehensive design will be done in the context of a strong and engaged theoretical investigation. The seminar and studio together combine the features of a thesis studio, in which students take responsibility for the definition of their own project, and a studio with a common program, allowing students to have a platform for the sharing of substantive issues with respect to the project.

A critical aspect of this project will be how the project is woven into the larger context. Even though the building will only occupy one site within the district, the intention is that the building be stitched into the larger fabric of the district and city—contributing to urban life and gaining life from the city in return.

The studio will be intense and cooperative, with regular pinups and the expectation of accountability to strongly articulated intentions as well as to the goal of furthering our understanding of a “new city.” Speculative, future-oriented solutions will be encouraged. But at the same time “traditional” ideas about urban buildings and urban life will not be discouraged—what we need is critical thinking, wherever it comes from and wherever it leads.