The City of Portland recognizes the value of supporting startup businesses. If these businesses are successful they will provide work and support a growing economy. The City of Portland and the Portland Development Commission take a proactive stance to provide for diverse ways to encourage entrepreneurship. To this end they have initiated several economic incentives for young entrepreneurs.

One of the experiments in small business development is a project for an incubator that provides inexpensive but limited, workshop/office space, business services, conference facility, and housing in the center of Portland. The project will provide a building to act as a hub for startups in the surrounding area, which until now has been less than successful in attracting development. The building is seen as a double catalyst to redevelop an area, while acting as a startup for economic activity in the center of NW Portland.

The selected site is well served by heavy and light rail to minimize the need for cars, though it does have good freeway access. Adjacent to the site are numerous underutilized historic buildings that will help to provide overflow space for offices, workshops and housing. The conference facility will mainly be housed on the site. The general site is a 200’x 200’ block at the corner of NW Broadway and Gleason Streets. The specific site is a 10,000 square foot portion of the site. The height of the building is constrained by the need for density, and the character determined by the urban design.

Initially you will be asked to undertake an urban design for the area adjacent to your specific site (two weeks) and then to design the incubator building for the remainder of the term. An important part of the building design is to develop non-verbal ways for the building to describe values of you and your clients. For example values such as, support of public life, support of entrepreneurship, ideal ways for living in the city, sustainability, etc. To facilitate this description, we will have a review of your statement about important values at the end of the second week, along with the urban design proposals.

While building functions must be part of the design program, the studio emphasis will be on the stated description of values. In developing a design, most architects intend their building to convey ideas while solving technical construction problems. Often these ideas are based on cultural knowledge and what they convey to the public. The
transformation and expression of ideas and values into physical elements is an essential part of making building form, and is a major architectural role.

In the Renaissance such ideas may have included classical compositional rules, proportional mathematics, relationship to nature, astrology (science), perspective, and many other contemporary and historical concepts. In the Mannerist period it might have been questioning the rules in favor of invention, wit or individual sophistication, poetic or esoteric readings of historic texts, the inclusion of medieval or vernacular elements etc. In modern architecture it might be questioning or rejecting classical elements, return to first principles of architecture, inclusion of nature, the ideas and forms of abstract painting, demonstrating new construction methods, or technologies to save energy etc. Choosing, and ordering the ideas, and their representational architectural elements, transforming them for inclusion in the building façade, is the role of composition and is a building’s means to convey ideas.

Composition is the transformation of thought into poetic (sensible) and/or conventional (normative) physical elements. The composed elements both poetic and conventional are a language. The language is composed of physical elements (words) juxtaposed in sufficiently conventional and/or poetic ways to be understood.

We no longer have a classical language with sufficient relevance for meaning or to be able to operate as an architectural language. However, we share a common culture with known elements that can be composed by an architect who wants to convey ideas/values. What is required is intent, cultural awareness and dexterity (ability) to juxtapose and transform (compose) the chosen elements so they have general meaning.

We can learn from our predecessors about making facades with meaning through ideas and transformational techniques they used to develop their buildings. The intent of this paper is simply to remember that a primary purpose of civic architecture is to engage in an urban discourse, and the discourse requires a lucid scaffold. It must be lucid enough for us to understand what is intended. When one looks at a building there must be a dialogue implicit in the question, why is the building like that - what is the idea – what is the intention? For an architect to be dexterous, she must be able to contribute ideas to public dialogue. She can contribute importantly to the improvement of the city, public knowledge and the relevance of architecture.