University of Oregon  .  Portland Architecture Program.

The Urban Stage.  Public Places in the City Center
Portland + International Cities

The Norway Opera and Ballet.  Oslo.  Snohetta Architects

Introduction

This is a design thesis studio of self-defined projects within the topical framework of “The Urban Stage: Public Places in the City Center”. 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 which integrate design with building systems. The emphasis of the academic year is development of a comprehensive architectural project backed by a strong research effort.

Studio Topic

In my previous thesis studios at the University of Oregon, approximately half of the students were interested in focusing on a Portland project, the other half in other cities around the world. In addition to selecting a topic of general social, environmental and design significance, I normally focus on a topic of current civic importance to Portland. This provides students with an opportunity to interact with public officials and City staff.
Public Place and Space

The terms “public place” and “public space” are used frequently to describe a wide range of urban space types. There is a healthy amount of debate about what makes a truly “public” place or space. May it be privately owned? May people be excluded by discretion of city authorities or private owners? While we will discuss and compare public space types in the prep seminar, there are no clear answers. “Public” urban space and place differs with culture, environment, climate and other factors. European public space is not the same as American public space, and so on.

As a starting point, we will define “public places” and “public space” in this studio as “spaces with universal access and open to all”.

Project Selection

Projects selected in this studio should propose a creative and significant public place as the primary focus of the design effort. Since the Advanced Architectural Design Studio course requires the comprehensive design of a building, the building may be designed as part of a larger concept that incorporates a significant outdoor urban space, large or small. It could be a small building with a larger urban space, or vice versa.
Portland Projects

For the past two years, my thesis studios have worked in collaboration with the City of Portland’s new Office of Healthy Working Rivers, focusing on urban and architectural design opportunities created by the new River Plan, currently underway by the City. Last year, the work concluded with a publication of the studio’s work and an exhibition in the rotunda of Portland City Hall. Collaboration with the Office of Healthy Working Rivers will continue, but broadened to include the Bureau of Sustainability and Planning, which is currently working on the Central City 2035 Plan. An impressive amount of base information, analysis and high quality reports have already been prepared by the City as part of the planning process. This provides a valuable foundation for the thesis projects. Included in the City’s work is identification of specific Downtown areas and sites where major development opportunities occur.

Projects selected with Portland sites should be in the Central City 2035 Plan area, east or west sides of the river, waterfront or inland.

Development Opportunities at the Bridgeheads

Project Opportunities in Other Cities

The studio invites projects in other cities of the world. These projects provide valuable comparative examples to inform Portland and explore the general topic of urban public places. Students who wish to work in cities other than Portland are encouraged to identify opportunity sites that offer the possibility of creating significant public places that contribute to the quality of
urban space in the city. In past studios, projects have been located in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Vancouver, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Hong Kong, Ho Chi Min City and many other cities around the world. The only requirement is that the student has visited the city at some time in the past, preferably during the past five years. The instructor will work with students to help identify projects and sites, in Portland and elsewhere.

New urban Infrastructure. Barcelona. Sewage treatment facility powered by solar cell installation marks an important public place on the seafront.

Portland’s Challenge

Compared to other American cities, Portland has done well to create an impressive tradition of public spaces during the past 40 years. In addition to the city’s historic park system, new public spaces were created in the 1960’s (Lovejoy and Ira Keller Fountains); 1970’s (Tom McCall Riverfront Park, which removed an expressway); 1980’s (Pioneer Courthouse Square); late 1990’s and 2000 (Riverfront Esplanade, Jamison Square and Tanner Springs Park); 2010 (Director’s Square). In each of these examples, however, great urban buildings were not important elements of the public place. The challenge of this studio, whether the project is in Portland or another city, is to create an integrated architecture of building and urban space, figure and ground, building and urban landscape. The preceding precedents provide hints of possibilities.

The Willamette Riverfront, including the bridgeheads, provides many prime opportunities for projects. The City’s Central City 2035 Plan identifies several development opportunities and potential locations.

Pioneer Courthouse Square
Precedents

The Norwegian National Opera and Ballet

The Norwegian Opera and Ballet, located on Bjørvika bay in the Oslo city center, is the focus and catalyst of the new Fjordbyen (Fjordtown) urban neighborhood on former docklands. The new building is one of the most significant new public places built worldwide in recent years. The project transcends its function as an opera to create a rooftop and bayside surround that is open to all, at all times and seasons. Far more people visit the building as a public place than attend the opera or other events in the building.

Mercat Santa Caterina, Barcelona

Mercat Santa Caterina, in the center of Barcelona’s Barrio La Ribera in Ciutat Vella, is a recent public place that brings people of all walks of life together in a diverse, dense neighborhood of the city center. The market is an imaginative and provocative reuse of an existing market structure built in the early 1900’s. Combining a small museum of archeological ruins found on the site with community activities and social elderly housing, the market is an new innovative building type that provides a new focus for the neighborhood.
This project illustrates meaningful possibilities in small community buildings. The library is built in a depressed city in eastern Germany that has been losing population. The building and site make a public space for children and youth of the city, modest in size and resources but large in its bold architectural language and meaning to inhabitants. Along with the Norwegian Opera, the Library shared the European Prize for Public Space in 2010.
The Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle

The Sculpture Park is both building and urban landscape. Located on a formerly unused Downtown hillside, the Park has become the most popular outdoor attraction in the city center. Along with the historic Pike Place Market and recent Seattle Library, the city has a trio of important public places that provide public destinations for its otherwise mundane Downtown. Although the building is overshadowed by the outdoor terraces and path, the entire project makes an integrated whole.

The Seattle Library

The Seattle Library’s brash spatial creativity attracts a user audience greater than a traditional library. Although no important outdoor spaces are provided, the free nature of the enclosed space makes a cascading interior experience that matches the open possibilities of outdoor public space.
Osenbashi Pier, Yokohama

Osenbashi Pier, the oldest pier structure in Yokohama, was recently rebuilt as a cruise ship terminal. An intriguing park and promenade was created on the upper deck of the terminal, providing the city with one of its most creative new public places on the harbor.

The European Prize for Urban Public Space

A biennial award for urban public space was created twelve years ago by a consortium of European architecture and urban arts institutions. The award recognizes significant new public places which have transformed particular cities in Europe. A catalog “In Favor of Public Space: Ten Years of the European Prize for Public Space” was recently published, providing a valuable resource of precedents. The projects are also summarized on the organization’s webpage www.publicspace.org. The entire catalog is online as an excellent resource.

Urban Design and Master Planning

Urban design may be a part of the total study, although the primary focus will be on the comprehensive development of a building in order to meet the Department of Architecture’s standards for this course.

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.
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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.

Programming Course: Fall Term

An Architectural Programming course by Yosa Huggins of Mulvanny G2 Architecture will be offered Fall term. Students without a previous programming course or experience in programming are required to enroll in this course. Programming is a vital part of the design process and should be a skill acquired by every architect. The Fall Thesis Preparation Seminar will not teach basic programming techniques although I will critique each student’s research and program development. If your schedule of required courses makes taking the programming course impossible, please confer with me so that we can work out another way for you to learn the methods you will need.

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. Physical study models will serve as important study tools for the studio.

- 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.

**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 to know student interests in advance of the studio placements, as well as individual interests as projects are considered over the summer.

Gerry Gast

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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 Lviv, 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.