"OPACITY": AN OLD CONCEPT FOR NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL (PLACE)-BOUNDEDNESS OF (ARCHITECTURAL) DESIGN

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper presents a model of an experimental architectural studio that is basically based on the concept of "opacity," as well as two frameworks coming from so called contextualism and critical regionalism. It argues that epistemological place-boundedness of architectural design inherent in these traditions could be reconsidered in the light of an old concept of "opacity," and the framework coming out of this act could be used in the architectural design studio to address various contemporary issues. One of such issues, as it was also stated by the conference call, is the problem of so-called global culture that has been influential on our teaching and design traditions as well as our designs; all becoming same day by day. In addressing this problem, the paper introduces the basic concepts and ideas, and continues to present and discuss some of the examples coming out of the application of the presented framework to the architectural design studio.

Keywords: (Architectural) Design Education, Formalism, Opacity, Bauhaus, Epistemological Place-boundedness

1. INTRODUCTION

1. 1. PROBLEM SITUATION/CONTEXT

The first task was to liberate the pupil's individuality from the dead weight of conventions to allow him to acquire that personal experience and self-taught knowledge which are the only means of realizing the natural limitations of creative powers … Practical and formal subjects were taught side by side so as to develop the pupil's creative powers and enable him to grasp the physical nature of materials and the basic laws of design.

—Walter Gropius, 1965

Although it represents a condensed expression of a pedagogy belonging circa early 1900s, the statement of Walter Gropius can equally be taken as a manifestation of a "typical" basic design studio "typical" to an architecture school today. Presumably inherited from the Bauhaus, especially at the early stages of architectural education, prior knowledge of some type belonging to the domain of (architectural) design; paradigms, precedents, exemplars,

or even problems, hence whatever we prefer to call this prior knowledge, are often avoided. Students are given abstract, unprecedented problems, and by departing from first principles (a default non-place: free of cultural, social, physical, historical or environmental aspects), they are expected to produce solutions to these problems, by externalizing and expressing their "creativity" residing within. The problem in this pedagogy, as it was already examined and criticized by many, was that it omitted the fact that design creativity is always dependent upon a prior body of knowledge that is operational both in the making and in the evaluation phases of design. Building upon an already established wisdom, and departing from where others left is in the very essence of design: design is not possible within a cultural (or epistemological) vacuum.

However, no matter whether the mentioned body of knowledge is of high or of poor quality, it still will be operational in the making and in the evaluation processes, directly or indirectly, governing the design process and consequently the nature of the designed product. This last statement marks one of the essential problems (architectural) design pedagogy is confronting today. We live in so-called "information age," and from the pedagogical point of view, this reads: students are continuously bombarded and filled with images of same iconic projects, trendy ideas and styles and their attached popular slogans and myths, so easily and quickly distributed without control and often taken as granted without a selective filter. Actually, the term "information," here must be taken as a "misnomer," what students really filled with is a set of shortcuts directly establishing a link between the phenomena and its image, yet from the pedagogical point of view, could be best described as a "pollution." All our cultural difference seem to be evening out (or chamfered) to become a dull, indifferent cultural landscape (a non-place if you prefer). We as designers (our mindsets and consequently our environment) are getting same and same each day, ironically, design, taking its present route towards the truths established globally, was once conceptualized as essentially about difference, not sameness.

1. 2. THE STUDY

The phenomenon of universalization … constitutes a sort of subtle destruction …of local cultures … also of … creative nucleus of great cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life, what I shall call in advance the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind…. We have the feeling that this single world civilization … exerts a sort of attrition or wearing away at the expense of the cultural resources which we have made the great civilizations of the past. This threat is expressed … by the spreading before our eyes of a mediocre civilization which is the absurd counterpart of what I was just calling elementary culture. Everywhere throughout the world one finds the same bad movie, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc.

—Paul Ricoeur, 1965

There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive and old dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.

—Paul Ricoeur, 1965

The present study does not take and directly challenge the problem of, say "design markets and tastes becoming increasingly globalized, as ways of teaching and learning design become more and more internationalized," or, "students around the world make reference to the same iconic projects, trendy ideas and styles, and star designers." One cannot directly challenge such a situation. This is so not only because it is impossible and futile to try to ignore or reverse such processes, but also, actually, because the present conditions coming out of the process of globalization constitute some type of a cultural environment which could be a valuable source for the cultivation of a designer, and a designer must be a part of this "global" tradition to survive. We might easily make an analogy to famous travels of architects, once, was an important source for their self-cultivation: however they did not try to copy that lied before them, but they brought about their own standards of evaluation, their own tradition, they kept a certain distance to see what existed before them in a new light, to reach their own reading and evaluation and finally a new synthesis (Figure 1).
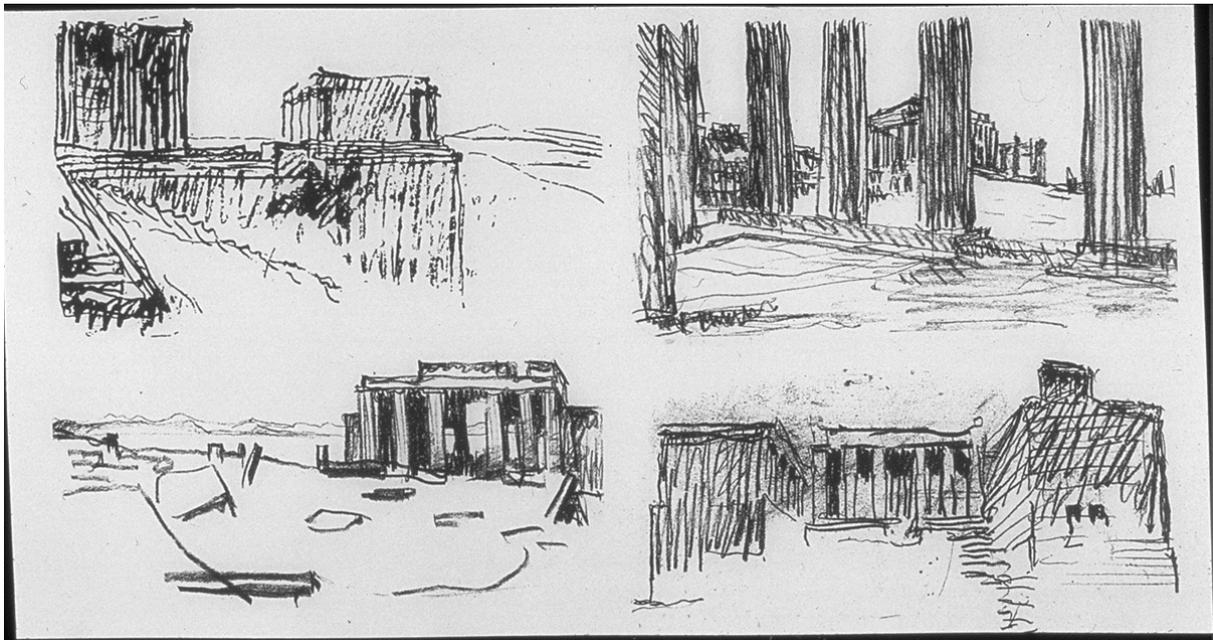

Figure 1 Sketches of Acropolis by Le Corbusier

So we take that the basic challenge which 21st century architectural design pedagogy facing is neither about surfacing the genius within the student by banishing what existed before her, nor about how to set up a body of knowledge, a schemata for her, or teaching how to design as it was once. It is (or should be) more about how to deal with the abovementioned "pollution," and "sameness": namely how to refine and re-place what already existed within the students' minds, how to establish a set of filters and develop an awareness to keep a critical stance, a designerly distance from what exists before them and from what they believe that they already "know," or "see" and how to develop a consciousness about the critical epistemological place-boundedness of design thinking. Architecture is not about

"thinking with images," and what was already known, already codified and formulated is of little importance to (self)cultivation of an architect.

The present paper presents a material coming out of a model of an experimental architectural studio that accepts this challenge and handles it in a specific way. Principally, towards establishing a theoretical and conceptual framework which would reside at the background of the studio, the studio utilized a concept borrowed from visual arts: the idea of "opacity" principally formulated by so-called German Formalists and elaborated by the formalist tradition later on, and a group of ideas borrowed from two paradigms from the last century; contextualism and critical regionalism. The framework is elaborated and evolved through years. Here, a rough sketch of the framework followed by a series of exercises coming out of it though years of studio experience is given.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2. 1. THE IDEA OF "OPACITY"

...art exists ...to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.

—Victor Shklovsky, 1917

I was cleaning, a room, and meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember —so that if I had dusted it and forgot- that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.

—Leo Tolstoy, 1897

...and so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war.

—Victor Shklovsky, 1917

Konrad Fiedler once proposed that there are two distinct relationships of the human mind to the appearances of the world: "conceptual cognition" and the "perceptual cognition." He argued, understanding and evaluation begins with perceptual experience, but this experience withers away by time, by means of the "conceptual thinking," as soon as one "draws out of perception that which all too often he believes to be its one and only essential content." Hence, the experienced phenomena are not seen and sensed anymore; almost through a shortcut, only recognized. He claimed, in understanding and judging of the products of the human mind (i.e. works of art), one should "remain at the stage of perception rather than to pass onward to the stage of abstraction;" maintaining a certain distance, that is essential "...to keep open other roads [to] arrive at cognition." It is a state, when one gains capability to distinguish and evaluate good and the significant aspects of a work that could lead to true (to that degree creative and multiple) reading and judgment of works. The idea of "opacity"

could be seen as an answer to this issue. Actually, in its original conception, "opacity" as opposed to "transparency", was the principal characteristic of an artwork; as it was argued by Rosalind Krauss, "...distinction between transparency and opacity was crucial to the differentiation between everything that was not art and everything that was." By various ways, art sought for opaqueness, enabling, even forcing, the perceptual process "long and laborious," extending the experience to "the fullest." Yet, another understanding of the concept is also possible, where operationally; "opacity" refers to some type of reading or transformation, which turned what was already known, transparent, or taken as granted (known, habitual, conventional, traditional, fashionable, popular), into something unknown, opaque, or unfamiliar. By itself this could be seen as a creative process, through which, owing to the required distance from the examined object, one can also reach new and unforeseen readings of the world as well as man-made objects, new and unforeseen ways of knowing and understanding them (Figure 2).
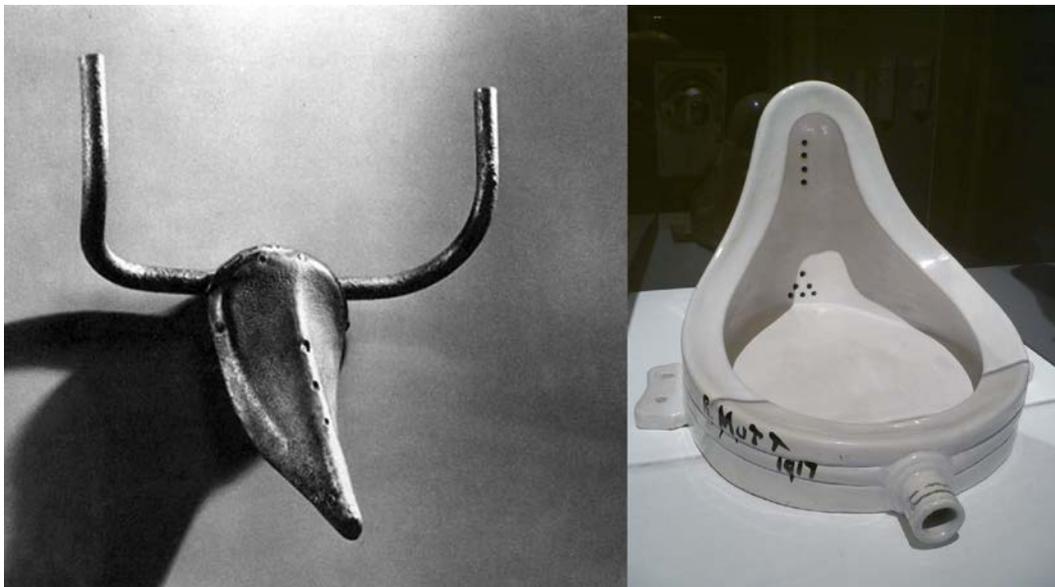

Figure 2 Bull's Head and Fountain (Picasso and Marcel Duchamp) Well-known examples illustrating two strategies to employ "opacity" to already existing artefacts.

2. 2. CONTEXTUALISM, CRITICAL REGIONALISM AND BEYOND: EPISTEMOLOGICAL (PLACE)-BOUNDEDNESS OF (ARCHITECTURAL) DESIGN

The world's great schools of design tend to be embedded in vibrant metropolises, distinctive regional cultures, hubs of creative energy, and other contexts that – in their rich design histories and unique social and cultural patterns – provide grounding, inspiration, challenges and nourishment to the teaching and learning of design. Local industries and natural resources, the geographical and climatic factors of the local environment, and the demographic and cultural specificities of the local society all have a formative influence on design students and teachers, and the institutions in which they operate. The place in which an educational institution is situated is the archive of tangible evidence of a heritage of

*design. Equally so, it contains the inheritance of intangible ideas and values, and is the
stage for the ongoing performance of a local habitus.*

—From the conference call of DesignEd Asia, 2015

*Even as design markets and tastes become increasingly globalized, as ways of teaching and
learning design become more and more internationalized, and students around the world
make reference to the same iconic projects, trendy ideas and styles, and star designers, the
importance of place in design education remains.*

—From the conference call of DesignEd Asia, 2015

One can easily sense the parallelism between the DesignEd Asia 2015 conference call and
two important critical traditions of architectural and urban design originally formulated about
the midst of the last century: Contextualism and Critical Regionalism. We believe that this is
no surprise since both the conference call and these traditions seem to have similar
mindsets behind their formulation and they are challenged with similar problem situations.
Actually, parallels that will be proposed below would be no surprise since the conference call
can be categorized under a certain mindset pointing to an urge towards some type of new
contextualism or new critical regionalism, which actually is a part of popping out discussions
we start to see here and there at the beginning of the 21st century. The problem of the
present paper can also be listed under this category.

Contextualism is commonly understood as an approach that proposes "buildings must be fit
to their (physical) environment," with a certain emphasis on the already built environment.
As such it says that physical context must be influential on every new design, in turn a new
design must be responsive to that context. However, in its expanded conception,
contextualism dealt with every new design's relation with what lied before it whether this
"what" is related with the physical, cultural, historical, symbolical, or otherwise, in addition,
it emphasized importance and the continuity of tradition as an active source and origin of
new designs as well as our standards of evaluation.

Critical regionalism on the other hand, basically emphasized the importance of local cultures
as the basis of architecture; fitness was not the basic issue, but local tradition constituted
the material to depart with, to create the new. Critical regionalism basically addressed so-
called international-style, a stage of modern architecture that proposed a global style to be
applied to everywhere in the world, and everyplace independent from the specificities of the
local (context) which in turn somehow leveling down the differences. Critical regionalism was
not against modernism. It embraced the essential ideas of modernism but proposed that
modernism by definition implied new to be a departure from where (local) tradition left. As
such on the one hand it required an established tradition to begin with on the other a
difference from that tradition. What made Critical regionalism important for the present case
was its main aim towards mediating the global with the local. It neither rejected the global,
nor taken it as granted. Identity was important. Frampton's version was following the

Ricour's formulation "... how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive and old dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization."

Of course main concern of contextualism was neither the education of an architect and the context's influence on design education, nor how to deal with the influence of globalization on the pedagogy, or question how to embrace that unrelenting force, and how to incorporate it within the specificities of the design education without being the victim of it. Actually, the picture drawn by the conference call demands some type of contextualism; a new type coming out of conditions which either we did not previously dealt with (i.e. influence of school traditions as a context for education of a designer), or newly introduced to the field (globalization dominating the design education) within the original discussions concerning contextualism. However, the conceptual and theoretical framework proposed by it was competent enough to deal with such an issue; basic devices were all there.

Similarly, one can easily identify the parallels between the problem situation confronted with critical regionalism and the present condition portrayed at the beginning of the paper. This in turn makes critical regionalist framework a potential paradigm to work with.

All in all, common to all, both contextualism and critical regionalism based their arguments on some type of place-bound epistemology that is (or must be) influential on (architectural) design, with different shades of "place" embedded within the conception. This points to what we call "epistemological place-boundedness of architectural design" a new conception with a strong emphasis on the epistemological aspects of (architectural) design, claiming to embrace historically situated paradigms such as contextualism and critical regionalism as well as contemporary situations such as the present problem situation.

3. THREE SELECTED EXERCISES COMING OUT OF THE FRAMEWORK

There were numerous exercises that came out of the framework by years, emphasizing different aspects of design. Hereby we present selected three, each emphasizing a different aspect of design equation, each illustrating a different dimension of the model. The exercises were given to freshmen and sophomore level architectural design students. They were given in Architectural Design Studio and Introduction to Architectural Design courses. By nature we believe that the approach best suits to the early stages of design education.

3. 1. IMPORTANCE OF OPACITY AND TECHNIQUE IN AN ARTWORK

Before asking them to prepare their own designs, we asked students to read the play Romeo and Juliet and followed by it, showed the students four film versions of the play (Figure 3). We ask the primary question; what is the difference? What makes people/audience to watch and rewatch a story almost known to all even from different versions of it? The exercise itself utilized the technique of opacity; the students almost always focused on the story to that date, now started to question first, the phenomena, and the difference between the versions. This required them to freeze an important (and obvious) layer of so-called the story which actually previously prevented them to be aware of various levels and content of the films themselves. We further argued that the films also utilized the strategy of opacity,

in various ways. For example it was one of the hardest things for the director of the most recent version to make people watch the film of which the story was already well-known to audience, as well as where there stand 3 previous versions before it. We emphasized that since the story is fixed, the variable that makes the difference is the "way" the story is presented, the technique employed by the director that requires an "opacity" to make people delay, stop and then start to think about the story once more, which in turn provide a new experience out of an already known one. The "expected" makes the scene stronger if something unfamiliar is provided. To illustrate this we particularly focused on certain important takes, and tried to relate form (that is the arrangement of artists, their mimics, their locations, dresses, location of the camera, etc. everything concerning the formal material) with say, the main theme of the take such as "the first meeting," giving the feeling of "love at first sight," "first kiss," etc. We also emphasized the relations between the various formal layers used in a take, such as the actual scene with the music. As a second step of the exercise, we go on to question the architectural correspondent of what we discussed and questioned within the specificities of cinema.

Figure 3 4 Versions of Romeo and Juliet (Picture Credit: IMDB Database)

3. 2. FORM-CONTEXT RELATIONS AND EMPHASIZING THE LOCAL

One of the exercises was about a typology of granary buildings. We provided the students a typology from Turkey and Spain which are called Serender and Horreos respectively. The theme was exactly same granary typology developed both in Turkey and Spain; two regions remotely distinct from each other. This was our strategy of opacity; two almost identical buildings were shown site by side, and being claimed that they belonged to totally different cultures, and developed independent from each other in two distinct parts of the world without any reciprocal influence (Figure 4).

First step was to make students question how two distinct cultures and regions came up with the same typology. Without telling them the function, we made them to ask questions about the function of the typology itself, then about the conspicuous elements and their functions. By reversing the process, they established an understanding about the relation between the context and the form as well as the function and the form. For example once they discovered the function of the building, it was easier to relate the high-rise podium, posts, slits and the caps at the upper ends of the posts with their respective functions. Students also saw that

(physical) context had (and must) a strong control on the development of overall form. We further emphasized this with putting different typologies in the same context and asking questions about the fitness, or make them ask "what if" questions to force them to deepen their understanding of the essential relations. We also take in-typology variations and tried to relate them to various environmental, contextual, material conditions.

Figure 4 Horreos and Serenders

3. 3. STUDIES IN VARIATION AND ADAPTATION: UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSFORMING THE TRADITION

The use of precedents in architectural design studio is a well-established tradition. Conventionally, we use precedents to illustrate our cases, or we use them as a source of architectural knowledge or source for inspiration, or, they work as source for our standards for evaluation.

In this exercise, we tried to develop a new approach to precedents to relocate their place in the design equation. We utilized an evolutionary analogy to achieve this. Without discussing any function, we asked students to make mockups of some selected buildings designed by specific architects. This introduced basic notion about the aspects such as main idea or concept, elements, patterns and how all these they come together, or organize the whole to end up with a building (Figure 5).

Then we introduced the notion of variation and ask them to make a variation of the building without any apparent program or purpose. By nature, designing a variation tied them to their departure point, and helped them to question its essentials and develop a deeper

understanding. On the other hand, they had to develop a strategy to design something out of the existing; a version that is both tied to and differed from what existed before it. This exercise was essentially different from either building something from scratch, or analyzing a precedent. The point was in all cases, first they had to see the original design in a new light (an opacity achieved) and develop a new (and deeper) understanding of it. It was essentially different from precedent analysis.
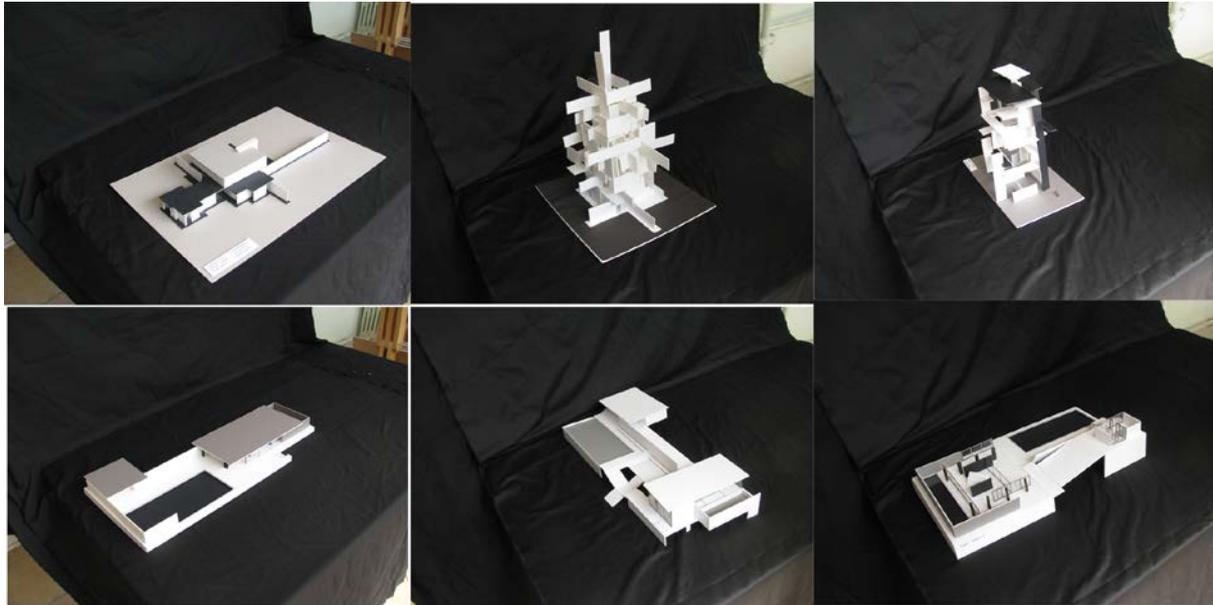

Figure 5 Variations and adaptations of a work

After this stage, a follow-up exercise was given; we asked them this time to adapt (not make a variation) the building, without losing its essentials (main concept, elements, relations between elements, patterns etc.) to, say, 30 degrees of sloped land. This also pushed them to create a variation but this time with reference to an external actor; physical context. Once there were the demands of the precedent, combined with an urge to create a difference, now both were challenged with the demands of the context (Figure 5).

Figure 6 New designs out of precedents (adapted to cliff)

Another follow-up was to change the main concept: For example if case was a building based on cross organization, developed in horizontal, then we changed the main concept to vertical development, and asked them to create a new building out of the new concept with the same formal material. Thus, by isolating one formal material out of the equation and by modifying it or replacing it we created some type of opacity, students now had to see the original system in a new way. Strategically, each stage broke the shortcut or direct link of the students with the object in front of them, and they require reestablishing that link again and again.

As the final stage, we assigned a total design problem (with the brief and the context) and expected them to work with the previous material to design their own. We further elaborated this work by changing the context totally, (first: a cliff, second: a site from Venice) and expect them to adapt their designs to this new context (Figure 6).

Figure 7 Parallel Works

It was a group study in which 20 students worked in parallel, which also helped us to emulate the dynamics of the evolution itself, all parallel versions helped the overall process to be intense and rich (Figure 7, Figure 8).

Figure 8 Parallel Works

4. CONCLUSION

Within the limitations of the present study, we tried to formulate a problem which we believed was one of the major problems of the present architectural design pedagogy. To address and challenge with problem, we presented a notion borrowed from literary tradition; "opacity," as well as two frameworks coming from so called contextualism and critical regionalism. We argued that epistemological place-boundedness of architectural design inherent in these traditions could be reconsidered in the light of an old concept of "opacity," and the framework coming out of this act could be used in the architectural design studio to address the stated problem situation; the problem of so-called global culture that is affecting our teaching and design traditions as well as our designs, all becoming same day by day, and by providing popular examples creating some type of a pollution in students' minds. As a follow-up we provided some examples coming out of years of studio experience, where we utilized the presented framework. We believe that, both the given framework and the

experience coming out of the studio process, implies many things to help addressing the "big problem" that was described in the conference call.

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