OBLIQUE PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES: IMPROV AND SPECULATIVE REALISM IN SUPPORT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper acknowledges the extent to which the majority of people who work in the field of architecture are white, examines the way that whiteness in the prevailing charity-service model of community-engaged design undermines meaningful social justice design, calls for dismantling white cultural dominance in architectural education, and outlines a pedagogical method that has shown some promise in uncovering blind spots caused by dominant culture belonging that commonly prevents architects from understanding the experiences of others during design analysis, especially where asymmetrical privilege exists, such as in the field of community-engaged design. With roots in improvisational theater tactics and a thinking framework from speculative realism that helps undermine defaulting to traditional hierarchies, these oblique pedagogical strategies appear to expand student capacity for open inquiry and self-reflection, revealing previously invisible biases, and may point to more meaningful social justice design with community. The hope is that this is an entry to providing transformative education in undergraduate architecture studios that creates unfettered creative space for students of color and productively reveals bias to white students. The concern remains that the tactic persists in centering white feelings of comfort in a way that erases BIPOC distress in the studio. Early experiments with this pedagogical approach showed promise in a fifth-year undergraduate capstone studio at Jefferson University focused on how architects (a largely privileged population) can form alliances with communities experiencing gentrification (a largely marginalized population) and again in a - second-year undergraduate studio deployed within a design fundamentals curriculum at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning.

Keywords: Community-Engaged, Improvisation, Pedagogy, Site Analysis, Social Justice Design, Speculative Realism

1. INTRODUCTION

An often-repeated statistic where I live is that there are only eight black people licensed to practice architecture in the entire state of Wisconsin. Upon checking the *Directory of African American Architects*, I see that seven are listed today. Wisconsin is not alone in this distinction, with twenty-four states in the directory listing ten or fewer African American architects licensed in the state. Five states list *no* African American architects (Mann and Grant n.d.). Wondering if this could possibly be an anomaly of our state rather than the result of a federally regulated profession, I used NCARB's "Licensing Requirements Tool" to confirm that the five states with no African American architects do regulate the profession of architecture through licensure, required work experience, and the completion of the ARE

(NCARB n.d.). A comparison of the total number of licensed architects across all US jurisdictions (115,316) to the total number of licensed African American architects (2,325) reveals that 2 percent of licensed architects are Black (NCARB 2019, 23; Mann and Grant n.d.). Several reports confirm what is obvious, that African American and all BIPOC architects represent a small fraction of licensed architects, a little more than one-quarter overall (Griffin and Yang 2015; AIA 2016). Acknowledging that the number of licensed architects in a state does not account for all people engaged in architectural labor (who might be labeled designers, academics, artists, unlicensed professionals, or licensure candidates), these data give a very clear picture: that most people who practice architecture are white.

Architecture's entanglements in white cultural dominance in the United States are many, and in this paper I work on uncovering some ways that the whiteness of architecture undermines the field of community-engaged design, call for dismantling white cultural dominance in architectural education, and outline a pedagogical method that has shown some promise in uncovering blind spots that can prevent architects from understanding the experiences of others during design analysis, especially where asymmetrical privilege exists, such as in the field of community-engaged design.

As designers and educators, we must do a great deal of work to overcome the training that instructs us not to see the value in the aesthetics of the marginalized communities we seek to engage. One thing I offer here is a way that design pedagogy rooted in improvisational theater (improv) and scholarship around nonhuman entities can serve to sensitize students to their own blind spots and architecture's Eurocentric bias. To achieve equitable community-engaged design practice, students need oblique strategies to overcome a near-inescapable design culture and human point-of-view biases. In other words, indirect or apparently tangential approaches to design practice may offer new perspectives that are impossible to see when we are committed to our habitual ways of working.

Scholarship that decentralizes humans in the field of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (OOO) makes space in architecture for exercises in which students invest in exploring the point of view of a nonhuman entity. Exposure to this ontological value framework within explorations that privilege nonhuman points of view are also instructive in the ways that many humans are treated as less than or not fully human in practice.

Structuring undergraduate studio assignments using improv tactics provides levity and medium unfamiliarity that engenders trust among classmates and dilutes student instincts to perform correctness by traditional architectural means. References to theater in general amplify the understanding that we are playing a role—and the performance of one role (nonhuman entity in the neighborhood) momentarily eclipses the performance of another role (preprofessional architect) that often confounds open exploration in studio.

Early experiments with this pedagogical approach showed promise in a fifth-year undergraduate capstone studio at Jefferson University focused on how architects (a largely privileged population) can form alliances with communities experiencing gentrification (a largely marginalized population) and again in a second-year undergraduate studio deployed within a design fundamentals curriculum at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning.

Most of my students have been white. Much as in the profession as a whole, BIPOC architecture students make up about 20 percent of the total population (Griffin and Yang 2015). I would not hazard a guess as to what percentage of the white students I teach have a willingness to examine the ways that they are complicit in systemic racism, but I can say

that all of them, like me, require education and experience to overcome the blindness conferred by belonging to the dominant culture. The oblique pedagogical methods I am developing in design studios appear to help reveal blind spots so that students can engage more meaningfully in self-reflection and equitable community-engaged design practice. My hope is that this is an entry to providing transformative education in undergraduate architecture studios that creates unfettered creative space for students of color and productively reveals bias to white students. My concern is that the tactic remains white-centered and may cater too generously to the notion of white fragility (DiAngelo and Dyson 2018) as Barbara Applebaum describes in her exploration of supporting without comforting white students as they confront race in the classroom (Applebaum 2017).

2. PATERNALISTIC CHARITY ENCODED AS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UNDERMINES SOCIAL JUSTICE IN DESIGN

The terms “community-engaged design” and “public interest design” are used interchangeably by practitioners to refer to design work done in the service of “people and communities who cannot afford to pay for architectural and related services and design for the broader public good” (Feldman et al. 2013, 4). The inability of the client to pay for design services is part of what defines community-engaged work as such and renders the delivery of services charitable. Community design organizations report that they work mostly for “underserved” and “urban” communities (ACSA 2015)—codes for poor, Black, and Brown.

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture’s “Community Design Directory” tells us that community-engaged design services are rendered by privately owned firms, design organizations in academia, and design nonprofits (ibid.). Public interest design services are often rendered pro bono by privately owned firms (OnePlus n.d.), and “very few community design organizations offer services at a market rate, with the majority operating on a negotiated fee or pro bono basis” (ACSA 2015).

Most community-engaged design practices are small academic groups of one to five part-time staff (often including faculty) that rely on student workers who are compensated through academic credit, a stipend/wage, or internship hours or who are not compensated.

> Academic organizations that offer services on a negotiated fee basis are most likely to pay participants a stipend or wage, while those offering pro bono services are more likely to offer participation through elective courses for credit. In the nonprofit sector, volunteer participation is the most common regardless of client fee structures. (ACSA 2015)

Private firms also engage in public interest design through pro bono work, noticeably through Public Architecture’s OnePlus program, “the largest pro bono design marketplace in the world,” which connects nonprofits to architecture firms that have committed at least 1 percent of total billable hours to pro bono work. Firms who participate in the program are encouraged but not required to compensate employees who work on pro bono projects (OnePlus n.d.). Of 2019’s top fifty architecture firms acknowledged by *Architect* magazine for excellence in design, business, and sustainability, forty-eight of fifty affirmed that they do pro bono work at up to 5 percent of total billable hours, with the median number of billable hours dedicated to pro bono work at 1 percent (Karlin Research 2019).

Predesign, organization, visioning, strategy, and ideation labor is emphasized across community design organization types. While technical services might be offered at the

discretion of the firm, the OnePlus FAQs for nonprofits (i.e., those who would be clients) advises starting with predesign and early-stage strategic planning or “request[ing] visualization and graphic communication service to support capital campaigns” (OnePlus n.d.). Among nonprofit and academic community design entities, the most commonly listed services include design, workshops, community organizing, research, sustainability, planning, and programming (ACSA 2015). Technical services, including construction documentation, construction/fabrication, and engineering, which are most commonly situated in later design phases and are those that carry the heaviest liability, fall to the bottom of these lists. The OnePlus FAQs for designers suggest that doing early design work well can lead to more work: “For example, a firm may be retained to create a pro bono sustainability analysis and then later hired to implement the plan on a full-fee basis” (OnePlus n.d.). The creative and relational engines that power the early stages of design are more commonly offered for free than the technical products of the later design phases, especially when the sacrificial labor of the former might lead to full compensation for the latter.

The charitable model described above for rendering community-engaged or public interest design services and education is problematic because it persists in putting an overwhelmingly white group of people in the position of delivering design “to” rather than “with” poor communities of color. As Paolo Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the oppressor cannot also be the liberator without participating in the racist structures that marginalized these communities in the first place. Freire also notes the dehumanizing impact of “false generosity” in a paternalistic system (Freire 2002, 54), which resonates strongly with the marketing and positive PR motivators latent (and sometimes explicit) in the world of public interest design work. For community-engaged design to become a robust part of conventional practice that does not participate in white supremacist systems of oppression, we have to both rebuild the field of architecture so that its practitioners reflect its participants and immediately transform the way that white architects engage in design with oppressed people. We should do away with the codes that hide the paternalistic nature of the charity-service model in architecture, reflect on the ways that racial inequity neuters the possibility of authentic social justice design, and push for new modes of practice that support long-term sustainable transformation of the relationship between design and community.

I do not suggest that charitable activities should cease in design altogether and agree with L. N. Badger’s point that “charity-based paradigms may be supportive in critical direct service-based tasks, such as those necessary to operate community food pantries”—perhaps analogous to emergency shelter design and fabrication in architecture. I agree, furthermore, that the place to begin “reset[ting] student expectation toward democratic collaborative practice and away from alienating charity paradigms” is by increasing opportunities for self-reflection and placing an emphasis on collaboration with community and long-term relationship building that may resist neat alignment with academic structures like grades and semesters (Badger 2017, 372–73). I would add that practices of self-reflection in the classroom, as I discuss shortly, must be integrated into nonelective courses such as design fundamentals studios at the undergraduate level. If we intend to transform the field of architecture such that it supports students and practitioners of color, then it cannot be optional for white students and practitioners to do the work to uncover blind spots, entitlements, and complicity that arise from belonging to the dominant culture.

3. OBLIQUE STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE–ORIENTED SELF-REFLECTION IN THE ARCHITECTURE CLASSROOM

Architecture students cannot begin to unpack their entitlements and complicity in the way that the built environment contributes to oppression until they understand that a difference exists between their experiences of place and others. Since the last time I taught studio, the protest movement in response to the murder of George Floyd has put white people, marching in solidarity with Black people, in neighborhoods that many have likely never experienced at a walking pace. I am hopeful about the influence this lived experience and physical encounter with Black space will have on architecture students and curious about the ways this will weave into the work of self-reflection in studio I describe below.

I am working with undergraduate architecture students on shifting the tendencies that make the charity-service paradigm outlined above so problematic: an overeagerness to solve perceived problems using information from an unexamined white perspective, confidence that dominant cultural expression is the right cultural expression for everyone, and the conviction that product is more valuable than process, as evidenced by the practice of giving away process labor much more freely than product (or technical) labor in academic, nonprofit, and private pro bono community-engaged design work. How might architects and architecture educators, an overwhelmingly white group, work with an overwhelmingly white student population to meaningfully shift the ways that whiteness impacts our work, especially in the direction of liberated social justice design practice, while building an inclusive learning experience for all architecture students?

In undergraduate architecture studios, I am developing oblique strategies to help architecture students uncover blind spots created by their belonging to the dominant culture, ease tension around productively admitting ignorance, practice empathizing with others, and develop what I hope are more meaningful social justice design practices whose value arises from the integrity of the process instead of a constant drive toward product. An oblique strategy in an architecture studio, like those offered in the eponymous card deck developed by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt as an “intervention into the artistic process” (Eno and Schmidt 1979; Mitchell 2011), prompts students to engage communities and contexts by unobvious means. Where Eno and Schmidt might, for example, suggest “gardening, not architecture” (1979) in music composition, I do this by incorporating elements of improv into the studio exercises I design and, increasingly, offering intersections with nonhuman entities using a framework for thinking provided by speculative realism throughout the studio learning experience.

Being white in a white supremacist culture causes blind spots. This is well described by the Johari model, in which the four quadrants of a square (like panes of a window) represent the possible combinations of self-knowledge and the knowledge of others. The two relevant squares are those that represent blind spots (information that is known to others but not to oneself) and the unknown self (unknown to both self and others); the aspects of one’s self that are “unknown to many people, because they have never had reason to engage it” (Carraher and Smith 2017, 222). The majority of current architecture students, who are white, will not have had reason to experience the consequences of race in the built environment as a result of their belonging to the dominant culture. White architecture students, as all white people, including me, are not exposed to the racial stress that people of color experience regularly (DiAngelo and Dyson 2018, 1). We do not experience the distress that contrast with the dominant culture encoded into the built environment constantly causes. We do not experience much “othering” or difference at all, except where

matters of taste or style (often driven by economic class) come into play. In a population that is blind to all but the most superficial experiences of difference, how might the parts of the design process that are explicitly about observation acquaint us with what it might feel like to be an “other”? The process of analysis, often taught as being exclusive to the beginning of a design project, has two qualities that make it opportune territory for blind-spot hunting: it is endemic (if anemic) in architecture, and it is the only part of the design process devoted completely to carefully observing existing conditions.

Pedagogical methods for teaching analysis rooted in both improv and speculative realism afford oblique approaches to questions of race that can be difficult to confront head-on both because the blind spots we are looking for are in the “unknown” Johari window territory of things we don’t know we don’t know, and because inquiry that threatens to expose white complicity in racist structures can shut down curiosity for fear of being labeled a bad person (DiAngelo and Dyson 2018, 71). As I continue to develop these oblique strategies in undergraduate design studios, I seek to transform the ways that this approach centers my and my white students’ feelings by softening direct encounters with complicity in racist structures.

I noticed the confluence of white racial bias and the productive uncovering of blind spots in a studio I designed in 2017–18 with fifth-year undergraduates in the B.Arch program at the College of Architecture and the Built Environment at Jefferson University in Philadelphia. The studio, called Betwixt and Between, examines ways that theories of ambiguity can help architects shift from a product- to a process-oriented approach in support of communities experiencing gentrification while also acknowledging that the designed proposals will not constitute solutions. To do this, we investigate concepts of liminality and ambiguity through seminar-style discussion of a limited set of readings, multisensory media work, and architectural drawing like the large-scale axonometric drawings shown here by students in the 2017 studio (Figure 1).

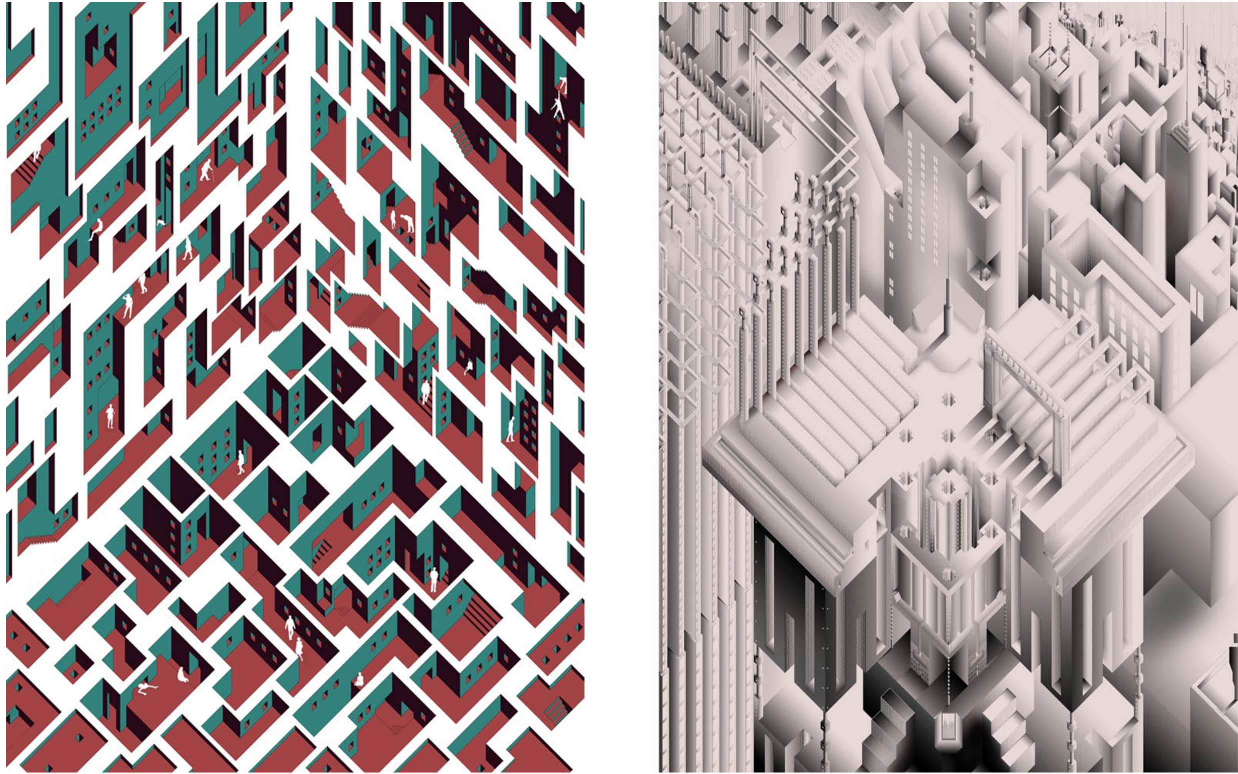

Figure 1: Axonometric liminality drawings (*left* by Jason Trutner, 2017; *right* by Yonatan Levi, 2018)

The studio is sited in a mostly African American, low-income, environmentally marginalized neighborhood on the banks of the Schuylkill River in Southwest Philadelphia called Kingsessing that is rapidly experiencing expanding gentrification spreading south and west from University City (the neighborhood that includes the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University) and historically diverse and financially stable nearby West Philadelphia neighborhoods such as Cedar Park to the north. Very few of the students in the studio had ever ventured to this part of the city.

At first, I used improv as a pedagogical tactic instinctively as a way to prolong a state of ambiguity and inject a loosening levity during the early phases of an architecture project—that is, during the site analysis period when students are getting to know the Kingsessing neighborhood and its inhabitants. I adapted the improv game “Party Guest,” in which one actor plays the host and other actors are each given a secret identity, which they must act out in the setting of a party and which the host must endeavor to guess based on behavior. Just as in Party Guest, each student in the studio adopts a new secret identity for the duration of the site analysis exercise—I generate many possible nonhuman entities, and we pick them randomly out of a hat. Each student must then represent the neighborhood from the perspective of this entity using as many senses as possible and preferably using time-based media such as comics, film, or performance.

For example, the still below from Kelsey Donato’s short animation (Figure 2) depicts Kingsessing from the perspective of an invasive plant persisting along a neighborhood street, even as gloved hands appear repeatedly to suppress its growth. Even a still frame of this animation is notable for its quiet, nonjudgmental observation of the relationship

between plant and neighborhood, and although it overlays the value of undesirability on the plant itself via the frustrated efforts of the gloved hands, it does not attempt interpretation by demographic statistical means, a common analytical default in undergraduate site observation exercises.

Figure 2: Still from stop-motion animation exploring the perspective of an invasive plant in Kingsessing, Philadelphia (by Kelsey Donato, 2018)

The improv roots of this exercise, clearly outlined with students, provide levity that engenders trust, builds willingness to experiment, and dilutes students' instincts to perform correctness by traditional architectural means. Almost none of the students had ever been asked to work in the medium of improv, and very few had ever been asked to work in time-based media that incorporated many senses. This leveled the playing field and produced an array of deliverables, from comics to short films, acoustic experiences, interpretive dance, and small installation prototypes. No student defaulted to drawing alone or to charts and graphs describing the demographic makeup, average economic means, or educational achievement of people in the neighborhood. The neighborhood is not an objective set of data points to be listed, a tragedy to be healed through charity. It becomes, through the make-believe window afforded by the assigned nonhuman role, rather more like the experiential field it is in reality.

I propose that the capacity this exercise builds to experience the neighborhood rather than to see it as a series of dehumanized data points to be solved comes from the affirmative nature of improv, the humanizing influence of humor in the classroom, and a framework for thinking that undermines traditional hierarchies, specifically object-oriented ontology (OOO) and transcendental materialism (both schools of thought within speculative realism).

The classic improv phrase "Yes, and . . ." summarizes improv's tendency to lubricate and build up rather than hone by removal. This affirmative quality, used famously by the Stanford

d.school in its experiential education programs and described by Robert Poynton in his book *Do Improvise*, does not eliminate difficulty but has students "engage with it instead of struggling *against* it" (d.school 2020; Poynton 2014). Improv also comes along with expectations of humor and flexibility. Humor, an underappreciated pedagogical tool, changes the stakes of the conversation, humanizes all participants, and builds trust—the most influential factor impacting team effectiveness (Google n.d.).

> Simply put, laughter shared can draw groups together. This is especially true in classrooms where there is much that separates, where diversity is the norm, or where the subjects studied confront students with depressing facts. (hooks 2010)

Speculative realist theories that decenter human ways of being provide a means to practice decentering whiteness. It is easier for most of us to understand that we experience the world differently than a cat or a snowstorm than it is for us to understand the magnitude of the experiential difference between ourselves and another human being. Asking students to adopt the identity of a nonhuman entity lowers the stakes in asking a very difficult set of questions: What is it like to be this other entity? How is it different from what it's like to be me? And what does that tell me about how to go about my design work? At a time when many human beings are still treated as less than such, pretending to be animals and objects can help students understand that there are huge experiential differences to detect in their understanding of others that are often obscured by assumption, stereotype, and systemic structures like racism that prevent us from seeing one another clearly.

Timothy Morton's theory of hyperobjects (2013) has accompanied this exercise in the past, helping students conceive of how nonhuman entities like climate change constitute our reality in ways that are as important as the ways humans do. James J. Gibson (1986) has also offered students a way to de-label the environment and evaluate it for its relational capacities rather than only filtering through what it offers to humans. In future iterations of this exercise, Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) could provide an OOO viewpoint on complexity, humility, and a relationship between a notion of messiness in the world of things and the way ideas heap upon one another in improv. Offering another model for flattening prevailing ontological hierarchies, Jane Bennett's explanation of the concept of vital materiality to both things and humans in *Vibrant Matter* (2010, 112) "draws human attention sideways" and might provide a more tangible, proximate framework for undergraduate design students practicing novel forms of undermining hierarchy both from an ecological and a racial perspective.

Using this improv- and speculative realism–informed technique, a productive failure showed me that this exercise had the potential to uncover blind spots produced by general stereotypes and by most students' belonging to the dominant culture. A certain student, assigned the role of a newspaper, had carefully constructed a narrative in advance of visiting Kingsessing, wherein the ubiquitous newspaper gets bought, read, cast aside, and then goes for a jolly ride on public transportation, an adventure all its own. But when the student visited the neighborhood to document the experience of the brave little newspaper, there was little evidence that newspapers circulated as expected in this neighborhood at all. Frustrated, the student returned to the studio empty-handed. Rather than dismissing the student for bringing nothing to class that day, however, we were able to have a studio-wide discussion about how the expectations about newspapers were coming from stereotypes about

media use not informed by open observation of the neighborhood itself. The student eventually returned with a set of short transcribed interviews that document brief conversations with Kingsessing residents about the ways that newspapers really do (or don't) operate in the neighborhood. The work took an important first step: open listening.

3. INTEGRATING OBLIQUE STRATEGIES INTO DESIGN FUNDAMENTALS AND FUTURE WORK

Over the course of two years, this exercise changed what the students ultimately proposed in the final project for the semester: a micro thesis in which each student pitched a system, process, or structure that amplifies, undermines, or articulates conditions of gentrification found in Kingsessing. Many iterations are necessary to confirm the effects I claim this exercise has in undergraduate architecture studios, but the shift from recognizable charity-service products to a more diverse set of empathetic social justice design responses is legible in the chart below that catalogs the students' final project topics from 2017 (before I fully implemented the Party Guest analysis exercise) to 2018 (Figure 3).

Student proposals 2017-2018

BEFORE PARTY GUEST (2017)	AFTER PARTY GUEST (2018)
Transit hub + park	Space for listening
Community college	Community forum / food hub
Market / cafe	Speculative fiction examining the power of monuments
Biophilic factory	Zoning code revision
Holistic wellness center	Phytoremediation farm
Transit hub + market	XR social hub
Modular development system	Art gallery / artist studios
Neighborhood museum	
Child care + study center	

Figure 3: Catalog of final project proposal topics in Betwixt and Between studio, 2017–18

I continue to incorporate these improvisational values and abilities, recently adapting "Party Guest" into site analysis drawing exercises in a design fundamentals studio I coordinate at the sophomore level at the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (Figures 4 and 5), where the students are not grappling directly with gentrification. Here, I am beginning to see evidence of this exercise's tendency to apply student abilities to set aside traditional hierarchies (the primacy of human perspective, for instance) in order to meaningfully discover something about another entity's point of view that was previously invisible to them. Benjamin Zerrien, a student in the Spring 2020 sophomore studio, said this about the difference between drawing from his own perspective and then switching to the Sun's (Figure 4):

> Composing the first drawing required me to prioritize which aspects of the site I wanted to explore. The resulting composition reinforced these hierarchies in my mind. These hierarchies, which were established from a human point of view, were

subverted by the second drawing, which required a nonhuman perspective. One "aha" moment for me was realizing that the sun doesn't see shadows. This realization led me to think more critically about what the sun does experience.

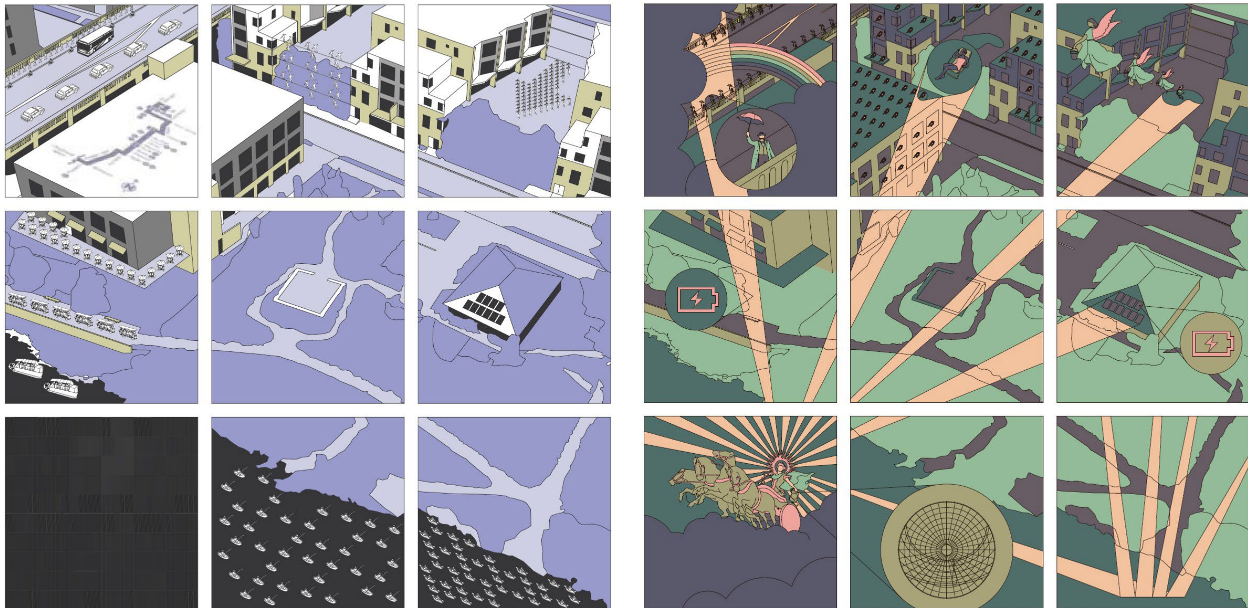

Figure 4: Point-of-view drawings: Human POV (left); Sun POV (right) (by Benjamin Zerrien, 2020)

Although there is still a lot of work to do to make explicit connections between my students and social justice design practice, my claim is that their exposure to improv-based analytical exercises that explore nonhuman points of view can reveal blind spots caused by belonging to the dominant culture, increase openness to others, and loosen fixed mindsets about the nature of architectural deliverables (especially for upper-level students). These oblique pedagogical strategies also seem to produce projects rooted more in process development, relationship building, and empathetic listening to design *with* community than in traditional, product-based approaches to solving perceived problems *for* populations who are disadvantaged by systemic forces like racism in which architecture is complicit. It will be important as this work evolves to constantly evaluate the ways that the oblique strategies themselves might become acceptable code for what Barbara Applebaum calls "white calming techniques that provide absolution from guilt" (2017, 865). Consistent curiosity in this area must be cultivated, especially as the essential work to dismantle white cultural dominance transforms all parts of life, presenting ample temptation for white people to seek the comforts of low-stress environments it has long been our privilege alone to enjoy.

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