

**Boston Architectural College**  
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*Invigorating Local: Surveying the Seven Hills*

So first of all, this human condition, it's nature. Or, to obviate this confusion about creation, perhaps I should start calling it *the land*. Second of all, as the Texans say, it's the other human beings. All six billion of them. If you were to count one every second, nonstop, twenty-four hours a day, it would take you 190 years; if you were to do the counting with your lover, it would take the two of you your whole lives. You'd need four or five people to do the job between childhood and retirement. To enumerate the other humans, of course is to suggest a mass of corporeal existence: so much meat. But by mentioning your lover and your friends, I intend to make the point that the second-of-all condition is other people, those to whom we speak and whom we love and hate and whom we act together with. Value is what's important in this second-of-all, since value is how we treat each other. (Paul Shephard, *What Is Architecture?*, 1994)

We citizens of the Commonwealth are notoriously provincial, at one time referring to our capital city as the 'Hub of the Universe' to convey a sense of import. Recently we seem to have become more comfortable in our collective skin, acknowledging, implicitly perhaps, that ours is not the New World's 'first city'. But our antique fabric and hallowed institutions still manage to beguile (and frustrate) visitors from throughout the world.

Our neighborhoods are central to this charm. While the urban fabric changes over time, so too people come and go, a testament to expansive mobility and the opportunistic urge. Our communities have evolved, shifting from a populace of primarily Western European origin to a more diverse, global immigrant culture. Still, much of the physical geography of this place has, for some time, remained relatively constant, providing a backdrop to the evolution our local culture. One might argue, for example, that the realities of our weather – abiding winters, abridged springs, clammy summers, sublime autumns – contribute to a unifying experience that makes us all Yankees.

As architects, we look for qualities that give buildings distinction. The corollary is, we hope, more engaging cities. In an increasingly universal world, our project becomes problematic. The desire and ability of the *laissez-faire* program to adopt imagery that is ostensibly radical, and certainly spectacular, in the service of 'growth' is profound. (A metamorphosis: Gehry – hippy/punk to yuppie to robber baron.) In this scene, architecture exists photographically, in journals and the tourist's travelblog. The subtle sensuality of surfaces and the spaces they contain, however, as well as their life in time, resist photographic conveyance. Those more elusive, and critical, qualities present themselves at close range, unmediated.

A sense of 'the local' is often identified as endemic to an authentic architectural expression. In an age when ethno-religious differences are used to mark and accentuate ideological and spatial boundaries, one must be wary of the potential meanings in the uses of localness. Distinctiveness, yes, but at what cost? Is this a desirable pursuit for a democratic society? The last two centuries offer numerous examples of parochial interests turned murderous.

One could argue that these concerns are beyond the scope of our discipline. But architectural production is fundamentally a collaborative pursuit, and so inherently political. Architecture, like drama and music, requires the efforts of more than the solitary performer to ensure its fruition. And once it comes to be in the world, a building, in its full-fledged material glory, resides in an unambiguously shared realm. Its meanings derive from a conspiracy with real forces. It is assuredly contingent.

In the city of Somerville – topographically distinctive, thickly settled, diverse in its citizenry – we find opportunities to explore the tension between local and global. This is the farming community that became the fifth densest city in the United States. It is the city that is home to multiple generations of families long settled, as well as recent arrivals from this and other countries, bringing 'alien' traditions. The strong accent heard throughout the city twenty years ago is replaced by others. One wonders whether, in some sense, this could be a model for cities in the future, under predicted socio-ecological conditions. If so, it may be worth studying the facets of its character that make it viable, while proposing ways of making it a more gracious place to live and work.

The term will be divided into three interrelated parts of unequal duration: case study, short project, long project. The case study and short project will serve to 'ground' the long project, by cultivating senses of 'how' and 'why' to the long project's 'what'. Proposals will be tested against the specificities of 'type'. Students will develop their own trajectories, based on proposed courses of interest, and will be evaluated relative to their engagement in the culture of the studio, improvement over the duration of the term, and accomplishment of the work proffered.

Recommended reading: "An American Culture of Construction", Tom F. Peters (1989), which can be found at [www.geocities.com/mitchellmosesstudio](http://www.geocities.com/mitchellmosesstudio).