

STATEMENT OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS: MURALI RAMASWAMI

STUDIO TEACHING - Pedagogy:

Faced with an ever-increasing array of technological, formalistic, and theoretical choices, it becomes a daunting task to find a direction. It becomes easier to collage one's architecture from various sources and limit its rationalization to the quantifiable and tangible aspects, be it scientific or monetary. This reactionary tendency, arguably resulting from a response to the sheer discursive nature of the discipline, in my view, has led to a certain level of apathy for architectural design resulting in numerous forms of divisiveness within the discipline. This overwhelmed state within which we operate, becomes an easy breeding ground for the banal, the excessively consumptive, the trivial and the arbitrary. If the interest is toward broadening the influence of better architecture without compromising the depth of quality, then it becomes important that the profession is permeated by architects who are critically thoughtful of cause and effects of their work from local, regional and global perspectives.

The combination of technological and formalistic freedoms that is available to architecture today can be meaningfully utilized only through a critical grounding of the project; a grounding which demands us to seek meaning to our architecture by examining the larger and the unseen contexts of individual projects. Such pursuits of critical thought and awareness require not only rigor but, preceding that, a willingness which can be inspired during the formative stages of one's architectural education.

The following constitutes my beliefs that will underlie my teaching method in a studio setting. It is the interest in a dynamic balance between the methodological imperatives (how to) and the critical concerns (why) that will form the focus of my pedagogical basis:

Teaching architectural design is a simultaneous process of aiding students' self-discovery and helping them to locate their work within the larger context. Whereas the former allows them to find their personal strengths and preferences, the latter demands them to maintain a critical distance to their own work.

Studios need to involve a process of learning, and simultaneously questioning, the accepted standards and the norms of construction, production as well as those of architectural forms and character. This process of critical examination should however involve students' personal physical and emotional experiences, thereby ensuring that a deeper understanding is gained in the process learning information. This approach would involve each student as a fully participating and subjective person, not intending to assert individuality and sever from the context, but to understand the essential experiences that connect different subjectivities.

Design is a cyclic process involving a dialectic relationship between the designer and the "designed." Even during the embryonic stages, the designer creates certain "wholes," the nature of which need to be realized and understood through reflection and interpretation. Without this realization, physical manipulations to further the design remain an additive and unilateral process. The activities of reflection and interpretation can happen within a highly interactive studio where discussions, reading, and writing will support the studio project.

STUDIO TEACHING- Methodology:

Across the different levels of studios I have taught, I have been able to incorporate the following general emphases:

1. **Innovative projects that act as provokers of thought:** in addition to providing a framework for learning techniques for specific problem solving, the framing of the design problem can in itself promote reflective and creative thinking. Studio projects by their very nature remain "hypothetical". Rather than let this fact become an impediment, in my studios. I have attempted to develop projects that seem at times extremely possible and other times impractical. My thesis proposal for a museum+ school of art for a small town of 50000 in India was my first brush with this notion. Projects posed this way become tools to raise larger questions while attempting to solve spatial needs for everyday use.
2. **Emphasis on developing and sustaining a critical/ conceptual basis:** In my studios, regardless of the level, I have greatly stressed on the process of conceptual development. It has been my belief that projects are as much a construct and manifestation of ideas as they are illustrations of a specific architectural configuration to solve the problem at hand. There is a dialectic relationship between the physical architecture that gets developed and the

consistencies of ideas that get “constructed” in a parallel track. The emphasis on the conceptual basis brings one to invariably face larger contextual issues, both visual and the unseen.

3. **Emphasis on examining what the experiential implications are for these conceptual ideas:** Vacant formalism results from a lack of consideration of the experiential implications of one’s conceptual notions. Ultimately through tectonics of construction and specific material sensibilities a particular place of inhabitation/ existence is created.
4. **Deepening one’s sensibilities with regard to materiality and structure:** The every day tasks of model making and drawing are very important tools toward this. Precision, craftsmanship and a sense of materiality are all embodied in the very products (models and the drawings) of the studio process. Rather than seeing the end results of the studio process as mere representations I encourage my students to see the evolving products as embodiment of their conceptual ideas as well as of structural and material sensibilities.
5. **Clarifying and strengthening ideas through verbal modes:** Reading and writing are necessary ways of cultivating, clarifying one’s own thought processes. As part of the studio process requirements, I have consistently incorporated selected readings as well as written projects statements. Readings have been followed by collective discussions that have been helpful for students not only to discuss the contents of the readings but their relevance to the project. This process I believe is necessary for at least two reasons: one it begins to introduce ideas and ideologies that have fueled built work and sets theory in the context of practice. It also begins to establish the necessary responsibility to articulate in a cohesive manner one’s ideas and steps in the process of designing. Clear articulation and clarity of thinking, in my belief are intertwined and therefore are mutually enhanced through disciplined practice.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS (SUPPORT CLASSES)

Within the broad scope of academic pursuit, the following are my particular areas of interest:

1. Tectonics and materials of construction: A focus on the processes and techniques of making a building is ultimately of paramount importance to me in any research conducted my other areas of interest listed below. Since no place or space is perceived in absolute abstraction (the digital space/ cinematic spaces are habitually rooted in and related to physicality of one’s experiences) there has to be an attention to how things are made both in terms of physical and social processes.
2. Architectural representation as simultaneous mode of documenting and predicting environment as well as of environmental inquiry and exploration. This inquiry is not to merely make further strides in formal inventions but to root the formal advances in the interest of creating stronger sense of place.
3. Humanist and phenomenological perspectives of place making; understanding the essential aspects of perceptions across cultural boundaries.

These three primary and inter-related areas will form the broad framework for my research and will also be integrated in my studio teaching. In the following, I will first highlight specific themes of interest within each area and outline some aspects of my personal and professional background to convey both my pedagogic positions and my qualifications. Following this, I will present some ideas for support classes in lecture and/lab format and also present my research directions within these areas of emphases.

1. MATERIALS AND TECTONICS OF CONSTRUCTION:

Materials and Building Constructions Systems

I have consistently been involved in the constructional processes all through my professional career, which has allowed me gain experience with a wide variety of systems of construction, emerging technology and materials. I have always tenaciously followed through with design intentions to realization, without compromising the quality of enclosure and performance. Through a variety of projects ranging in scale and type, I have dealt with numerous concerns of enclosure, weather tightness/ energy consumption, economics/longevity, constructability/time constraints etc. Relying on this direct experience with contract documentation and materials specifications, which I continue to gain through professional associations, I will be able to teach courses in materials and methods of construction and production of contract documents.

Environmental responsiveness and responsibility

My foundations in environmental concerns and respect for resources, both natural and cultural, were laid through undergraduate architecture education in India and my professional work that followed. To that extent, it is important that I outline that background here. While the curriculum was steeped deeply in modernity, the emphasis on natural limitation of resources and a minimal reliance of mechanical systems forced us to rely on natural ventilation and lighting to the greatest extent possible. Such environmental restraints were concerns in all small and medium scale projects. The curriculum, following the lead of the broader intellectual community's stress on self reliance and appropriate technology, also emphasized on projects that dealt with human habitats and their natural balance with environment. Housing, urbanization were serious concerns. The following are some noteworthy school work which relates to these concerns:

- Design build of a "hut" project during sophomore year using thatch, casuarina poles and coir ropes and a limited budget.
- A third year project involved studying a rural community in the vicinity of a large metropolis. Students worked in teams and gathered a wide range of data through physical surveys, photography, drawings and personal interviews. Following a protracted period of study, with a multifaceted study of the rural settlement as a holistic entity, design proposals were made by different teams.
- A hands-on design-build of a 700 sf. masonry house for teacher. The funding was a donation and the design commission was awarded to one of the students in my studio. The collaborative work was done by about 16 students. This was not part of the school coursework.
- Final year thesis project: The project proposed adapting the local conventions of load bearing rough-hewn granite block walls and timber floor/roof structure for a place for art. The form making strategy of identifying and projecting contour lines was analogous to the "almost geometric" spaces built by local masons.

In my professional work, without exception, I have actively promoted architecture that is fundamentally responsive to natural context (Please refer portfolio). Proper orientation, siting, and strong connectivity to the outdoors have been unvarying concerns of mine.

I have been active advocate of these concerns professionally in all the firms that I have worked with. In 2000, as a Senior Designer at Gould Goodman Associates, I was a member of the steering committee on sustainability. The committee's responsibilities were to set a course for incorporating sustainability as a chief concern in all the projects. The committee explored multiple aspects of material research, through design decisions to budgetary and business implications to help achieve this transition.

Design/Build Projects

My real appreciation for construction came through participating in the physical construction of a 700 sq.ft masonry house during senior year of undergraduate architecture education. The project employed resurrected and innovative brick masonry technology to create highly affordable and innovative residence. In my own private practice after graduation, pursuing this direction, I was able to build another project (Salem house: please refer portfolio).

I have continued my interest in design-build more recently through two residential re-design projects both of which were speculative investments (Please refer to Locust House in book-1). Both houses attempted to reconcile architectural aspirations with the realities of real estate market. Through GEOMETREE, a practice that my wife and I have sustained, I continue to seek further opportunities to synthesize my research, creative and theoretical interests.

2. ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION AND EXPERIENTIAL REALITIES:

Architectural Representation/ Graphics

Although I have not been formally trained as an artist, I have gained my abilities through drawing and painting in a variety of media all my life, while gaining additional formal and theoretical knowledge of the visual arts through my architectural education and work. As a part of my professional work I receive regular commissions to execute architectural renderings in water color and other media.

I am interested in approaching the visual medium not only a tool for design communication but as a medium of design discovery and experimentation, and as a medium that focuses and clarifies personal experiences. I am less interested in objectifying the visual world than in using representation as means of discovery and connection with the physical world. Particularly important is the actual, immersed experience of drawing in all of its physical and emotional wholeness. I wish to

teach drawing and representational techniques to the beginning and pre-architecture level students and explore experimental and hybrid techniques that combine traditional and digital media in the process of design for upper level studios.

In parallel track architecture I have also pursued drawing and painting for many years (please refer book 2 of my portfolio). It is my intention, as a part of my creative work, to develop theoretical projects through my art.

3. CONTEMPORARY/ THEORETICAL ISSUES OF IN ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURE:

Phenomenology in architecture:

Although valid criticism can be laid upon the influence of outside or applied theories on architecture, it would be a mistake to assume that architecture in an act of turning inward can in totality completely ignore outside influences. In my view, technological changes can not be neutrally incorporated since they come with undercurrents of ideological or other socio-cultural view points, even if only implicitly. Among the various streams of thoughts and research that affect architecture today, Phenomenology has continued to maintain relevance primarily because of the interest in qualitative aspects of place making. A wide range of literature contributed by scholars of architecture, philosophy and literature and humanist geography offer a body work through which a deeper understanding of place making can be gained.

I was drawn to the notions of Phenomenology, formally during my graduate education in architecture, as a trait, not because of its potential as an external "theory" that promised a visual potential, but instead because of its essential emphasis on the singularity of place. My graduate thesis, written under the guidance of Professor David Seamon at The Kansas State University allowed me to study the influence of this existential philosophy on our field. With other generations of architects through modernity I share the interest in exploring the limits in integrating the advances of technologies of synthetic production of images and materials into new potentials for place making. While rejecting the notion of "conservative" phenomenology (that the world of theory delineates), I am interested in exploring manifestations of place in response to change fostered by changes, in the process taking the care to avoid (in equal measure) both techno-romanticism and sentimentality.

Hybrid Modernism

Although the term modernist architecture often evokes an almost mythical image of the precise, the abstract and the pure, numerous situations around the world can be found where the results of modernist influence is anything but pure. The environment in India offers itself as an unrivaled living lab to study the processes through which both technology and images become absorbed and mutated into an impure and hybridized form, all its own.

I am also interested leading a group of students to India for a design studio to be conducted in a cooperative effort with an institution in India. The coexistence of clear traces of colonial culture, as well as local cultures will clearly signal to the students the importance of various socio-cultural processes that are work as architecture evolves both through conscious design and through commercial and vernacular adaptation. Additionally, students can also become more sensitive to problems of designing from the remote which technology allows us to.

TEACHING / support courses>

In the following I will outline ideas for support courses that integrate my areas interest. Actual courses will be developed in response to the needs and curriculum of the school.

1. BUILDING CONSTRUCTION SYSTEMS/ CONTRACT DOCUMENTS:

In addition to Materials and Methods course in lab format within the sequence of the school's curriculum, the following are propositions for courses that I would like to develop.

Apart from teaching basics of construction systems as ways of making real a given design intention, I am also keen on examining their inseparability from a particular form, architecture and character. In terms of teaching, this involves not only transferring knowledge related to conventions and techniques of material fabrication and assembly, but further, admitting discussions on how we make those choices. In particular, I am interested in emphasizing issues of environmental connectivity, sustainability and the associated changes we need to make in terms of life style/ convenience etc. This requires a study of the evolving technologies and ideas surrounding the consumption and application of these technologies. In a lecture/format, this course will review examples of contemporary architecture from around the world and understand their contexts of production in terms of availability and/or limitations of resources, and regional ideas regarding comfort and convenience. Students will study and analyze tectonic aspects of specific examples .

In addition to lab format materials and methods class for third year level I am interested in full scale constructs and design build studio projects. When appropriately paired with a local community, such projects can constitute a community outreach effort of the school. I anticipate this to range from very small scale (furniture, storage) to small shelters and interior work.

2. REPRESENTATION:

While drawing and representation (digital and analog modes) are typically taught with a focus on techniques and communication, the aim of this course will be to induce a consciousness out how we employ these techniques as an active method of exploring form and space rather than as passive methods of documentation. Exercise will be toward creating formal products (one-to-one constructions) that embody specific formal and spatial conditions through application of a critical and conscious logic.

While the curriculum will vary according to the level, I foresee this class to include free hand drawing, blind drawing, drawing big, collage, memory drawing, perspective and other forms of projective geometries, watercolors and mixed media. I envision the coursework to combine hands on work in a lab format along with lectures on precedents, examples and techniques. I expect this course to be in tandem to studio work that the students will be doing.

Lectures will present architectural theories and ideas about the emergence and evolution of perspective and other projective geometries and explore the implications of this history upon the human-environment relationship. Writings on visual perception and techniques of abstract spatial representation will be reviewed through literature review of writings by, among others, Alberto-Perez-Gomez, Stanley Allen, Robin Evans, Martin Jay, Barbara Maria Stafford.

3. SEMINAR ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN ARCHITECTURE

I am interested in conducting a seminar format class that will review and debate some of the socio-cultural and theoretical issues surrounding architecture today. The seminar will explore the relationship of media and imaging techniques to the experienced actuality of constructed places. Theories of representation and phenomenological notions of place making will form the general focus for lectures, readings and discussions. The course will be an avenue for students to examine emerging ideas and approaches in architectural thinking and making in a rigorous way.

The broad goals for the course will be to:

- Introduce basic ideas of Phenomenology through literature review.
- Establish an understanding the humanist notions of place and place-making
- Establish the realm of architecture and its influence on place making processes, and in particular the material and construction processes.
- Examine the notion of place and place-making in the context of techno-romantic and media driven culture and ask: What are the possibilities and necessities of adapting, altering and hybridizing this notion of place? Does an interest in humanist notions of place making favor, if not pre-determine certain formal dispositions, and preclude certain others?

I am particularly interested in offering a seminar class at an early to mid level of architectural education. Even though students are only in the beginning stages of design, technical, and representational skills in architecture, such a course will initiate them to consider architecture from a broader perspective. My interest is to lay the foundations for rigorous research and analytical thinking.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS>

I expect my research work to be intimately connected to and directly draw from my teaching efforts. With the purpose to generate and share new ideas and knowledge, I aim to produce both written work for publication and built work.

Material studies: Built Place and Fabricated Materials

I will be continuing my research on the relation ship of materiality to sense of place which I began with my graduate thesis. Progressing from natural to man-made materials, the research will focus on the sensibility of materials and their experiential potentials to define place. While my thesis relied on my personal descriptive interpretation of a natural material done through

applying Thiis-Evensen's frame work of Archetypes, I aim to conduct further research of synthetic materials through employing other participant's descriptions and attempt to draw eidetic conclusions.

In tandem, as a part of my creative research and practice, I aim to produce design build projects with broader concerns including sustainability, document my efforts, and publish the work. The scope of these will vary from furniture and everyday objects to small projects with a focus on material and fabrication experiments. The hypothesis of these parallel investigations of materiality is an interest in finding new dimensions to experience of place (and therefore new dimensions of *topophilia*) that become manifested through the formal and spatial potentialities of materials.

Visual studies: Place and Image

In an inescapably media saturated visual world, a renewed interest in visuality and visual knowledge is immensely important. While scholars have inveighed on both sides of the ocular-centric and logo-centric evolution of knowledge, from the perspective of the built world, it becomes important to examine the relationships between modes of representation and experienced realities. Drawing on the works of various theorists from different sides of the issue, Stafford, Pallasmaa, Evans, Bendikt, Martin Jay, to name a few I seek to examine the following broad questions particularly related to architectural visuality:

- I. Given that the alienation of man environment harkens back to the invention of perspective, what new potential separation and distancing are fostered by evolving modes of imagery and animations? An examination of the medium of cinema and non-figurative art would be useful in this examination since these forms of art offer interpretations rather than act to determine realities.
- II. Does the cautionary or critical attitude toward visuality immediately restrict one's ability to operate? How can one critically consume the range of technological as well as its concomitant aesthetic options available to still create physical environments grounded in place? The goal of this research is not to construct a theory but rather to examine whether critical approaches (emphasizing sustainability/environment/phenomenology or other concerns) are inherently limited in terms of visual character and expression. The research will be conducted through literature survey and analysis and will be in the form of published papers.

Tracing Sources: Modern Hybrid

I am interested in interpreting contemporary Indian architecture: identify and understand the sources of influences and the myriad processes that transform and hybridize these sources. The research aims to place and critic modernity and modern architecture from a different and a distant context and thereby leading to a comparative analysis of contemporary architecture. This research would involve documentation and analysis of selected contemporary and post-colonial examples of places, both anonymous and recognized.. This research with its focus on place studies and rapid image-transfer will be an extension of my research in visual studies.