The Vernacular and Americana
2011 Open Jury Session
Intermediate Unit 1, Diploma Unit 8, Intermediate Unit 3, Intermediate Unit 12, Foundation
Written by: Meggie Kelley

There was a fantastic moment towards the end of the 2011 Open Jury day when the tutors from the Vernacular and Americana session turned the microphone towards the Foundation students and asked: "What do you think about what you have seen today?" The ones who spoke seemed euphoric for the future. A few more students opted to speak during the final discussion. One brought up the struggle of having to legitimatize their project to a band of outsiders. While in the process of clarifying they get lost in their own work. I recall witnessing a few endearing moments when students have to go back and explain what wasn't understood, which resulted in confusion about what was or wasn't displayed in front of them. But I once read that confusion usually occurs when data income exceeds our brain's processing speed and the vast accumulation of thoughts causes us to panic resulting in an inability to articulate. So perhaps confusion isn't necessarily a bad thing. The wonder of the architectural project for the 'unit' is that it is something which makes an effort to rid the amorphous understandings and confusions and places us into a chosen *scenario* within a fragmented system of studios (i.e. the lost highway, the corporate domain, burning wastelands, the deep copy, self-identification and the human body). The result is an attempt to clarify the scenario by proposing something, and whether or not the project is harshly criticized there becomes varying levels of self-clarity in the end. This mode of thinking appears common in our post-Cartesian age.

Descartes arrived at self-clarity despite everything else being in doubt. And nowadays it seems as if we are living in an era which has resulted in us trying to understand ourselves by abstracting everything on our sphere. It is possible that the conversations surrounding the Vernacular and Americana session could be destined to intersect this thought. But perhaps the golden question of this session was corresponding to something along the lines of: how should we measure the (and I hesitate to call it this) 'role of the architect' within the *scenario*? I saw the Foundation students, the fresh meat of the school, sitting there amongst the audience perhaps unconsciously absorbing the many dissimilar roles and mentalities with each project. Should the role attempt to be generally accepted across the board or should the role be understood in relation to the scenario? This is the concern I gathered from the discussions. And now the varying dispositions observed in this session will be briefly highlighted.

It was when, I believe, Sam Jacob eagerly stated, "The south shall rise again" after the Intermediate Unit 1 presentations when the optimism was underlined within the student's research. Although this statement is usually misunderstood to be adverse, its meaning actually manifests itself in the hope that American South will not remain a defeated, dejected realm of misery and despair and instead become a significant influence for the culture and economy for the *entire* nation. Thus the role in the project becomes completely manifested in the underlying confidence in the subject matter of the unit; however the next unit had an entirely different agenda. The Diploma 8 students showed four projects for the condition regarding the corporate domain. It was understood that they are trying to fathom how to design for multinational corporations and doing so by using production as a catalyst for the project. One student even described the city as the office. "This is bone dry" a tutor commented during the discussion. One of the students responded to a question by stating something along the lines of, "There are many buildings with empty spaces and I believe that we must accept that they exist like this and just

deal with it". Part of me wanted to cry inside after hearing this, but perhaps for some this may be considered the 'reality' involving built conditions of corporate architecture and a manifesto for dullness is needed. The main debate in the discussion was whether or not we should choose to accept the conditions as such. Should the project's radical demand for dullness and efficiency when designing for the corporate be applicable? Nevertheless an intentionally dull set of projects with stirring questions then turned the other way around. The next unit presented experimental infrastructural solutions driven by a collection of narratives chosen by means of the student's matters of concern. One student in Intermediate Unit 3 gave a rather impressive demonstration of a DIY energy structure consisting of a mobile telephone wired to a fan. The phone number was presented to the audience and then dialed by one of the tutors. When the phone vibrated, the fan spun and the room was inevitably filled with delight. But there seemed to be uncertainty on how the project was going to continue. The most alluring project I had seen on this day was a design made by a Foundation student. It had a rather endearing and awesome awareness of the human body and success in capturing a conditional space for it. The design was a coat for those who are sensitive to PDA (Public Display of Affection). The hood was designed to be large enough so it could fit two people underneath of it.

It was the second to last unit presentation involving rather intrepid research on the *Deep Copy* when the 'role of the architect' was finally mentioned. "How can the architect indulge in copying? What does the role of the architect then become?" a tutor asked. I then concluded from this session that within each project the mentalities regarding the 'role' were very different. When looking at the dead zones and disconnections of the Mississippi River Delta there was certain optimism present in the design process and research. With the multinational corporation the work tended to be anti-visionary and accept the probabilities of failure; thus, a decision was made to focus on efficiency and dullness within the project. The students with their considerate narrative-driven infrastructures seemed hopeful, yet uncertain for the next step. In the case of the copy, the project was temporarily hiding in shadows of the original. Foundation appeared to be the outsider here in regards to the debate on how the 'role of the architect' appears in the student's work, but perhaps the most thoughtful moment observed throughout the whole day involved them.