Magazine Club Interviews

Perry Kulper

In Fall 2021, Syracuse Architecture invited four design practitioners to lecture and lead workshops as part of a series focused on drawing in architecture. Organized around alternative (often analog) techniques and means of representation in architecture, the workshops included Syracuse Architecture undergraduate first-year and fifth-year students. The workshops were led by **Stephanie Lin**, Dean of The School of Architecture (formerly the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture); **Perry Kulper**, Associate Professor of Architecture at the Taubman College at the University of Michigan; **Nathan Williams**, architect, artist and frequent collaborator with Syracuse Architecture; and **Iman Fayyad**, lecturer at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

Thanks to all the students who participated in the workshops. Special thanks to Associate Professor Kyle Miller and fifth-year student Andrew Yu for coordinating the workshop series.

Magazine Club, a Syracuse Architecture club devoted to the interview format, interviewed Perry Kulper on October 16th, just after his public lecture and during the first of his two workshops. In the interview, Kulper discusses teaching, his own work, and new developments in drawing and representation in architecture. Magazine Club will publish interviews with each of the four workshop leaders in two formats: one in print and one on the Syracuse Architecture website that includes the interview and student work produced in each workshop.

Magazine Club   We all enjoyed seeing the many projects and hearing you describe your design process in the lecture last night. You are conducting a workshop with our students this weekend and again in two weeks. You obviously cannot teach someone to draw like Perry Kulper; you cannot teach them to draw the kinds of things we saw last night. So, what are you teaching when you teach?

Perry Kulper   First, I try to encourage students to think relationally and critically about analogous worlds that they might already know or refer to. . . this allows them to enlarge their skill set and at the same time refer to things they're already interested in. I talk with them a lot about relational structuring. For example, how do you structure things in such a way that you can establish the communicative potential that you're after? The Villa Savoye is a house designed by Le Corbusier and he discusses it in relation to the five points of architecture, his manifesto. But when you drive a car into and through the house, ending up on the roof garden, the discussion immediately becomes one about technology. The house is partially about the relationship between man and technology, technology and technology, technology and nature; about their relational structure; about the house, its program, etc. With the students, I discuss ways to spatially, representationally and verbally structure things and their relations in such a way that they have the potential to encounter and use them.

MC   You started the workshop today. How did you begin?

PK   We started by building a context for the workshop, tickling the ethics of representation, and reconstructing a very brief history of representational developments as related to perspective and the picture plane; and by lightly introducing various design methods. Then, we explored how to work with appropriation—a design approach and form of authoring that would allow them to work quickly. By appropriating things, students already have gas in the tank, they have things to work with. They have references and perhaps have discovered interests by working with things that are already rich with associations. Starting this way also displaces questions of authorship, and this allows them to avoid starting on a blank sheet of paper—without all the questions about "what do I do first?" It helps them to start with a set of references to an outside and immediately locates them in a place of generative authorship. The intention is to help them build a story. . . together we just try to build up a story where the ground, the sky, and modeling and rendering techniques reveal a world that refers to worlds within worlds—with multiple ways in, and multiple ways out.

MC   The students in your workshop are a mix of first-year and fifth-year, thesis students. Do you work with thesis students at Michigan, and if so, how is that different from teaching other students?

PK   I teach a lot of different ways. But teaching thesis students is different. With them I seldom deal with things directly. Instead, I work to build up things, structurally. I am always asking them "where do ideas come from?" I usually set up a dozen ways that ideas can come into play. And then, for example, I ask them to produce four speculative scenarios about possible thesis trajectories. . . to stretch them. So, they might propose a thesis scenario about data collection, narrative construction and AI thinking. Then they write a paragraph about that. A second one might be about children's stories, homelessness, etc. I try to get them to open up their conceptual framework so that they can think about what might be possible. My hope is to give them the freedom to say, "we may be working on a house or a housing project, but there are always other possibilities, other ways to conceptualize, even a simple house." There are many subsequent areas of interest, but this gets them out the gates.

Another thing that I do is take things apart with them. I do not accept anything as given. I do not accept program or site as default assumptions. We try to unpack some of the primary constituencies of disciplinary tools, organization, programs, thinking, representation… we try to get under the skin. So, we do a lot of these things in thesis.

MC   Once students get caught up in proliferating these connections and contexts, how do they know when to stop?

PK   Yes, this question comes up in my own work. With my early drawings, I could have gone on with them, I could have made stacks and stacks of drawings forever. But that question, when to stop, that's the scope question. To me, it's a question about what is relevant and appropriate to discuss in a situation. I talk about fitness with them, which is both situational fitness and cultural durability. How might things persist and not go flat?

MC   And these are all different, depending on the context, the situation?

PK   Yes, they are all different. I encourage them to construct the scope of their work as it relates to their interests. But it is not a free-for-all. We tailor things: the design methods and working techniques. I try to get them to work out how to set up a discipline for the interests they have. This has to do with how you work on things, how much is in play, what things are related to what, when to reflect on the work, how and when to position their work, and so forth.

With thesis students, I also try to work out with them how to set up a practice. I tell them, "Whatever you are currently working on, you will not work on it for a lifetime. You are not going to work on that library forever, or that pavilion, or that landscape." So, if they can set up a discipline and then understand where ideas come from and begin to understand how to generate work, reflect on it, position it and make judgments. . . if they can do that, with discipline, then they can make and work on anything. If students are working properly within the framework of an architectural education, they can become a filmmaker; they can make objects and have an Etsy site; they can teach third graders—they can do all those things, and more.

MC   Is it the same when setting up a practice, or developing an approach to practice?

PK   When I graduated from Columbia pretty much everyone set out to work in an office. That's what you did. But when I moved to the West Coast, to Los Angeles, I learned, while at SCI-Arc, how one could be entrepreneurial, how one could do other things. There were not many faculty teaching at SCI-Arc who ran conventional offices. There was an office there called Hedge. They were 17 thesis students who created a practice working on landscape design and other projects, including houses and other additions. And they also taught. That office and many of those at SCI-Arc taught me that developing a practice is not only about learning techniques, it's also about constructing a culture, and that is why I focus on relational thinking, or relational structuring. If a student wants to become a filmmaker, they can do that. But it's important they know how to set up an approach and discipline for working on something.

MC   You mentioned that you did not accept program or site?

PK   It's not that I don't accept sites or programs, it's instead I feel that things like site and program can be too restrictive, too narrow, at least if we start with them in a conventional way. The situation of this room, where we are now doing this interview—the dean's office—is everything that comprised it, forever. It's not just a room. Instead, it is connected to construction logics, property lines, adjacent buildings, geological processes, and this also includes all the deans and other people who have been in and out of here. This room is part of a much larger context and so when I start an assignment with a room, like this room, I don't want to start so narrow, I don't want to frame it only as a typology, which is often how we discuss the room in an educational context.

If I ask you to design a house, you can do a great house, with bedrooms, living spaces, bathrooms, and so on. We see those kinds of houses all over the world. But if I asked you to work on the privatization of sexuality, hygienic practices, madness, or sickness, dreaming and cyclical temporal phases, which belong to domestic environments, that structure them, let's say, that might allow you to produce something quite different than a bedroom with a nice bathroom adjacent to it with a view. So, it's not that I don't accept the things that we conventionally think of as a bedroom, it's that when we think narrowly about the bedroom, we don't tend to think about what might be structured and how we might structure those things. This often limits us to a surface understanding of the house, the domestic realm and the bedroom.

MC   And what about the ground, do you accept that?

PK   Now, as for the ground. . . it is not just a physical thing, it is also a conceptual condition connected to historical consequences, data, practices and ethics. Things are grounded in the world, and the ground is a physical thing, but ground is more: ground is a multi-tentacled thing in my world. There was a time when modern architects would draw a building as if there was nothing else around that mattered. There was no thickness to the ground, no city. Nothing. It was a clean slate, *tabula rasa*. When I was in school, I never drew anything like a ground, or a situation. The ground was a conceptual conceit. You just saw linework, and that was the ground. Many modernist drawings are detached, not situated, not grounded, historically, conceptually or materially.

MC   A lot of your projects seem to be floating, literally, in the air.

PK   Architects never really deal with the sky. With skyscrapers, yes. But not the sky. The sky, for me, is an interesting realm for architects to think about. That's why you see the sky in a lot of the drawings I showed in the lecture—the sky is in play. I like that the sky has a difficult time remembering; it's like the sea, which erases its movements and histories. The sky forgets that things have happened. I mean this mythologically, let's say, but also, when you think about it, literally. That is one interest I have in the sky, but by no means the only one.

MC   Many of the projects you showed in your lecture seemed to be free of the ground as well?

PK   Thinking back to the first drawings of the Desert House. . . the ground was really, really important in that project. There, the ground was a conceptual and material condition. So, the proposal was to build,

one year before the project was to be completed, a steel floor 30 inches above the ground plane of the desert. I wanted to establish a secondary ground—the steel floor in the living space—where animals might burrow and where graffiti drawn by high schoolers might appear. Then, later, the house would materialize and become an enclosure. The steel floor was meant as a kind of memory device to recall the horizon. It's one of the projects where I explicitly deal with the ground.

> **MC** I want to ask a question about technique, specifically about the level of complexity found in your drawing, David's Island, from 1997. It's an analog drawing but it seems to assume a kind of digital complexity not even found in drawings that we can make now.

PK Yes, I agree. That drawing is more complex than my digital skills allow me to make now.

> **MC** Right, and that's the point I wanted to make. Is it possible to combine digital and analog techniques to produce a new type of drawing with a new level complexity?

PK If Michael were to give me a research space in this building, I would probably work on hybrid representations as a kind of technique but not so much as content. I would try to work out how a film might turn into a data feed that is then translated into physical instruments, blended. Now, most of my work is composites. I don't think of them as collages. I think of them as composites. Hybrid drawings could begin to fuse three-dimensional constructs, AI, virtual things and the emergent species produced would cross-breed those things. I like the word speciation, a lot, relative to things I might work on. Working this way would allow me to keep more types of ideas in play, but it would also allow me to make those hybrid constructs more active and open to feedback. And that is because I would be working on things rather than illustrating things like I sometimes do now. I would love to set up a project that would cross-breed these various mediums and techniques.

When I make a project like David's Island, the individual parts, and what they do, are clear to me. What's harder for me to understand is how they triangulate, overlap and articulate relational assemblies. Even though I made them, I don't understand all of their combinatory possibilities. Each element is like a vial loaded with content. A kind of still life. And I have not yet worked out what those things might produce if combined and mixed, and what significance those conversations might have.

> **MC** Some of your early analog drawings exhibit more complexity than we see in most digital drawings today. Is it possible that digital drawings cannot attain that level of complexity?

PK Good question. When I work in Photoshop I am in an operational mental mode. When I work in analog it's different—I am already working with relational structuring, with content. Maybe it's because I have done so many drawings. Since I have so many drawings in my background, I'm not too worried about technique; I am not worried about how to get the back panel to be a little more translucent. That's a question of technique, and one that does not lend itself to mythology, stories, connections and context. Those kinds of connections are important for me, and they seem difficult for me to make in the digital realm. I would never argue that anyone should make only analog drawings. Different techniques allow us to do different things. But there's something about spending time making construction lines, taking out tape and applying it here, and another piece over there. In doing that I am always looking for potential. Latent, and tacit knowledge. In the digital realm, I don't see the residues, the traces; I don't get the tracking processes. I want to, I'm interested in that. I know, for example, that there are things in the intelligences of the digital that move beyond the operational, and I'd like to work on these kinds of potentials.

> **MC** It seems like the digital drawing does not have the same energy the David's Island drawing does.

PK When I work by analog means, there are consequences of that kind of making that do not occur with digital making. With digital making, some things are not even there, like, for example, tacit knowledge. Earlier when I was discussing establishing a discipline, I thought you were going to ask me about how I establish one for myself. For me, part of establishing a discipline comes from cycling and racing. When I first started to ride, I thought that when you race, you just ride faster. But that is not true. Cycling is like a kind of moving and dynamic chess; it requires strategy and preparation, diet and training. That's discipline. My father was a fine cabinet maker—a brain surgeon equivalent of a cabinet maker. I used to help him in the shop. And the way he set up the shop, the way the machines were set up—it created a whole discipline and framework for making, also important in my development.

> **MC** With digital, you never lose anything. There's never any mistake; the tolerance is always calculated perfectly. But in your way of making, there is always that possibility, and it seems like it's the mistakes and miscalculated tolerances that lead to the good stuff!

PK   In the workshop, I will assign a drawing that will require students to erase 12 to 15 percent of the image. Part of the idea is to work out not just how to erase an image, but what happens when you erase 12 to 15 percent of the image? Where does that erased portion, the information, go? Could we code that index? When I turn off the history panels, I want to know where that information goes. And that becomes an interesting area to interrogate.

   MC   There's a temporality implicit in physically drawing a line. Once you draw the line, it's permanent, it can be extended, it can be adapted. When you're designing on a computer, that line is just a mathematical projection. And that math can be reproduced. Also, in the digital realm there's the undo button.

PK   So, when you undo something, the question is whether or not there is potential in that undoing. There is a temporality in the digital realm, for sure. But the only thing you might find in a plan drawing that suggests temporality would be something like a door swing. There are very few things in conventional architecture representation that have any sense of temporality. Maybe projected shadows, or a door swing in a plan. There are implied temporalities in plans, but there is nothing explicit in most architectural representations—analog or digital—other than things like shadows, entourage elements, clouds and other things like door swings, that have anything to do with temporality.

   MC   I was also thinking about the two different timelines that exist between making the image and making the drawing.

PK   Yeah, for sure. They are different. Absolutely. The idea of the line, in relationship to the production of the line. A lot of people will question whether the digital line is a real line.

   MC   Similarly, a physically drawn line that you scan might not be recognized by the technology as an actual line.

PK   Sure. Absolutely. It's just information. The machine doesn't know.

   MC   Yesterday, in the conversation after your lecture, you talked about approaching projects from the standpoint of different characters. You mentioned a few different characters. Would you say that whenever you approach a project from a different perspective, or different character, that the colors, textures and materials change, and if so, how do they change?

PK   Yes, characters like the detective, the alchemist, the amateur. I do that because I am trying to displace my own point of view. I am trying to pick up other relationships to just get out of my own way at a certain level, but characters, like I've mentioned, also have particular relational and operating traits that might be useful.

   I have so little time to work these days and so I rely on a lot of well-worn techniques, styles of thinking, and so on, that might not be appropriate or relevant to the actual situation I'm working in. I do things that betray my larger values. I am often forced to rely on things that come from other pieces of work that probably don't have relevancy or aren't contributing to that particular piece of work. That's why when I keep track of patterns in my work, I'm trying to articulate what persists to see why they persist.

   Why am I interested in miniatures and in mythologies, for example? If I can track those patterns internally, or diagrammatically, then I can work out whether they're being effectively utilized, or whether they're just things that I depend on. I've tried to keep a bunch of other unknown things in play, but with too much frequency, I just harness things that I already know. For example, there are shape grammars that I use, configurations, formal things, and those are just wired in me. They're not relevant or accurate, relative to what I'm trying to accomplish. They're just things that are close to what I want, but they're not tailored to that specific piece of work. I should also say that sometimes I really don't know what it would be like to work properly. When's the last time I really, really worked properly? Hmmmm. Maybe in 2012. . . on "Pamphlet Architecture 34", that I worked on with Nat Chard. And in the Central California History Museum, I worked properly. That was 2001. But the museum never really got designed.

   MC   When you say on those two occasions you were able to work properly, what do you mean? You did not have enough time?

PK   Yes, a lack of time and focus, probably. So, during and just after the time I was making the drawings for David's Island, I wasn't doing lectures, conferences or writing—I wasn't doing any of that stuff. I was teaching. For me to work properly, there's just a ton of stuff I need. But mostly, I need time and concentration. Even if I am able to work properly, it might only be for an hour. Then I have to email or call someone. I can't work properly like that. No one can. Well, maybe some can. I can't do that. It's why I think people like Olafur Eliasson are so successful. He's making things and now he has a lot of people working with him. It's not that I want a bunch of people to work with me, because I don't know how I would do that. To be honest, even if there were 10 people, it wouldn't work. I just need room and time to focus.

When I was doing David's Island, I would work for 70 hours a week and then go teach. Maybe I've worked 70 hours total in the last two years. That's not an exaggeration. I've worked eight total months in the last 16 years if I add up all the hours that I've worked on my own focused work. I'm talking about working in a place where the cosmology is mine. My friend Coy Howard told me that I should say no to every single thing that I am invited to. That means book projects, research projects, etc. Coy says you need to say no to everything for two years. That is, if you want to do some work. That's probably decent advice. (laughs) But if I did that, I wouldn't be here talking to you.

MC Yes, that's a great suggestion, but start next week!

PK Some people can keep a lot of things in play and care for them properly. I feel like I do a mediocre job with everything because I'm too distributed. I just I don't have those gears. I have slow-twitch gears: I'm not great with fast-twitch gears when it comes to working; I can't focus on this for 10 minutes, and then that for a half hour, and then work with students. When I work, I need to see it. I need to be in the workspace. I need to get the mental space set up. I need to be able to focus because there are a lot of moving and very complex parts when I am working properly.

MC What about when you collaborate with someone? Does that collaboration create a character?

PK Yes, for sure. When I begin a collaboration, I roughly lay out what I'm thinking about: bird motels, human and non-human relationships, fictive and real space. There are long emails or Zoom calls between myself and a collaborator. They're really long ones. I always insist that they bring to the table things that they are interested in or might seem relevant to the work that they are doing. Then we negotiate how that all works. The trouble is that the people I work with use digital modeling. So, there's always an immediate certainty. Any of the latent knowledge, the background conversations and the construction lines—those are evacuated because they don't think like I do. And we have a short period of time where we're trying to design a bunch of bird motels. We don't have time or money to actually focus as I did with David's Island. We immediately generate pictures of ideas that are the closest analogues to what we're trying to work on.

So, for example, an artificial weather garden, as in the latest bird motel. That's a super interesting thing to me. What's an artificial weather garden for birds? We make pictures of things that might produce that sort of environment. But that's not working on an artificial weather garden

with respect to this strange log that has breeding birds and different levels of technology, changing weather patterns, fluctuations according to the situation of the garden. We're not working on those things; we're picturing those things as well as we can. It goes through a lot of phases. When I ask someone to work with me, I say to them: you need to work out what you want to get out of this. They're not donkeys carrying stuff for me. I want them to think about what they want to get out of the work. That's important to me, and, of course, I pay them, but it is important to me they get something out of it.

MC   Do your dreams impact your work? If you leave your work overnight, do you see yourself waking up with a new resolution?

PK   You're asking an interesting question. Over the course of a year, I probably remember three dreams… maybe. I seldom remember dreams. When things like that are stimulated for me, I might be in a museum somewhere. And I might see a handful of things that stimulate me. But dreams, no. I am interested a little bit in the surrealist relationships of dreams and reality, which is part of a key part of their project. But no, no dreams.

MC   What artists or architects who also focus on drawing do you find interesting? Do you go to the bookstore and see a book and say, "wow, love that!"? Whose work excites you?

PK   In terms of the drawing? Michael Young would certainly be one. Michael Young is a friend. There are different things that I pick up from different people, like Neil Spiller. Neil's a good friend. Mike Webb, of Archigram. I think of Mike not only because of the drawings, but because Mike is one of the most interesting thinkers alive. Peter Cook's work interests me a lot. Laura Allen of Smout Allen; Laura does most of the drawings. Good friends Nat Chard and Anton Markus Pasing. Bryan Cantley, a very good friend and some things about Brian's work. . . many others.

MC   What other work shares the same drawing ecosystem with your drawings?

PK   Some of the work of Morphosis, perhaps Libeskind's "Chamber Works", things like that. And even some specific drawings, for example the Sixth Street House drawings that Andy Zago did for Morphosis. When I saw those drawings, it opened up a way for me to think about composites. Those drawings were important, and even things like Robert Rauschenberg helped thinking about combines.

MC   In the great book of contemporary architecture drawings, we would surely find the work of Perry Kulper. Who else is in that book?

PK   Zaha Hadid, especially her early work. Maybe Cantley would be in there? Mas Yendo would be in that book and several others that I mentioned a few minutes ago.

MC   Do you know Drawing Architecture Studio?

PK   Yes, I know of them. They would be there. I'd like to meet them, they're in Beijing? I've only come on to them in the last couple of years. They mean business. I need to know their work better. I have huge respect for them, they would definitely be in the book. C.J. Lim would be in the book. Riet Eeckhout at KU Leuven in Belgium would be a part of that discussion. Mark West probably, Surviving Logic, a Cooper guy. I certainly have a huge respect for Diller + Scofidio, those early drawings. I made the David's Island thing, and someone said, "you should look at Diller + Scofidio." I said, "who are they?" I didn't really know them. They would be in that conversation and in the book. Not drawings really, but Raoul Bunschoten, and some of the work that Chora does.

MC   What architecture schools foster an atmosphere for this kind of work?

PK   I have many friends at the Bartlett. I've been at the school probably 50 times for different things. But I think the Bartlett, Cooper, SCI-Arc, are the ones. I must say, though, that I think the Bartlett is the best design school in the world. I don't see schools that are as experimental or as speculative as the Bartlett.

MC   Related to drawing (digital or analog) and the curriculum, what do you think schools are doing well and where do you think they can do better?

PK   To be honest, I'm not so locked into so many schools and what they are up to. I think that imaging ideas, modeling figurative things, some provocative parametric modeling, a bit of AI work, rendering with some interests in affects, and some digitally generated affects, are in play. Some good things happening. I think it would be helpful to work on techniques, linked to ideas, that let students work on and through the ideas, as much as illustrating them. I think more diverse representation vocabularies that might hold different levels of understanding could be useful as students try and keep diverse interests in play. Temporally intelligent and mixed,

or hybrid vocabularies, and probing the entire digital space setup for potential, are worth a good perusal.

MC   We have discussed the relationship between analog and digital drawing and ways of making both in schools and in practice. Today it seems the most exciting work incorporates both. Do you agree? What are the new frontiers of drawing and representation in schools and in practice?

PK   Yes, I think there are incredibly interesting possibilities hinged to incorporating several visualization techniques. I am particularly interested in both composite—but not so much collage thinking— and hybrid possibilities, that might be on the horizon. There are many interesting things happening with developments in AI, VR/ XR, machine learning, scripting, coding, point cloud potential, data mining, 3D scanning and photogrammetry. I suspect that medical imaging techniques, and things like Google Earth, maybe be worth keeping an eye on. Many provocative areas that aren't necessarily linked to the pictorial representation of spatial realms, but other areas that are information rich and that open the roles for what representation might discuss, seem tantalizing. Time for the think tank realm!

Perry Kulper is an architect and Associate Professor of Architecture at the Taubman College at the University of Michigan. He taught for 17 years at SCI-Arc in Los Angeles and has held visiting teaching positions at the University of Pennsylvania and at Arizona State University. He was the 2018-2019 Sir Banister Fletcher Visiting Professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. Kulper studied at Columbia University in NYC and has worked in a number of renowned offices, including Eisenman/Robertson; Robert A.M. Stern Architects; and Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown Architects. In 2013, with collaborator and friend Nat Chard, Kulper published "Pamphlet Architecture 34: Fathoming the Unfathomable". You can view his work on Instagram @pkulper.

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