dWall – Case of VDS Baghdad

Jerzy Wojtowicz
University of British Columbia
Ali Shakarchi
American University of Sharjah
Minoru Takeyama
Musashino Art University, Tokyo, Japan
(http://vds.arch.ubc.ca

Virtual Design Studio students and teachers of architecture in Canada, Japan and United Arab Emirates worked on the central area of University of Baghdad and examined its main square by proposing designs ideas and projects while sharing dynamic web portal. The narrative aspect of the digital media redefines the nature of design practice by making the creative process more democratic and transparent. Communicating design progress across temporal and geographic borders we can publish it instantly and make design accessible at different stages of its development for the benefit of distant collaborators, as well as general public. Baghdad remains site of traumatic conflict. Approaching aftermath of this war, creates unique opportunity to challenge the role of students of design. Among issues raised by this studio were: While apart - we will share and design for the betterment of the future condition of man people. We will consider not only possible futures, but also importance of the tradition while constructing our proposals in hope for both peace and democracy. However, the ongoing Globalization patterns are subject to the growing reassessment by many. What is the role of the central square in the campus of University of Baghdad in the XXI century? How can architecture and new media contribute to the peace making under such a circumstance as Iraq is facing at present? These were fundamental questions that the students needed to deal with. This paper presents the dynamic collaborative environment as well as diverse Digital Democracy Wall projects formulated in this distributed situation.

Keywords: Virtual Design Studio; VDS; Baghdad; architecture; democracy.
Design Objectives

Design for University of Baghdad was initially conceived in late 50’s by the Architects Collaborative led by Walter Gropius and partially constructed in mid 1960’s. In its context students were asked to focus on the central square of this campus, revitalize it as the student forum, as the new public space in relation to your project. VDS Baghdad was to conceptualize the future aspect of the campus by proposing the Mediatheque and provision of new, contemporary facility like Democracy Wall both situated in the context plan marked by one of the funding fathers of the Modern Movement. The central area of campus (Figure 1 & Figure 2) is where Walter Gropius sought to revive those qualities introducing traditional, main square and positioning next to it university library as well as the main administrative tower in addition to other facilities. Students were asked to reinforce its original intention as a main gathering place for everyone and amplify it through deployment of the new media. In contemporary terms projects should help the university to reconnect with outside world, as well as with the local population. In the modest way it should aspire to contribute to process of reconstruction and growth of this once illustrious city.

Scope of Work

After more than a decade since the first VDS session was held, surprisingly, not much has evolved in the core technology behind it. Today the data is processed and transferred at much higher rate, technology is more accessible and the expertise to run and manage such sessions are becoming common knowledge.

VDS model, however, has evolved into a medium with a set of tools that could be incorporated into the pedagogy of architecture design studio by means of cross cultural collaboration with unique contextual discourse. VDS_Baghdad carried that theme of inter-cultural perception of three distinct-
Students from those three countries participated in a design charrette to re-develop the main square of the campus of the University of Baghdad. Students researched and located some photos and drawings of the original documents prepared by TAC. The pictures of the current conditions were sent from Baghdad. As well as some background information were provided. All reference material as well as projects under development were posted on the internet and made accessible to registered participants at all times.

In general, students tackled the project from different perspectives. For some of them, site planning, and visual connectivity dominated their reasoning in design, for others, the usability of the structure(s), and the significance of the site. Yet, few of them were stringent about the importance of the political situation and the cultural components to the project.

Figure 4
Weaving Codes: Mediatheque for the University of Baghdad by Eitaro Hirota (UBC)
Even though there were few attempts to be cynical in the whole subject of Democracy carried by missiles, students took this project very seriously, partly because of their interest in the complexity of the topic, and probably, a way to vent out their frustration towards what was happening. An interesting example by one AUS student; Nasreen Tamimi; describing her concept:

"Democracy is defined as „the free & equal right for every person to participate in a system of government...“ Democracy is portrayed as being an illusion in this particular project. In reality democracy does not give everyone an equal fair chance as the minority will always lose. It is believed that democracy can be depicted by the concept of „double-speak‘ where one says something but means something else and this is represented by the illusionary d-wall. The d-wall is not a solid item but rather an implication as it is the space in between. The user of the d-wall will have the illusion that he/she is free to express themselves. The text a person writes on the screens will either be illegible or incomprehensible. The voice of a person on the stand will not be audible. Users will be under the impression that their words are being heard but they are not!"

Another important work by a UBC student who took a formal approach in translating the ideas of democracy, transparency, and order into a monumental mediateque space utilizing a weaved pattern of structural entities that symbolizes the unity and complexity of the Iraqi society as well as the transitional values that are emerging for a progressive future (Figure 4).

An interesting proposal by a MAU student; Akiko; who designed an interactive wall as a large interactive LCD screen that broadcasts images from around the world that help connect people on campus to the rest of the world, shrinking the boundaries and giving context to their current situation (Figure 5).

**Context Evaluation**

In an attempt to learn lessons from an interesting project as this one, we tried to evaluate the process, the scope, and the response from all participants. The main question we had to ask is: What is the role of VDS model of education in the construction of a design concept?

At the very beginning of this project, many hours were spent to build the VDS dynamic information portal (Figure 6). The main function of the portal is to accommodate for all data transactions between students from the three schools, as well as their professors. At later stages, students were able to see other work developed in other schools running in a different place and time zone. The construction of the design concept is more related to the school of thinking and the cultural background of the students than the way the studio class is conducted via VDS. Since each studio had certain agenda that served within the curriculum of the school, the work of students demonstrated a wider variety than a usual architecture studio in one school. The exposure student got to other schools worked to their advantage. That type of exposure is one major component that has the potential to influence the learning process, which in effect will determine some of the qualities of the design conception.

With the exception of very few students who participated in this project, many have demonstrated design thinking that is stimulated by commonly acknowledged stereotypes. Baghdad and what it means through public media, wars, dictatorship,
Figure 6
Front page of VDS_Baghdad portal was never same, as it was made up of the top voted projects. Democratically selected and linked to the database top projects were dynamically updated reflecting the majority views. It reminded all of the nature of problem set.

Thousand Nights and One Night, blue ornamented domes, palm trees, and the octagonal star. Through this project, and because of the cross-cultural complexity involved, students have touched on very important issues related to design and design thinking. Unknowingly, they revealed to us some very important pedagogical concerns, The stereotyped and the typical. In effect, design is being initiated the recognition of the stereotypical image of the context, rather than to what it means as a type. Form is encoded with messages rather than decoded from its prejudiced image.

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References