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The Virtual Ching's Head

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The bar in the Architectural Association, named after the bust that sat in one corner, had white formica topped tables. Each day around lunchtime these were cleaned with Vim by the bar staff, ready for the new day's thought's, ideas, and occasional inspirations. Students used the bar as an ideal place to discuss their work, the table tops providing an endless supply of virtual napkins waiting not to be used but to be drawn on. This atmosphere of providing a relaxed environment to discuss and debate architectural ideas proved immensly popular, with tea spills adding to the table top sketches. It is often forgotten in the ordered cleanliness of the CAD studio, where the protection of the computers overrides the comfort of their users, that ideas and their development do not always come when we most expect. Providing an atmosphere in which the designer feels comfortable enough to play is as vital now as at the time when the Architectural Association was seen as an ideal place to foster debate. As the architect feels more comfortable, so will the ideas flow more freely. This paper demonstrates how a CAD environment can become the virtual equivalent of a coffee bar as it relates to the design studio, where ideas are thrown around with abandon, and where the discussion of those ideas is more important than the material with which the ideas are depicted. In contrast, the use of computers in design is following along the same path as beautifully descriptive artwork or highly skillful technical drawings, that say much about the presentation abilities of their authors, yet often little about the actual designs. Designers often are so seduced by the medium that they do not properly see the message. A computer's ability to present three dimesnional form instantly, and the ease with which those forms may be altered, stretched, shrunk, reversed and so on make the computer an ideal sketching tool. This paper shows the results of the combined RIBA Part II and MSc Computing and Design course. This two year, 96 week course is entirely computer based, and uses generative modelling to explore the fundamental nature of the design of form. This paper seeks to show how this approach may be successfully used with some students, and how the approach complements existing teaching methods and techniques. To accompany these notes a computer based presentation will illustrate a variety of past and present student work. This will show how rule based form, and the use of computers as a sketching tool, has influenced the students' working methods and their approach to the creation of form. Finally, we will show that the use of such a formal approach leads inevitably to a greater understanding of, and therefore a greater ability to articulate and illustrate, a student's own design ideas and proposals. The use of the computer at every stage of the design process forces the student to be entirely explicit about every action as it occurs. Similarly the rule based approach requires them to be explicit about actions they propose to take in the future. This double combination has produced students who are highly articulate about their designs at every stage, and this paper aims to demonstrate that the more articulate the student, the greater is the possibility for success.

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