Heart[h] of Dis.course

The third floor is a unique experience where information literally flows from studio to studio, review to review. On a busy day, the crescendo of a heated discussion in C performs inextricably with a low bass hum in M, mediated by the ethereal pitch of Y, unpredictably punctuated by a crash or sudden static outburst in K. This is the chorus of the third floor: at times chaotic, frustrating, or inhibiting to some, but thrilling and liberating to others. Whatever your take on the flows of a busy day on the third floor might be, whether from the perspective of faculty, staff, student, or other, the fact is, the hub[bub] of the third floor is the heart[h] of this institution.

The third floor (especially CMYK) is not the heart[h] of this institution because it is where the studios are, or where we hold reviews. It is the heart[h] because it is the pedagogical center—its form is the latent message of what the institution has to offer that is sincere beyond the objects that we fill it with. For me, that message is dis.course.

If discourse is defined as a conversation, or thought communicated through speech, or a course of reasoning from premises to their outcomes, dis.course is situated within this territory while encompassing everything that is the “other”: the realm of possibilities; every path not taken, every tangential line of reasoning, every potential course of action. Dis.course is the gritty, less traveled avenue of discussion; the syncopated messiness of negotiating a critical mass of ideas—resistance to a cleanly sealed, neat argument, and bane of an illusively set course.

It is hard to say whether dis.course defines the third floor, or if the third floor defines dis.course, but regardless, the link between dis.course and the third floor, like the audible flows between CMYK, are inextricable. The third floor is messy and unkempt when it is at its best. Desks and credenzas negotiate an economy of proximity to natural light, climate control, and direct access to the power grid, and the floor has a delightful coating of chipboard, foam core, and a pink, powdery residue. Although unsightly at first, the physical messiness is an illustrative product of a happy interior messiness—the result of productive identity crises, schizophrenias, and thrilling neuroses.

To think that even through the clean-house paradigm that digital media and advanced digital modes of fabrication facilitate, that the messiness of dis.course can be a desirable condition is hopeful. It is not that I have a fetish for scrap, or that I am nostalgic for the X-acto knife, but rather the fact that the informality and uncertainty of messy modes of dis.course on the third floor leads me to believe that there is room for a wider degree of tolerances that digital means can’t easily cope with, and that within this space is the potential to produce some of the most interesting and lively discussions.

Although the third floor is an immediate example of dis.course, it should not be limited to a particular site, but rather situated within larger pedagogical and disciplinary questions.
Architecture schools must contend with responsibilities to the profession as well as accreditation requirements, which at times leads to a tidying up, and tightening up, of the workshop quality of the studio experience. These pressures tend to privilege certain kinds of projects over others to represent the institution in the face of these responsibilities. The kind of project that tends to be on the receiving end of this privilege is the one that advances clarity and certainty at its core. It is not to say that these are anything less than highly admirable qualities, but from my naïve perspective there is a larger institutional issue at stake: that by preferencing this type of project as a measure of success for an institution, we run the risk of undermining sincere dis.course.

It is also about a general questioning of clarity and certainty as the only model of logic for the discipline. While desirable on one level, clarity and certainty tend to ignore a whole set of potential lines of discussion. They are facile communicators, but also exclusive and reliant on closed loop logics. Dis.course, on the other hand, uses messiness and uncertainty as a viable logic— the same logic that allows one to imagine the multiple uses of architecture and the possibility of multiple readings. This messiness and uncertainty of dis.course is about a more permissive legibility of architecture— one that has the potential to direct the discipline toward unexpected and unforeseen territories of discussion. It is also a means of exploration and research that unabashedly seeks out the latent qualities and potentials of space. Once sought out, latency and potential can be brought to the surface, engaging in productive oppositional play with the logics of clarity and uncertainty.

Engaging messiness and bringing it to the forefront for its integral role in the discipline of architecture is a method of operating through the agency of dis.course that re-informs the work of the institution; the institution as a place where we seek out the difficult, ill-defined situation and manage or curate it, not through the reductive logic of clarity and certainty, but through playful engagements that prod the foundations of architecture as a way of re-inscribing our knowledge onto the discipline.

According to Mark Wigley, schools work hard to hide the fact that at the heart of the discipline is doubt, enigma, and uncertainty.¹ There are varying degrees to which institutions fall into this habit, but here we benefit greatly from the rich moments when doubt, enigma, and uncertainty reveal themselves. We should embrace these exuberant moments not as signs of weakness or sources of concern, but as opportune moments to learn and to teach, and moments that can create genuine dis.course that have the possibility of resonating beyond these walls. They are these moments of exuberance that define this institution and make it unique— they are these moments that are the fire at the heart[h] of this institution.