THE VOID

INTER 13 2011-2012

Miraj Ahmed
Martin Jameson

ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
THE VOID

Inter 13 will continue to explore fundamental conditions of space and the oppositional interplay between form and formlessness, order and disorder, sacred and profane; the basis of heterogeneous cultural and phenomenological experiences of the city. This year we will look deep into the void for our inspiration.

We are not interested in complex form or architectural ‘objects’ that do not respond to the contingent or ordinary but a deeper understanding of space and human experience. It is space that is complex and the things that happen within it that hold the biggest challenges. In this regard we will engage with the concept of the void – that useful ‘nothing’ that is so often taken for granted.

In modern western philosophy the void and emptiness has often been seen as negative in more than one sense of the word. It has been viewed as a fearful nihilistic ‘other’ space. However, the concept of nothing and zero is ancient in the east and has a place as much as any other physical element. The void rather than being nothing is something – where its otherness is rich with imagination and possibility. A space that can be intimate or sublime, it is the formless field that allows things to dwell or move, as well as the space in between or the hollow contained within. The void suggests both absence and presence and is a process involving negation – towards nothing, zero, entropy, erasure, tabula rasa.

‘Space is nothing, yet we have a kind of vague faith in it.’

Robert Smithson

A drive towards nothing has always been explored in both art and architecture for its powerful symbolism and subjective experience. It is a desire for a return to essential qualities and a primary state. The void has a use value beyond the emblematic or minimal. It is a powerful and essential process of creation and sensation. So our focus is on making and the interplay between something and nothing, dynamic and static, darkness and light. Concepts such as ‘formless’ and simple prosaic form and ‘base matter’ will be key in the exploration of the empty.

Theoretical positions will be investigated through readings as well as a wide range of media tools from art practice. To better understand the ‘physicality’ of nothing we will emphasise materiality and model-making, and in this regard casting and carving will become key techniques. We will locate and explore the voids that exist in various guises – urban, monumental, contained, limitless and indeterminate – to discover architectural possibilities. Architectural precedent and site analysis will be used to develop programmes (contemplations of the void) that are critically juxtaposed within the urban fabric of London.

Idris Khan
YEAR OVERVIEW

*Eternal nothingness is fine if you happen to be dressed for it*

Woody Allen

The first term focuses on research and the development of concepts for the main design project – first material and architectural readings of void and then socio-political notions that relate to the urban realm. The second term leads to the development of an architectural proposition within the urban fabric of London that includes a range of media, photo/film, collage, model-making and drawing. Each student will propose their own site and program based on the research of the first term; conceptual interpretations of void and analysis of the selected part of the city. Term 1 and 2 are divided into three phases of work. At the end of the first two phases of each term there will be a pin up and discussion. At the end of each term there will be a jury with invited critics.

**History & Theory**

Students joining Unit 13 should have an interest and articulacy in art and cultural theory and have a desire to translate this into design. The ideas and theories relating to the ‘void’ and the strategies that are employed in philosophy, literature, art and architecture will be key in terms of design application and should inform the projects theoretically and materially. Students are encouraged to combine HTS with their project research and conceptual grounding.

**Technical Studies**

Structure, environment and material construction are essential and integral to the design process. Technical research should be documented and collated as an ongoing process in order to support concepts and build a viable technical study that underpins the main design project – based on experimentation and research. Further information on the TS is given in the Appendix.

**Design Portfolio**

Students are expected to collate all design material of the year into an A2 portfolio document. As well as this A3 volumes will also be developed and bound at the end of the year. This should be an on-going process of collation in order to exhibit the volumes at the end of the year. Folio checks will occur at the end of each term.
First Term

1.0. INTO THE VOID

Overview of the term

The first term focuses on research into the void and the development of skills as the foundation for the development of the final project proposition in term 2.

The term is divided in three phases. The first phase starts with the analysis of art work and representation of the void in two dimensions; the focus is on painting and drawing. This is followed by the second phase of work that is based on analysis and transformation of architectural precedent: in this phase we work in three dimensions, with architectural space and with physical model making. The term ends with a third phase that involves selection and analysis of a site in London and development of a project strategy. Throughout the term we will run a series of seminars that cover the cultural and social aspects of the void.

At the end of the term students will have developed an advanced skill set (drawing and two dimensional representation, three dimensional modeling); have developed a personal position on the void and the potential of ‘nothing’; and have selected a site and associated project strategy. HTS essays should be developed in line with this work.
First Term

I-0. INTO THE VOID

0 Induction

1 The two-dimensional void:
   Pictorial analysis of art work

2 The three-dimensional void:
   Architectural precedent research and transformation

3 London void:
   Site and proposition strategy

Theory Seminars

Skills Workshops

HTS Lectures

Pin-up

Pin-up

Jury
I-1. THE TWO DIMENSIONAL VOID

Dates: Weeks 2, 3 and 4
October 3 to 21

Two dimensional void: finding ‘nothing’ in the painted masterpiece

The year starts with great art. Students will select a painting and develop a three week research project into the representation of ‘nothing’ within the painting. This work will entail processes of abstraction, distillation, supposition, extrapolation and imagination. Techniques to be employed include perspectival analysis, tracing, covering-up, blocking in and out and re-composition. At the end of this phase students will have produced a series of analytical drawings that de-code the painting and present a new reading of space within the art work. The work is at once analytical and speculative. Students will be expected to stake out an intellectual position on the nature of the void and its potential agency. There will be a pin-up at the conclusion of this phase with invited critics.
First Term: Phase 2

1.2. THE THREE DIMENSIONAL VOID

Dates: Weeks 5 - 9

October 24 to November 25

Three dimensional void: architectural anatomy

The second phase takes the unit into three dimensions. The aim is to carefully dissect a masterpiece of architecture and to build it anew. The first step is to draw and understand by identifying balance, symmetry, structure, circulation, solid and void; the use and misuse of space. The second step focuses on the void space and a re- representation of this space. This will involve extension, exaggeration, reconfiguration and solid-void inversion. Students will prepare a detailed 3D digital model as the basis of a physical model making exercise with emphasis on casting techniques. This work will be associated with development of interests in structural, environmental and phenomenological aspects of the architectural void that will form the basis of TS theses. There will be a pin-up at the conclusion of this phase with invited critics.
1-3. LONDON VOID

Dates: Weeks 10-12
November 28 to December 16

London Void: site and proposition strategy

The final phase of the first term takes place on site. The first two phases will allow students to develop an intellectual position with respect to the void and its potential. Site selection is undertaken with this potential in mind. All students will work on one of several pre-determined sites in London. These will include site of power, such as the financial district of the City of London, and sites of contention such as the Tottenham riot district. Essential at this stage will be developing a forensic understanding of the site, its architecture, and its cultural and social issues. Detailed 3D models will form the basis of large scale axonometric drawings at the scale of the street or city block. This work will conclude with a set of diagrams that set out an architectural strategy. This strategy will specify the role of the void in addressing the site contents. The term will end with a formal jury with invited critics.
Second Term

2-0. MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Overview of the term

The second term leads to the development of an architectural proposition.

Like the first term the second term is divided in three phases. The first phase is essentially a research and experimentation phase: here the emphasis is on technical and performative criteria. The second phase emphasises the main design elements including circulation, configuration of space and programme. The final phase is a physical model-making phase.

At the end of the term students will have prepared a closely argued architectural proposition, which includes a technical justification and a compelling physical model.

Anish Kapoor
Second Term

2-0. MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Week 1

1

Technical Design of the Void
Structural, material and phenomenological research

Pin-up

Week 2

2

The Void as a Proposition
Architectural design proposition

Pin-up

Week 3

3

Materialisation of the Void
Physical model-making

Jury

Week 4

TS tutorials

Week 5

Week 6

Week 7

Week 8

Week 9

Week 10

Week 11

TS interim

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2-I. TECHNICAL DESIGN OF THE VOID

Dates: Weeks 1 to 4
January 9 to February 3

The agency of nothing: technical research and design

The second term begins with intense research into the performative qualities of the void space. For third years this work feeds directly into the TS thesis. The work here is experimental and methodical. Students will develop hypotheses with respect to the performance of void space and test these hypotheses through physical experiments and model making. Possible topics include phenomenology, structure and material. The research must place emphasis on making things and on physical experimentation. This work will be documented into an A3 booklet.
Second Term: Phase 2

2-2. THE VOID AS A PROPOSITION

Dates: Weeks 5 to 8
February 6 to March 2

Architectural design proposition

The second phase of the term is the heart of the design phase of work. Here we start with developing greater precision regarding program and circulation before the key design moves regarding spatial disposition and qualities. The design must both reflect the potentialities of the site and the thesis position developed in the first term. At this stage of the year, students should be using a variety of representational techniques in addition to the developing the design through detailed plans, sections and axonometric drawings. TS research continues through this phase. There will be a pin-up at the end of week 8.
2-3. MATERIALISATION OF THE VOID

Dates: Weeks 9 to 11
March 5 to March 23

Physical model making of design proposition

The end of the second term is dedicated to physical model making. This will involve detailed rhino modeling and setting out and the use of various digital techniques including laser cutting and sintering. We also envisage the continued use of casting techniques. All models will include site information as modelled at the end of the first term, and aspects of materiality as researched at the beginning of the second term.

TS work should be finalised during this phase and be ready for final compilation and printing over the Easter break.

Third year previews are in the week beginning March 19.
Overview of the term

The last term focuses on compilation and speculation at the city scale.

The compilation work brings together the whole portfolio and addresses gaps and inconsistencies. The speculation work allows the project to address a wider scale beyond the site itself. The emphasis will be on large scale collages and drawings. Third years will submit their TS research reports at the beginning of this term. The Easter break will be an important time for finalising these reports.
Third Term

3-0. SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

1. Documenting the Void
   Portfolio composition

2. Speculative Void Space
   The Void at City Scale

Week 1  Week 2  Week 3  Week 4  Week 5  Week 6  Week 7  Week 8  Week 9

Pin-up

Jury

TS
final

2nd year tables

3rd year tables
Third Term: Phase 1

3-1. DOCUMENTING THE VOID

Dates: Weeks 1 to 2
April 23 to May 4

Compilation of the portfolio and completion of drawing set

All outstanding orthographic drawings need to be completed by the end of this phase. Folios are to be formatted and printed at A2 or larger.
Third Term: Phase 2

3.2. SPECULATIVE VOID SPACE

Dates: Weeks 3 to 6  
May 7 to June 1

Series of speculative collages and drawings at city scale

As in previous years we will be experimenting with collage techniques using photoshop and perpective drawing. The idea of this work is both to better represent the ideas of the design itself and to speculate at a bigger scale. In other words, this phase asks the question: what is the agency of the void at the scale of the city?

Final juries will take place in the week commencing May 14. Second year final tables are on June 6 and third year final tables on June 11.

Raimund Abraham
Appendix

TECHNICAL STUDIES

‘Moulding clay into a vessel, we find the utility in its hollow-ness; Cutting doors and windows for a house, we find the utility in its empty space. Therefore the being of things is profitable, the non being of things is serviceable.’

Lao Tzu

The technical report will be a body of research that explores a particular aspect of a design. Observed and recorded phenomena will provide the basis for concepts and technical explorations. Material and structural strategies will be explored in parallel to the sociopolitical implications of ‘void’. This will provide the basis for specific phenomena and technical aspects of the design.

This year material processes, such as cutting, destruction, erasure, casting etc will inform model making and architectural technique and become part of the tools for experimentation with TS. Other techniques and interests will emerge depending on the nature and intent of the project. In term 1 phase 2, the investigations of an architectural precedent will reveal issues of programme, event, spatial hierarchies and a whole range of physical and metaphysical phenomena that will allow students to develop very particular interests that will initiate further TS research over the rest of term one and the following. In term 2 these criteria will be the focus of more detailed experimentation and research – leading to a comprehensive body of work that will form the TS report for 3rd year and portfolio work for 2nd year.
SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT NOTHING

Phenomena
In Japanese philosophy, there are five elements: earth, water, fire, air, void. It is part of the physical world and yet immaterial. It exists as a phenomena that is integral to experience along with all of the other elements. The concept of zero was discovered in ancient India and was taken up by scientists and philosophers alike. It is an ingredient of everything. It speaks of lack as opposed to excess - darkness as opposed to light, silence as opposed to sound. Other words to describe the void / nothing; the infinite, abyss, vacuum, darkness, space - the interest in the void span science, theology and philosophy.

Language
The void exists between and within words. Absence of words can be meaningful. Lewis Carroll in Alice’s adventures in wonderland played with words and the negation of meaning. Issues of scale – less and more, issues of presence and absence confound and amuse Alice. The Map of the Ocean in Carroll’s Hunting of the Snark also represents a lack. Absence also plays a big part in ‘A Void’ by George Perec – specifically the absence of the e. Laurence Sterne in ‘The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen’ chooses to describe death as a black page.

Art
The idea of nothing has always existed within art. The notion of the blank space waiting or needing to be filled and the idea of the mark within an empty space go back to cave painting. The importance of the void continues in representation to this day. The balance of object as held in pictorial space, or the illusion of depth can be seen in painting. More recent minimalist art explores nothingness in both two and three dimensional space, and also time based works.

Monuments
The void can also be seen in the halting of time through the memorial. It has no function in relation to day to day use. Memorials can be a defined object or space that has few uses beyond its symbolic meaning signifying death.

Non-Place
Since Nietzsche we have understood the possibility of the world as Godless and therefore without a preordained meaning. The idea that the world or things can lack meaning is a modern concept - that we exist within a void of meaning - and meaning is to be created by us. In this respect the idea of an emptiness within things can be seen in pop art - in which the vacuousness of modern life is either critiqued or celebrated. In a similar way the idea of the ‘non place’ as described by Marc Auge points to spaces such as supermarkets, airports and hotel rooms as being in some ways blank and placeless.

Political Space
The city (Polis) by its very nature is political. The division of territorial space is negotiated, land is assigned and void spaces such as streets and squares are created to connect and provide spaces for civic life. The plan of Athens incorporated the civic Agora - the space that connected the major civic institutions. The Nolli plan of Rome shows the city as solid (black) and void (white) and describes well the accessible nature of the void space (the interior of churches is described as white. However there are complexities within the spaces of the city that are left over, useless or contentious. Boundaries are often vague and therefore we have expressions such as ‘no mans land’. In revolutionary Paris the open space of Place de La Concorde became the execution site of the old order.

The process of growth of cities involves layering over time, densification and this in turn gives way to demolition, erasure, cuts that open up new voids. Nash’s processional route cuts through London making an open connection between St James and the then new Regents Park, while Haussman’s boulevards slice through old medieval Paris - these are political acts.

The Void as Programme
There are programmed spaces where the void - or emptiness is of utmost importance. Where we try to minimise the functional - or render them invisible.

Planetariums aim to create the illusion of the cosmos - the great abyss. A simulation of total darkness punctuated only by points of light.

The art gallery is one such space. In contemporary art the gallery artefact is knowable and unknowable - so we make building that can be filled with unspecified things. Blank spaces that are hyper neutral. White cubes, shells, empty warehouses or power stations become what we call galleries. Religious buildings or emblematic political buildings tap into the void to create the connection with the sublime - volumes that inspire awe through vastness. We look to the foyer of a bank or powerful institution where the expression of power is made through the excess of emptiness.

There is also an emptiness that is intimate and this is the space of the body. Henri Lefebvre refers to space being produced by people. That it is a performance, an event. This relates to our daily lives and therefore all spaces. This type of space becomes most manifest in the spaces of performance. Peter Brook in his book ‘The Empty Space’ points out that within emptiness we can create other spaces.