Instructional Levity in the Architecture Studio

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Abstract

Architecture education is typically cast as trying and bleak, a simultaneous exercise in sleep deprivation and innovation. While practicing architects' hours and pay are rationalized with, 'You do it because you love it', students of architecture should too be situated to argue that their education is a similarly joyful pursuit. This work does not suggest revelry and jokes in studio, but rather that instructors adopt pedagogical methodologies that engender lively engagement, and ultimately joy. Two benefits of levity in the architecture pedagogy are of particular interest. First, the impact on student engagement and experimentation. Second, the impact on learning. Levity, appropriately incorporated in the studio curriculum, can improve the academic experience and quality of student work. This research is not 'soft' or 'fun' – to be written off as lacking in rigor and seriousness. Instead, it is an unapologetic suggestion that bringing *lightness* into the work of architecture studio instructors can elevate student output. In fact, this has been experienced this first hand; when asked for feedback on such pedagogical innovations, a student remarked, 'These unconventional ideas made me excited to design, it made the gruelling hours fun, and it made me proud to put out the work I did'. Introductory examples of such applications of levity in studio teaching at The New Jersey Institute of Technology and feedback gathered from students along the way support such success. Following this, a more in-depth survey the prevailing scholarship on humor in academic instruction (the Instructional Humor Processing Theory) substantiates its place in the architecture studio. This paper aims to provide narrative examples of such pedagogical methodologies, setting the groundwork for future study.

Keywords: Levity, studio, instructional humor, incongruity resolution theory, disposition theory

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"Levity is the result of spiritual and aesthetic poise. A person who is groping and struggling for such poise is worried and grave. All progress is towards levity through gravity. Weight then wings! But it is the wings which are the goal, not the weight. Not wings to fly solemnly with; wings to frivol with. You cannot worry them into existence. You may get them by acting as if you already have them and thinking you have them" (Marquis, 1951 cited in Powers, 2001: 55).

Architecture education is typically cast as trying and bleak, a simultaneous exercise in sleep deprivation and innovation. While practicing architects' hours and pay are rationalized with, 'You do it because you love it', students of architecture should too be situated to argue that their education is a similarly joyful pursuit. This work does not suggest revelry and jokes in studio, but rather that instructors adopt pedagogical methodologies that engender lively engagement, and ultimately joy.

Two benefits of levity in the architecture pedagogy are of particular interest. First, the impact on student engagement and experimentation. Second, the impact on learning. Levity, appropriately incorporated in the studio curriculum, can improve the academic experience and quality of student work. This research is not 'soft' or 'fun' – to be written off as lacking in rigor and seriousness. Instead, it is an unapologetic suggestion that bringing *lightness* into the work of architecture instructors can elevate student output. In fact, this has been experienced this first hand; when asked for feedback on such pedagogical innovations, a student remarked, "These unconventional ideas made me excited to design, it made the gruelling hours fun, and it made me proud to put out the work I did" (Name Witheld 1, 2019). Introductory examples of such applications of levity in studio teaching at The New Jersey Institute of Technology and feedback gathered from students along the way support such success. Following this, a more in-depth survey the prevailing scholarship on humor in academic instruction substantiates its place in the architecture studio.

1. Levity Defined

Levity is "The treatment of a serious matter with humour or lack of due respect" (Oxford University, 2019). Oxford English Dictionary's sample sentence directs a rather negative connotation: "as an attempt to introduce a note of levity, the words were a disastrous flop" (Oxford University, 2019). Two understandings of 'levity' follow. First, one may embrace a "lack of due respect" - the subject matter of our architecture studio should not be cast as superior or it will be unrelatable. Second, and the preferred path here, levity is 'lightness' - in fact, the root if levity is *levitas*, mid-16th century Latin for 'light' (Oxford University, 2019). Here, student joy and engagement are posited as consequences of lightness in instruction.

2. Exercises in Lightness

Before examining the prevailing literature on levity in the classroom and in-depth studio projects, studio exercises in lightness set the tone.

2.1. Poetry

Pablo Neruda proposed such lightness in his poem, *October Fullness*: let's be humble, let's query ourselves, let's ask "how insignificant this business is" (Eisner, 2004: 175). The author starts instruction in her first-year studios with hand drawing, typically providing prompts to teach students to 'see' without prejudgment – for example, draw with eyes closed, do not lift the pencil for 5 minutes, draw your feelings in straight lines, and so on. It is fun, it is unexpected, it is incongruous with the formal curriculum. One month into the Fall 2018 term, the students grew attached to these exercises and asked that to participate in 'Inktober' – drawing in ink every day in the month of October – with a series of prompts from the professor. At this stage, the studio was working on understanding the poetics of design and so a poem was chosen with a line read each day. Neruda's *October Fullness* served as a start to each day's studio work.

To best communicate here the notion of levity chased, the reader is asked to engage as well. At this very moment, you are invited to experiment just as the first-year students did. Find a piece of paper and a drawing instrument and for 60 seconds, pause and just draw Neruda's stanza: "and how insignificant this business is" (Eisner, 2004: 175). Be interpretive, be experimental, be conceptual. Let it clear your mind, just be.

[60 second pause]

Evaluate your own sense of lightness after drawing.

And, the full poem (Eisner, 2004: 175-177):

OCTOBER FULLNESS

Little by little, and also in great leaps,
life happened to me,
and how insignificant this business is.
These veins carried
my blood, which I scarcely ever saw,
I breathed the air of so many places
without keeping a sample of any.
In the end, everyone is aware of this:
nobody keeps any of what he has,
and life is only a borrowing of bones.
The best thing was learning not to have too much
either of sorrow or of joy,
to hope for the chance of a last drop,
to ask more from honey and from twilight.

Perhaps it was my punishment.
Perhaps I was condemned to be happy.
Let it be known that nobody
crossed my path without sharing my being.
I plunged up to the neck
into adversities that were not mine,
into all the sufferings of others.
It wasn't a question of applause or profit.

Much less. It was not being able
to live or breathe in this shadow,
the shadow of others like towers,
like bitter trees that bury you,
like cobblestones on the knees.

Our own wounds heal with weeping,
our own wounds heal with singing,
but in our own doorway lie bleeding
widows, Indians, poor men, fishermen.
The miner's child doesn't know his father
amidst all that suffering.

So be it, but my business
was
the fullness of the spirit:
a cry of pleasure choking you,
a sigh from an uprooted plant,
the sum of all action.

It pleased me to grow with the morning,
to bathe in the sun, in the great joy
of sun, salt, sea-light and wave,
and in that unwinding of the foam
my heart began to move,
growing in that essential spasm,
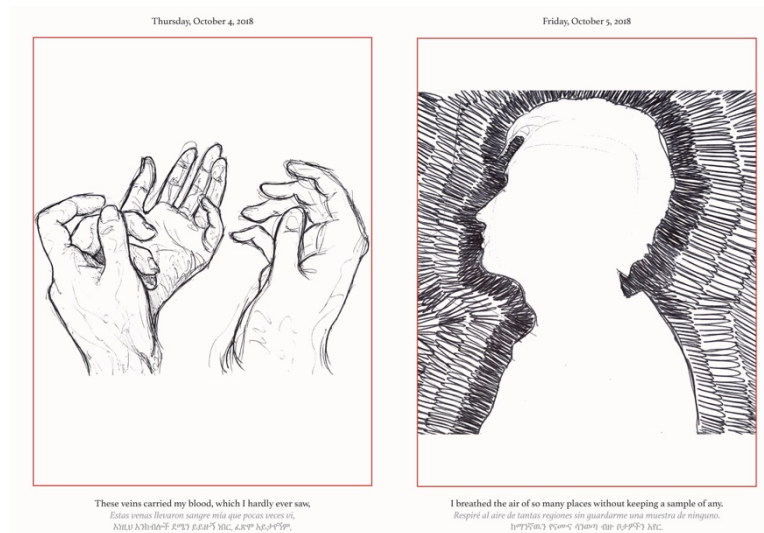and dying away as it seeped into the sand.

Figure 1. Student Neruda drawings (Liscano, 2018)

Student feedback on daily hand-drawing exercises ranged, but universally supported that the lightness it introduced translated to elevated architectural ideation. One student said of hand drawing, "Those exercises challenged me to think of my concepts as a foundation for my design, and to think beyond the surface about the way I was going to communicate and

represent my ideas" (Name Witheld 2, 2019). And another student remarked, " … drawing every day was honestly a challenge for me. Not because I didn't love drawing, I'm an art enthusiast myself, but because of the way we were drawing. … [it] changed the way I think, the way I perceive …" (Name Witheld 1, 2019).

2.2. Music

A Spring first-year studio section continued its own experimentation with daily hand drawing. The students proposed the class draw to music, a proposal accepted on the condition of the music being connected to the work underway, which at that time was precedent evaluation of a practice. Students thus selected pieces aligned with an architecture practice -in idea, time, concept, theme- and before they started drawing, a student would summarize a practice's work, explain the connection to the music and provide a related drawing prompt. They called it 'JAM' (Just Architecture and Music) and even made a poster for the studio advertising this wholly elective work. The ownership, engagement and experimentation were model behavior on a small scale that translated beautifully to larger ongoing studio projects. An added benefit, these exercises offered an opportunity to clear the mind and prepare for the focused studio work that would follow: "It was a constructive part of our studio time where we were able to detach from our work and express whatever it was we were going through that day" (Name Witheld 3, 2019).

Figure 2. Student-generated class drawing schedule (Konradparisi, 2019)

3. Theoretical Framework

Short poetic and musical drawing exercises serve as gateways for levity in the studio pedagogy. The potential, however, is much broader. In order to further apply levity, the existing scholarship on levity in academic instruction warrants review. The most established scholarship on humor in education comes from work in the communications field. Communications scholars study humor as a tool in the classroom, generally finding that the incorporation of humor by an instructor is positive (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez and Liu, 2010; Benjelloun, 2009; Bolkan and Goodboy, 2015; Tews, Jackson, Ramsay and Michel, 2015). While these academics' hypotheses and methods (jokes in lecture halls, for example) do not perfectly translate to the architecture studio format, valuable parallels remain. *Caveat*: This paper and author in no way match the depth and breadth of these scholars' studies; the present work simply acknowledges and seeks comparison at a survey level, thus establishing the value of future study.

3.1. Institutional Humor Processing Theory

In 2010, Communications scholars Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin (2009: 1) combined the "Incongruity-Resolution Theory, Disposition Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion to establish Instructional Humor Processing Theory or IHPT". While relatively new to the literature and certainly open to debate, IHPT has become a popular method by which to evaluate the impact of instructor humor on student learning (Bolkan and Goodboy, 2015).
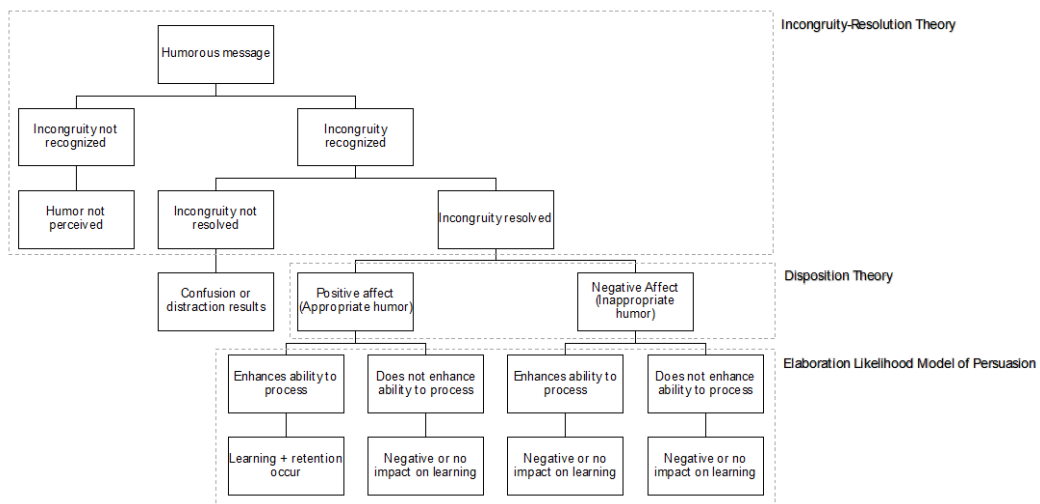
Figure 3. Institutional humor processing theory (Redrawn by author, based on Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin, 2009: 7)

First, Incongruity-Resolution Theory establishes whether students perceive a humorous message (La Fave, Haddad and Maesen, 1996). "This extended theory depicts humor as a two-phase process where the perceived incongruity or inconsistency in the stimuli must first be recognized and then accurately interpreted by the receiver for the joke or humorous content to be perceived as funny" (Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin, 2009: 3). This theory hinges on the gap or dissonance between expectation and reality. Simply put, the humor cannot be expected.

Second, Disposition Theory posits whether this humor is well-received. The subject of the humor is critical here; it must be welcome by the recipient, the students in our case (Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin, 2009).

Finally, the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion establishes whether this the humor enhances learning or actually produces learning (Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin, 2009). Several scholars have found that elaboration occurs when students are motivated and that this motivation is rooted in relevance yet again. At minimum, a positive affect is sought: "students acquire more positive attitudes towards education, which then increases their motivation to learn and results in improved academic performance" (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez and Liu, 2010: 120). Tests of Incongruity-Resolution Theory utilize 'jokes' 'top ten lists' 'self-deprecation' and other arguably trite forms of humor, correlated against student retention and learning. However, the architecture studio is a special place. And so emphasized here is lightness over jokes, acknowledging the goal as design thinking, decision-making, and honing a learned intuition.

4. Institutional Humor Processing Theory in the Architecture Studio

To apply this scholarship to the architecture pedagogy, a first semester first-year studio project the author taught at NJIT is taken under consideration. Again, IHPT as applied here is not about jokes or top-ten lists. Instead, instructional methodologies that celebrate 'lightness' – a notion of levity that maintains the seriousness of studio production but uses unconventional tools to lead to deeper education are proposed.

This work, the first of its kind in the architecture studio context, is observational. It sets the groundwork for future largescale study. This paper does not assert itself to be a formal scientific research study, but rather an observational and reflective analysis. The instructional innovations described herein were organically developed in the studio context over a single year, without the traditional metrics and limits seen in largescale studies. Like the work's observational methodology, its evaluation is similarly informal. Students provided written feedback at the conclusion of the year, asked specifically to comment on how they felt these untraditional methods impacted their learning. Finally, the student work primarily relied on here has been expressly discussed and approved for publication by those students.

4.1. Narrative as Lightness

Students across the first year were called on to complete a very typical first year project - site manipulation and volume design. The program for both tasks was 'relaxation' and the default in previous years was for students to imagine what relaxation meant to them and proceed accordingly. However, an additional constraint was introduced: narrative. Students picked a client and reinterpreted the notion of relaxation for that client. Beyond ingenuity, this approach called for research. As an outside critic remarked after the final review, "Each and every presentation was outstanding" (Name Witheld 4, 2019). No rambling hills and hammocks here.

One student proposed a mundane office space for Louis Carrol's Mad Hatter, the student's research on madness supported his theory that his client would find order relaxing. Another student proposed a series of raft docks for rapper and producer Armando Christian

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Pérez -stage name Pitbull- to escape his polished and arguably false performer persona, and simultaneously call to his Cuban expatriate heritage. A third student proposed a strict box for the Cat in the Hat to destroy – such destruction as the character's ultimate respite.

Figure 4. Student-Generated client profiles (Liscano, Nicolas, Palamuthi And Sanchez, 2018)

The project and client considered in depth here is Benjamin Franklin. Through images from the students' final presentation, the six points of the Instructional Humor Processing Theory are tracked.

First, humorous message. The humorous message in the instruction was that anybody can be a client – alive, historical, real, fictional, human, non-human. A wide cast of character resulted; the author encouraged this range and experimentation to show students how serious design production can follow unusual ideas; the two are not mutually exclusive. Students embraced this whole-heartedly. In choosing Benjamin Franklin, the project here investigated not the scholar-diplomat we know but instead a jovial swimming colonial.
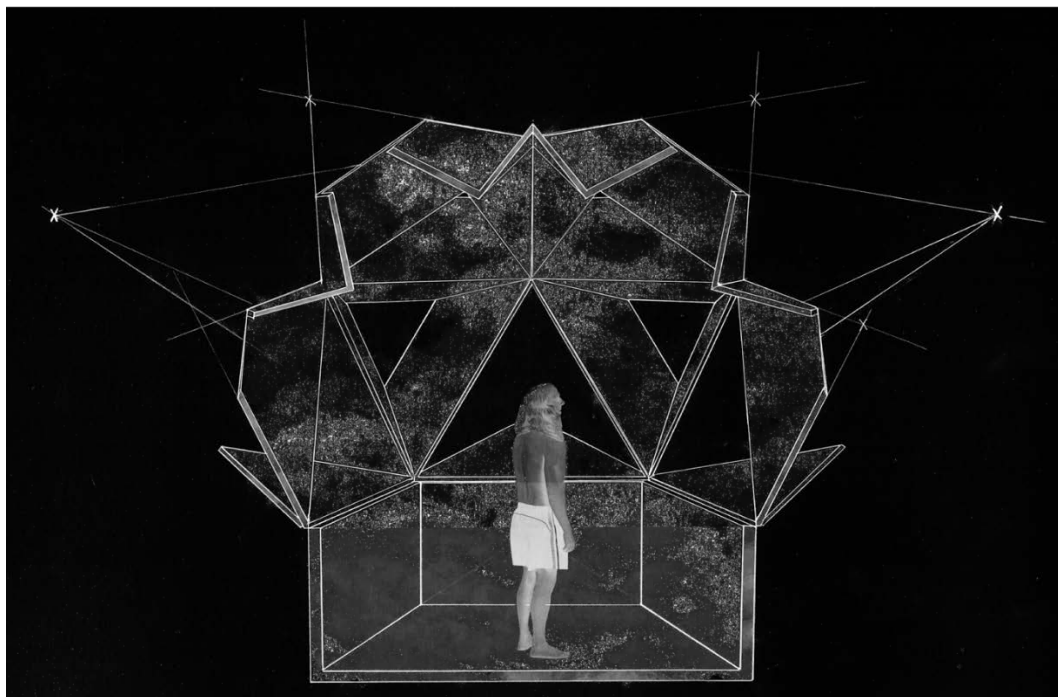
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Figure 5. Benjamin Franklin, swimmer. multi-perspective (Sanchez, 2018a)

Second, incongruity recognized. The student's project statement reads in part,

Humanizing a historical figure, this project exaggerates the little-known hobby of Benjamin Franklin: swimming. Since Benjamin Franklin spent most of his time helping found a country, being a diplomat, author, musician, printer, and more; he couldn't focus on his passion. Not a lot of people know that at the age of 11 this passion led him to inventing a pair of swim fins made out of wood and that he usually swam a distance of 3.5 miles a day. Therefore, my goal for this project is to design a space where he will reconnect with his lost passion (Sanchez, 2018b).

The student was researching Franklin for her history class and discovered, rather tangentially, that his true passion was swimming, something he had less and less time for as he grew in accomplishments. But, when contemplating relaxation, the student pushed and pulled at the notion of a mere swimming hole. She thus identified an incongruity in the project definition of relaxation.
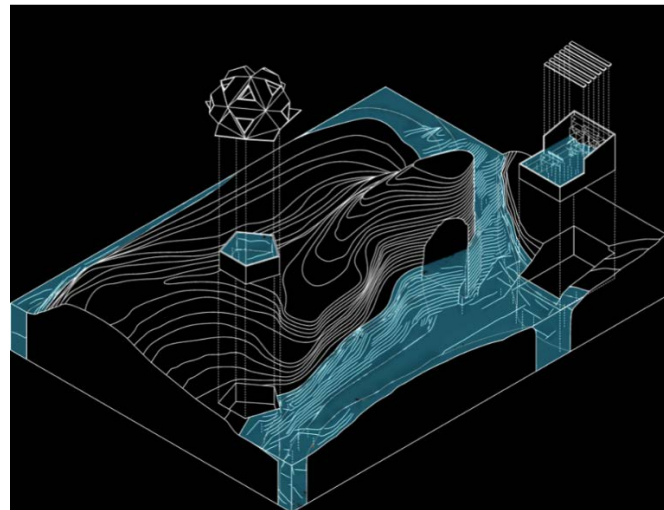

Figure 6. Benjamin Franklin, swimmer - site axonometric (Sanchez, 2018c)

Third, incongruity resolved. The student resolved this incongruity by redefining relaxation in her client's terms. A constant 'doer' - an inventor and philosopher - Benjamin Franklin's relaxation space would be a working space, an effective laboratory for swimming. The student manipulated the landscape to develop three diving platforms with exacting requirements.
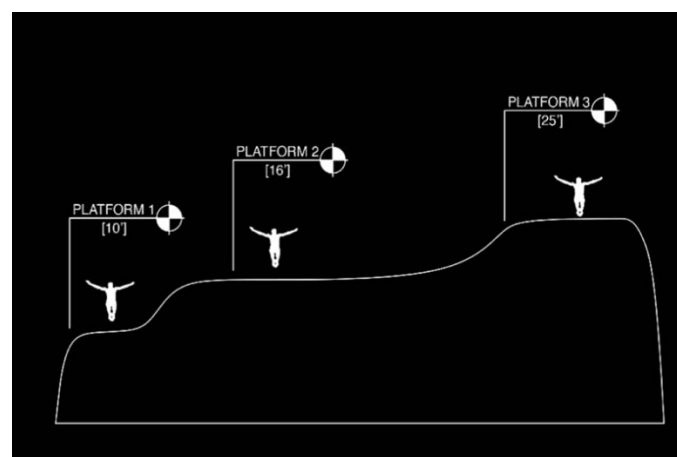

Figure 7. Benjamin Franklin, swimmer - platform analysis (Sanchez, 2018d)

She further introduced enclosed specialized pool destinations –a swim-up library and a scientific salt bath- reachable by swimming only. Finally, the circulation through these destinations equalled 3.5 miles, Franklin's daily goal. The quality of this first-year, first-semester work skyrocketed with the students' growing intrigue in her self-directed narrative.

Finally, positive affect. The agency of choice set students up well to resolve the 'Disposition' aspect of Instructional Humor Processing Theory. With the author's support, this student added levity to her drawings, for example Benjamin Franklin in swimming trunks in her perspectives. This lightness was still fully appropriate for her learning. Here, she learned to make design decisions. While given a list of normative deliverables, significant questions, such as what models to build, what sections to cut, answered themselves. This student's models here were fully self-directed – she built the swim up library and scientific salt bath in section and added a resin to emphasize the prominence of water.
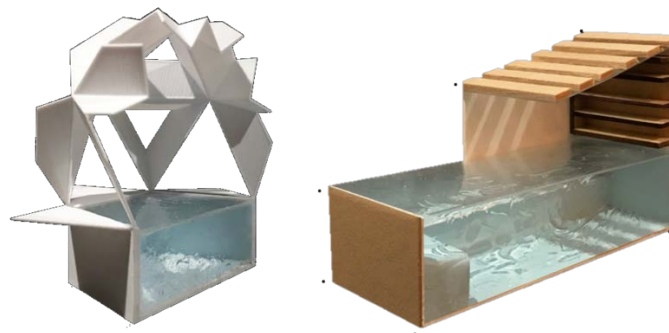

Figure 8. Benjamin Franklin, swimmer. models - library pool and science pool (Sanchez, 2018e)

The theoretical framework – Institutional Humor Processing Theory – supports these observational experiments in the architecture studio. Levity *can be* productive. Drawing exercises and project narratives are just two approaches that create incongruities - the groundwork for instructional levity established by the Incongruity-Resolution Theory. These incongruities were recognized and resolved; students were receptive, as predicted by disposition theory.   And, finally, elaboration, or learning, occurred per the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion.

There was a lightness through it all.   Again, student feedback supported this success: One student remarked, "Technical skills and presentation skills are always learnable and improvable. But the way we think is hard to change unless we are taught that way from the beginning, and [these projects] somehow managed to make a change in my stubborn mindset. [They] changed the way I think, the way I perceive, and the way I design and it is something I will carry with me forever" (Name Witheld 10, 2019). Another said of this approach: "Including a narrative in my work gave me ownership and created a level of meaning, it presented me with the opportunity to connect and engage with the user. Having a story helped me resolve problems I encountered" (Name Witheld 11, 2019).

4.2. Postscript, Self-Directed Lightness

Beyond the professor's direction, students were observed adopting strategies for levity in their work independently.   This has produced unexpected results, an extension of

architectural mediums in whole ways. Such extension became obvious in the project voted by her peers as the strongest in the first year. Another narrative approach, the student's client was Theodor Geisel's political figure, i.e., Dr. Seuss' Cat in the Hat. The resulting design work – centered around a rhyming children's storybook character – was sophisticated beyond its years. A perfect example of fully self-directed and rigorous lightness: the student decided to present before her final jury *in rhyme*. This was a design choice about the medium by which to verbally communicate the project – a decision by the student driven by the incongruity set up by the prompt. This paper began with a poem by Neruda, and so it ends with a rhyme by a student:

The deformation of pure land and volume symbolizes revolt against authority, the hallmark of The Cat in The Hat, a character of Dr. Seuss.

Rather than take a break from his crazy antics, He relaxes by letting his imagination run loose.

However, "when it is too wet to play, and the sun does not shine"

The Cat in The Hat must head inside.

A boring old cube? It looks too clean,

this is no fun sight to be seen!

He will jump and he will crawl,

and he will bounce off the wall,

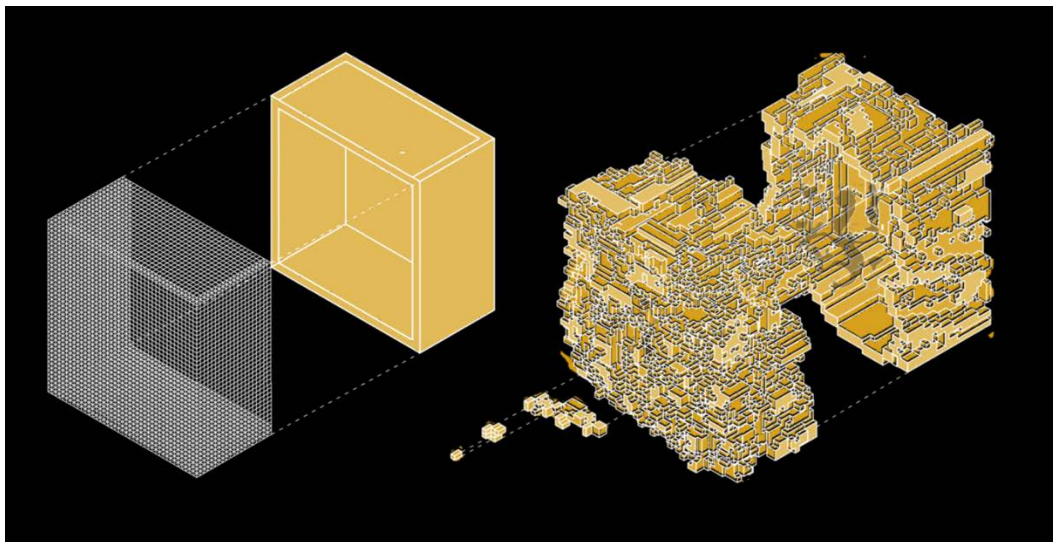and turn these blocks into a volume that isn't ordinary at all!! (Palamuthi, 2018a).

Figure 9. The cat in the hat - axonometric transformation (Palamuthi, 2018b)

5. Conclusion

The experiments discussed here suggest that lightness enhances learning in the architecture studio. Such enhancement of learning is the goal set forth by the IHPT, borrowed from Communications scholars. While this paper's methodology is observational as opposed to empirical, its observations are consistent: With lightness, students may engage more fully and eventually self-direct their own work. Such self-direction is the most

significant evidence of the enhancement of learning, leading to elevated output and increasingly sophisticated design thinking.

Lightness in studio instruction can take many forms. Poetry, music and narrative are just three examples. Instructors are here called to identify what brings lightness to their own architectural work and perhaps re-form that as an instructional tool in studio.

Declaration of no Competing Interest
The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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Biography

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Neena Verma is a practicing architect, teacher and theorist based in New York City. Her research and writing focus on the intersection of practice and society. She aims to challenge the norms of perception and beauty. A former attorney, her background adds a criticality to her architectural analyses. Neena's writing has appeared broadly, most recently in Architectural Research Quarterly; she is currently writing a book about immigrants finding place. Her collaborative work has been presented before the Venice Biennale and Buenos Aires Biennale. Her first built work was completed as an architecture graduate student with Tulane's UrbanBuild program. A recipient of the John William Lawrence Travel Fellowship, she has studied slum architecture in India. Neena was an invited participant to the American Institute of Architects Emerging Professionals Summit and the Practice Symposium at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Neena holds degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, The Wharton School, Rutgers Law School and Tulane School of Architecture. She has worked in the architecture offices of Kieran Timberlake, Peter Marino, and Studio Mapos. She is currently Adjunct Faculty at NJIT Hillier College of Architecture and Design and The School of Constructed Environments at Parsons The New School, a Writing Associate and Fellow at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science, and principal of an eponymous practice that pursues small-scale, forward-thinking, ground-up architectural works. Her architecture office is a certified Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise in New York City.