Approach

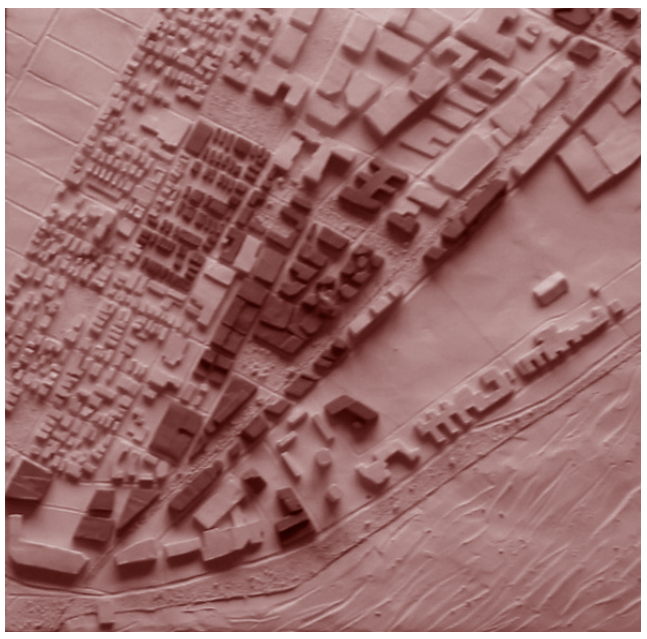
Setting the stage

The urban setting for major research universities is likely to be contested territory. In these settings there is likely to be overlapping and competing expectations as to the future use, form and management of the 'edge' between the setting and the university. Many of these expectations are long-standing and some are new concerns stimulated by the recent growth and change of one or another of the activities in the area. Fresh expectations also accompany new political and administrative leadership and can also arise as a product of study and reflection.

For many years, Cambridge, MA, host to two major research universities, has been the scene of debates about how best to meet the competing expectations of the different stakeholders in its future. The two most recent fall Urban Design Studios have examined these expectations and the issues that need to be resolved by the stakeholders at a larger scale. In 2001 we looked at the possible patterns for growth and change in Cambridge, UK, as triggered by the plans of Cambridge University. And in 2002 we looked at these same issues along the length of the MIT 'frontier' in Cambridge, MA as they related to the development of MIT and the biotech research industry.

The MIT Urban Design Studio, Fall 2003, has focused on urban design proposals for the Cambridgeport/MIT edge, an area roughly centered on Fort Washington Park. Without a specific "sponsor," this studio, instead, sought to respect shared expectations and reconcile competing demands of the various stakeholders in the area. The goal of the studio has been to discover ways in which good urban form, apt mixing of activities, and effective institutional arrangements might all be brought together, perhaps in unexpected and adroit ways, to build a neighborhood that is a delight to all. Learning to explore and discover these ways has been the pedagogic goal for the studio. The public goal for the studio has been to share these discoveries with the key stakeholders with interests in the neighborhood to stimulate and inform debate about its future.

Five students made up the studio class: three are in the graduate professional degree program in architecture: Emily Greeves, Daniel Malinow, and Eric Orozco. Two are in the corresponding program in city planning: Raymond Hodges and Todd Kohr. Teaching Assistants Anthony Guaraldo and Robert Morgan supported the class' efforts and background material to create a starting point for the studio was studied and assembled by two recent graduates, Greg Morrow (SMArchS/MCP) and Jeff Roberts, (BS/MCP). This publication describes the students' ideas and proposals and begins with a brief account of the conduct of the studio and the working methods adopted—and in some cases invented—by the class.



1 **"Double Readings,"** the first pair of tasks, examined institutional goals and built form in a two-fold, reciprocal manner. Each student read and summarized major policy or planning documents of MIT (such as "Report of the Presidential Task Force on Student Life & Learning," *MIT Planning 1960-2000)* with the aim of identifying stakeholders and characteristics they'd consider important for future MIT growth. At the same time, students visited and analyzed each of six Boston-area college campuses, describing the characteristics of recent built form and venturing and/or inferring the policy and program intentions such form may have been designed to achieve. Relations between intention (or even institutional mission as an evolving policy) and form or use pattern, as honored in new development and institutional mechanisms, became revealed in study and were, in turn, related to a distillation of the current goals and directions for the future of MIT.

2 **Plasticine Model.** The second task called for individual brainstorming about the future three-dimensional form of the study area using the medium of plasticine at the (ratio) scale of 1:800. Based on preliminary study of the MIT project area, each student devised a strategy for its future development. The assignment carried specific charges: indicating how the various stakeholder concerns will be addressed (or not), indicating specific built form characteristics: advancing an idea. The proposals drew largely from intuitions about how the site should be developed, and they were greatly influenced by urban morphologies already existing in the area.

Sequence, Tasks and Studies

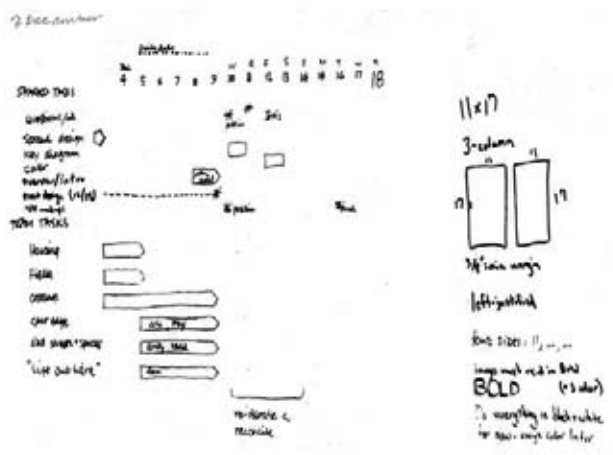
The studio began with benefit of a variety of prior reports and studies documenting and interpreting the many dimensions of the area, of which the authors of several contributed to the studio personally. To address a set of complex problems lacking easy or obvious solutions, the studio began with an initial series of study exercises.

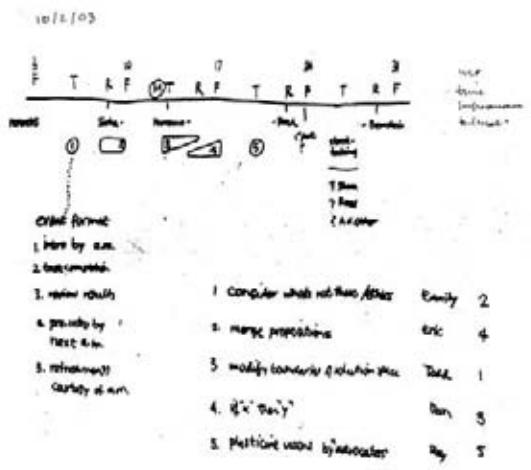
Reflections

Several distinguishing characteristics made this studio especially enjoyable and rewarding.

Timeliness. Numerous factors gave the studio a sense of propitious timing. City council elections in Cambridge in November reinforced the importance of public discourse about the future of the City. MIT, consolidating at the end of a period of development and transition, now faces renewed change, including a new president. Similarly, the cyclical transition of the economy suggests that this is a time to put forward ideas.

Home Base. Focus on the area of everyday life allows us to see it in new ways. Site visits were easy, daily events, that over time yielded good insights from sequential observation of small things. Airing the plural interests of the stakeholders in the area—those that can speak for themselves, and do, along with mute interests of the physical environment itself—engendered a sense of respect for diverse viewpoints and spurred interest in discovering means to resolve conflicts among them.





The rotation method*

The October 28th review marked the recognition of the studio in what came to be known as "rotation." In certain sessions in the seminar on approach management, drawings and chairs were literally rotated around the white table, allowing several students to work on any drawing and authorship of drawings (and ideas) to become blurred. The "tell 'em" technique for organizing these sessions was also a rotation of sorts, a turning of the mind—planning, performing, appraising.

The rotation method was invoked later, including obvious application in reiterative and dialectic processes. Often collective in character, the notion of rotation encouraged engagement with others or suspension of disbelief about a process underway. The students took it on as a group working method, a referent in planned coordination of "passing off" work, including drafts of the broadsheet. Working altogether "on the same page" in true partnership (rather than in the hierarchy of the office or the territory of the conventional design studio) this socializing aspect might be characterized as "extensive rotations." At many times, however, individuals confronted the need to patiently turn the facts in some complex problem in what might arguably be called "intensive rotation."

**Soren Kierkegaard formulated "The Rotation Method" in an essay by the same title included in the book Either/Or, published in Denmark in 1944 and first translated to English in 1959. The complex principles of his modern/ironic philosophy both do and do not relate to the work of the studio.*

3 Seminar on Approach Management. Putting aside a planned task involving detailed development of proposals, the studio invented and began a process characterized later as "learn here." Over a two week period each student in the studio conceived an approach or working method that would help the class arrive ideas and remedies for the issues to be resolved in the edge neighborhood. That student then managed one meeting of the studio using members of the class to implement the suggested approach. The process for each student involved three presentation/discussions over (minimum) three days: first, explaining how the approach process would be carried out, answering questions, and taking suggestions; second, managing the approach process; third, summarizing or drawing conclusions from the experience (paraphrased in writing *how-to* as "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em; tell 'em; tell 'em what you told 'em.") The rigor of this technique in organized activity, though perhaps obvious, had significant effect on the care and quality of exchange and the productivity of the work sessions, which did not depend on the intuitive model predominant in many design activities. None of the approaches were "completed," which seemed aggravating at the time; however, the benefit of the seminar was in exerting cognitive development across the full spectrum, rather than in coming to an end. The result was a rich familiarity on all of our parts with the issues and a bundle of ideas which then needed to be marshaled, prioritized, and developed further. Another important result of this task was a deepening of understanding of and respect for each other's stance and skills.

4 Rotation Method Applied. The fourth task became an iterative investigation of selected concepts, solutions and proposals for key aspects of the future of the edge neighborhood. The selection of aspects, their assignment to an individual or pair in the group, the timetable for each round or "rotation" of consideration to another student team, and the progressive evaluation of the ideas—all became a class-wide responsibility debated at the large studio table, captured on the "printing white-board", and shared at the end of each meeting, In effect the task became an exercise in "autonomous pedagogy" driven by the imagination, energy, debates, and expectations of the class as a whole and guided only lightly by the faculty.

5 Endgame. By late November the class reached agreement as to the intended scope and broad content of the studio's proposals for the edge neighborhood, and the timetable and responsibilities for a final two rounds or rotations on each aspect was established. The class also agreed to present their proposals in an economical 'broadsheet' form so as to allow the widest possible circulation and consideration of their ideas and to stage the formal presentation and review of their work as a seminar with guests responding to issues and questions raised by the class.

The Final Review. Structured as an academic conference, the intention of the review is to address complex problems with precision. The final review is not final, it is one more turn of events in the rotation of the studio. Through this discussion, we hope to continue gaining momentum and power for further investigation of the issues that we've investigated throughout the studio.

Students. in the studio, a good little group, came with a willingness to listen to and understand each other. They brought clear thinking, good work, creativity, cooperation, and studio snacks. Much of the inventive pedagogy of the semester depended on a very high level of coherency in speech acts, speaking and listening in true dialogue—without interruption, with attentive suspension of one's own position, with an ear to learn. In this sense the studio modeled the behavior required for good planning.

Crossings. The Urban Design Studio exists to support interaction across departments of design. Students (and faculty) discovered in the immediately adjacent design subspecialty areas stimulating and surprising new territory. Going back to their own base of personal expertise, they take new tools, new ways of thinking and making and communicating

Process. To say the least, the studio invented a process that was not routine. In a pedagogical model of "guided autonomy," the studio proceeded in ways that could not have been predicted in advance. Using whiteboard printouts to diagram ideas and decisions, we typically did not know where the studio was going until we wrote it down.