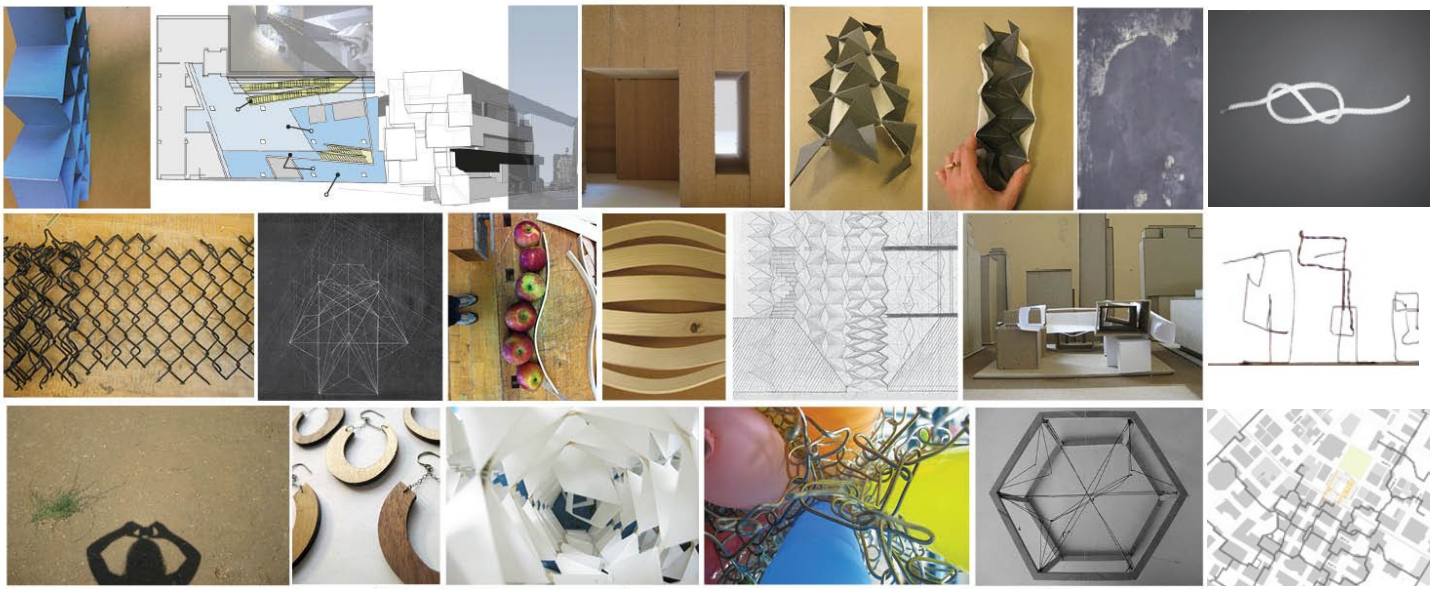
Allison J. Johnson - Teaching Philosophy: Informative Happenings Through Learning

As a maker of things, teacher, and designer, I seek to learn through exploration. Part of this has been with me since I was young and much has been absorbed through my time in academia. The teachers whom I have encountered and learned to trust have been the most significant instruments to my personal and academic growth and intellectual thinking. They have taught me how to follow my creative processes, how to question and critique my work, and how to find beauty in everything and everyone around us. These individuals who were once strangers turned to be guiding voices and the rock I turn to when searching for clarity. Throughout the 8 years I have been studying at universities and colleges, these individuals have taught me how to understand my design process, how to construct with conceptual clarity, and how to think architecturally. In all sincerity, these teachers would not have left the imprint they have without establishing a sense of comfort and trust between themselves and their students. I find the relationships that develop between the learner and teacher - or learner and the learner - a valuable component of academia. If an instructor and student have a sense of comfort and trust residing between them, the stage has been set for a precious opportunity to fully engage in learning from deep inside one's mind and self. The student recognizes an academic environment not as a place to 'be taught' but a place to learn and grow meanwhile building relationships, building intelligence, building trust in others and confidence in themselves.

Being a designer of spaces, places, things, and systems, my teaching focus takes on a holistic approach to design. The responsibilities of teaching are more complex than simply facilitating learning; rather, a guiding voice and a questioning mind, opening students' to new ways of thinking. In architectural design, a powerful informative way of thinking is through making. This notion is the foundation of the teaching methods I embrace. Architectural design encompasses ideas and elements from the scale of a city to the size of a spoon with endless variables and influences. Architectural education touches on culture, society, people, places, scale, texture, building traditions, buildings systems... the list goes on. Within this complex world of architecture are phenomenons that are the genesis of design thinking.

My interest and expertise lies in introducing students to design thinking, exploration through making, and most importantly thinking through making. In a world of books and digital media we sometimes look past the importance of building with our hands; a kinetic methods of idea exploration; kinetic research. The act of 'making' is not only a catalyst to idea creation and development, but the most informative process one can generate on their very own. For example, in my past undergraduate sophomore studio course, an everyday occurrence such as tying a knot can be translated into an entirely new element when explored with a new material. We can create the same bowline knot with wire, bending it around, under, through... considering length, angle... letting the process of bending wire inform the outcome: a three-dimensional rigid knot. This can be reworked into paper models that form a boundary - that create an enclosed space - or perhaps a hand drawing a planar representation of heights, depths, scale, and thickness. The common 'knot' was the genesis for an entirely new entity. Thinking through making has led to a new invention - an invention that has led us to endless design opportunities. Something we have not thought out or planned prior to creating.



A past research project I conducted on masonry vaults and gothic building traditions in XVI century Mexico revealed interesting construction methods of churches and convents of the gothic tradition. These magnificent architectural works were not 'designed' as we do today . In fact, construction would begin with laying out a geometrical configuration on the ground (representing what later would be the vault) and then projected up toward the sky. From there, the walls were built, each stone was individually cut in a particular way; the masons designed the structure as they built it. Through a dynamic process of adapting to the structure throughout its genesis and formation, by thinking through making, working with building, these vaults were created. This realization had left a lasting imprint on the way I think, work, and design.

This extraordinary notion of learning through making is a non-linear function of time that yields amazing results within minutes, hours, days, months, or years. It allows for surprises, challenges, questions and answers. A quick study-model created from rips, tears, and a couple dabs of hot glue can be as informative - if not more - than a detailed model of a building section. I embrace teaching methods of quick exercises, rapid model making, group discussions, and one-on-one sessions. I let my students' projects manifest through iterations and constructing ideas in physical media of various types at a pace comfortable to them. Although it is strongly enforced that checkpoints are met, it is important to recognize the ebb and flow of students' individual design methods.

Foremost, I teach through making and express the significance of the design process - the power of doing, documenting, reflecting, reviewing, and reconsidering. Design is a cyclical process that follows these trends through processes that enrich the end product. Discussions between the student and instructor provide an opportunity for even exchange of ideas and questions between the two individuals and the student's work. To engage in conversation not only helps the student build an architectural vocabulary regarding their projects, but it helps them see the project from two pairs of eyes. From an evaluative stance, this helps me understand how my students think and understand their project and establishes a base to evaluate academic growth throughout the course duration. The comfort of sharing one's ideas through verbal exchange of ideas establishes a sense of trust and understanding between the student and teacher resulting in an environment that will inform the students that their work and ideas are valued.

Each teaching opportunity provides a set of goals for the student and teacher to achieve together. Students will grow confident in their design exploration and not hesitate to push boundaries or test new methods. In addition, students will grow aware of their own thought and exploration processes in order to have the capacity to structure and carry out similar projects in the future. Finally, students will have the ability to understand and express their projects in an effective and unique architectural language that can be shared with individuals form a variety of disciplines.

Throughout my academic experience I encountered a revolving question: 'how do I know I am learning?' Measuring learning in design education is an unanswerable task, however I have drawn my own conclusions and two in particular have guided me in my studies. First, learning is evident when one can further establish an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. Second, progress is shown when an individual can clearly communicate a coherent concept with intention, process, and outcome. Communication is a valuable component to understanding the what, the how and the why about students' work. My students' effectiveness is measured through evaluating their design process and narrative techniques. In a design studio or elective course it is essential for the student to form a clear argument about their work and to have the capability of communicating through drawing, models, digital representations, etc. Both the student and instructor can evaluate one's work by analyzing the process of their project - the intellectual path manifest through making - into an architectural composition. Evaluating communication, however, is best revealed through presenting to a group of people. Can the viewer gather the essence of a project through its representation? Does the student's work show clarity, meaning, and can they express this through a variety of methods or media?

In the end, I wish for my students to be able to answer questions through their own design processes and to pose new ones. I want them to learn to have confidence in themselves and their work and to be able to communicate their intentions and desires. Instead of focusing on the what , I hope they are compelled to explore the how around which their work revolves. This how can be manifest through building, making, deconstructing, writing or analyzing... however the student aspires. Teaching is the most rewarding path I have taken in life. To be a guiding voice, a challenger, a mentor, one who nurtures the desire within a student to learn create and grow is the most rewarding and amazing experience life can offer.

The Rhode Island School of Design
Department of Architecture
Spring 2012

Illustrating the Designed Environment: Devising a Language for Unspoken Conceptions
ARCH 3350
Instructor: Allison Johnson

Architecture Elective for majors and non-majors
Studio/lecture
3 credits
Seats Available: 15

Prerequisites : na
Class Schedule: Friday 9am - 12pm
Location: BEB 210
Lab Free: na

Overview

Architecture qui parle? If architectural works could speak, what would their story be? How can our designs be enriched with the power of unspoken language and through which methods can this language be evident in its mere existence. This course will teach students how to recognize, employ, and describe an architectural language and to further carry out architectural works meanwhile embracing artful interpretation with words, text, and imagery.

Students will attend a series of lectures both in class and out of class and will examine methods of communicating our built environment. The primary objective of this course is for students to learn about creating a narrative that reveals the seen or the unseen in a building. We will bridge areas of studies (photography, writing, journalism, drawing, building, etc.) and explore a breadth of written and illustrative design documents to learn how to infer, communicate, and narrate our designed environment.

In the later half of the semester, this course will focus on each individual's role as 'author' in written communication in comparison with the role of audience as interpreters. What life does your writing take on and for whom are you writing for? Students will learn to critique, discuss, and communicate design with their own voice - an animated voice that will be shared through various forms to a variety of people. What do we infer from the physical world we encounter and how does one individually illustrate this in the written context? The skills acquired throughout this course can be used in illustrating the designed environment from numerous disciplines and conceptions.

The Rhode Island School of Design
Department of Architecture
Fall 2013

Shaping Apertures From Space to Place : An Investigation Through Material and Technique
ARCH 4351
Instructor: Allison Johnson

Architecture Studio - Architecture Majors only
Studio/lecture
6 credits
Seats Available: 10

Prerequisites : na
Class Schedule: Monday, Thursday 9:00am - 2:00pm
Location: BEB 315
Lab Free: na

Overview

How do we overcome the challenges of synthesizing space-making with place-making? What enriches the places we inhabit and why are we moved by certain places we encounter rather than others? This course will investigate how we distinguish space and place, and furthermore how to generate desirable environments through interpretation and design thinking. To achieve a rich myriad of media and strategies throughout this exploration of spatial situations, students will be encouraged and expected to employ various materials and methods throughout their design exploration. Some of these will be demonstrated within class periods and others will be conjured during individual investigation.

Students will begin the semester through sketch exercises in a given site near home or school leading to an artful collection of photographs depicting a narrative through their site. Lectures during class will inform students how to question and examine these sites in a comprehensive manner. This interpretation will lead to a 3-dimensional iteration of multiple 'spaces' in tandem. After a series of drawing explorations a 'path' will be defined and soon turned into a 'place' which will have a genius loci (which in classical Roman religion was the protective spirit of a place) with spatially captivating qualities and an special 'inner being.'

This course will teach students to communicate ideas and concepts in three-dimensions through means of sketching, photography, architectural modeling, and through written narrative. Students will learn how to recognize and create extraordinary qualities of place-making while designing the places we inhabit. Emphasis will be put on each individual's ability to devise and describe their ideas and methods of design thinking and exploration. They will learn to explore this notion through a variety of forms of 'making' meanwhile using techniques found in a variety of academic and professional concentrations.

The Rhode Island School of Design
Department of Architecture
Spring 2014

Re/Interpreting Ground: Generating Meaning Through Unbounded Ground Conditions
ARCH 5323
Instructor: Allison Johnson

Architecture Elective for majors and non-majors
Studio/lecture
3 credits
Seats Available: 15

Prerequisites : na
Class Schedule: Tuesday 9am - 12pm
Location: BEB 210
Lab Free: na

Course Description / Goals

How has the ground been occupied over time? Since ancient civilizations and until today, this element/figure has been the base of existence and the foundation from which most everything has been built. In what ways has this word been used as earth, terrain, floor, noun or verb, orientation or disorienting...? Ground is everywhere and it interacts with everything; its meaning can be still transformed as it has repeatedly throughout history.

This course takes on an approach of reinterpreting and understanding elements of 'ground' and generating a new language or persona with which one can create new places, environments, and worlds. This course will lead to the unfolding of ideas and philosophies of the individual students. We will achieve this essentially through examining, discussing, and abstracting ground conditions around us and creating our own work of ground.

In the built environment we encounter notions of a (meta)physical element such as architectural works that are built into or onto to the ground as a result of physics, tradition, or specific need - for example. These instances reveal a particular notion or understanding of 'building'. What if terra firma were re-examined? In what ways can ground be manifest through form?

The aim for 'Interpreting Ground' is for students to critically explore moments where buildings reach the ground to then form an opinion and create their own interpretation of the material, form, function, and scale of this extraordinary element. This course will embrace both theoretical and design methods throughout its duration. Students will have the choice to direct their exploration toward one method over the other, but both cognitive and design thinking/making will be explored during the term.

Students will respond to the course goals through short generative projects using methods of photography, model-making, drawing, etc in allowing them to take on a provocative approach to redefining the ground our world has been created among. A final project of any size, medium, or format will reveal each student's exploration and reflect their understanding of 're-thinking the ground.' Although this course in an architectural elective, the format will not be held strictly to typical architectural presentation - allowing for techniques that create open communication between the student and their audience.

Aims

Throughout this course students will grow in their ability to:

- re/consider the conventions our world has established
- understand of the relationship between our surroundings and ourselves
- reflect on modes of representing and interpreting an element
- construct/deconstruct a representation of an element
- explore various representation methods specific to an idea, thought, theory, or scheme.

Outcomes

Students will have achieved and/or grown in their ability to:

Speak clearly about your project process and content.

Convey ideas through various media

Work through multiple methods of design thinking

Identify your preferred methods (drawing, making, writing, creating, etc.) of working through problems

Work rigorously and productively

Allow the process of your design research inform the end result.

Attendance:
Students are expected to attend each class. Attendance may be taken on occasion. Each class period contains pertinent information for all projects and the final project and lectures will not be available after the class period.

Grading:
Students will be graded on their work (process and product) over the duration of the semester as shown:

Attendance -	10 pts
Project I -	15 pts
Project 2 -	15 pts
Project 3 -	15 pts
Project 4 -	15 pts
Final Project -	30 pts

Grading:	A 90-100 pts
	B 80-90 pts
	C 70-80 pts
	D 60-70 pts
	F below 60 pts

Schedule

Week 1
Lecture: Intro to Re:thinking Ground

Week 2
Problem 1 : A Narrative Path
In your given site analyze the attitude toward the ground. How is the ground occupied, ignored, oriented, worn. Write a collection of words that describe the ground. Establish your idea of the ground and depict your narrative of ground in a series of photographs and words put together into a photomontage. Use any medium graphic elements, linework, color, type (typeface, type orientation, spacing, etc), in conjunction with photographs to narrate your ground exploration.

Week 3
Review Problem 1 :
You have now created a mapping of your site. Think of how we read maps. How do we navigate and locate our surroundings and ourselves? How do we scale them? In 30 minutes, discuss your map with a fellow classmate and sketch a diagram of how you interpret his or her map. Following this diagram exercise, pin up in groups of 6 both the map and the student's response diagram.

Lecture A : Introduction to FWR (Floor - Wall - Roof series)
Lecture B : Floor
Floor - A lecture that examines the architectural language of floors. It will cover these key concepts:

1. floor vs ground
2. steps
3. slopes
4. scale
5. material
6. orientation

Problem 2: Floor as ground
How do we understand ground conditions compared to floor conditions? What are the differences between ground and floor? You may contend they are one in the same, or they are different elements... Analyze where you stand on this issue. For this Problem you will create a series of hand-drawn sketches depicting five different 'floor as ground' conditions in your surrounding environment. From these five sketches create a further iteration in model form using materials of your choice. Your models should reveal spatial conditions found in your sketches.

Week 4
Review Problem 2:
Each student shall place their five models in a row along a row of tables with their sketches pinned up above them both in an ambiguous order. With another student, you shall decide which models pair with each sketch. Students will have a discussion on the floor as ground conditions represented in their projects.

Things to consider:
Take note of your partners use of material, scale, proportion, orientation, openings, solids, voids, surface orientation, thicknesses...

Lecture : Wall

Walls are an indication that a floor has met a vertical element. An element of division, a barrier, an opening, a beginning, an end. We will cover these key concepts:

1. wall vs floor
2. wall height
3. wall thickness
4. wall shape
5. opacity

Problem 3 : Floor & Wall

An exploration through model-making.
Create a spatial condition - a territory - where the ground mingles with floor & wall. How is the ground 'grounded' and how can it be modified to create vertical and horizontal boundaries, voids, solids, etc. Explore through any medium of your choice the ideas of floor and wall together. It is not required you build at a specific scale, however keep in mind a sequence of movement through your territory.

Week 5
- Review of Problem 3
Students will display their projects in one room and the class will have a discussion on a small selection of projects chosen by the critics.

Week 6
Spring Break - no class

Week 7
Lecture : Roof
In conjunction with floor and wall, the roof creates an overhead enclosure. This element can delineate edge conditions, levels of enclosure and exposure, and interact directly with what is occurring below.

1. roof vs wall
2. roof vs floor
3. roof porosity
4. edge conditions
5. roof as ground

Problem 4: Floor, Wall, Roof
This assignment is about creating a diagram that communicates idea of floor - wall - roof and considering each element's relationship to the ground. This will be achieved in three exercises:
1) create a hand-made model that brings together all concepts we have learned thus far - think about the roles of floors, walls, and roofs in this model.
2) draw a perspective view from within your model.
3) another model using one uniform material (ex: one homogenous element that is worked into a spatial configuration) that depicts your perspective drawing in terms of *ground*. Think of each exercise as being 're-born' where your ideas take on a new life.
Let these works be the genesis of ground movement.

Week 8 -
Review of Problem 4: Formal Storyboard / Pin-Up with guest critics.

**Mid-Semester Feedback Form*

Week 9
Lecture: The ground as room
One may contend a sense of place is elicited by a feeling of being within or among something/somewhere. Our world is formed by spaces and places that have boundaries, edges, names, and identities.

Introduction of Final Project: New Ground
The final project will be to create a *groundscape* that identifies as a place. This can be made up entirely based on a beginning ground condition of your choice - one you have encountered in life, dreams, or through narrative. Students will utilize the properties of each architectural element (floor, wall, & roof) to create a hybrid ground that forms a new spatial experience. Their final project exhibit must occupy a space (on a wall, on the floor, within something) of at least 4 feet in one dimension.

Week 10
Student pin-up: Final project thesis/idea & approach

Discussion among the class will follow

Lecture: Ground as narrative - story-telling
Architecture as narrative is a powerful concept that can be embraced through visual representation. What kind of story does a building, landscape, object, or place tell? This lecture will visit the art of language and narrative in story-telling. Fantasy novels, stories of adventure, and fables are wonderful examples of places found in our imaginations and will be discussed in terms of created places from narrative.

Week 11
Desk Critique with Instructor

Week 12
Lecture: The world as ground

Desk Critique with Instructor

Week 13
Mock-presentation in groups

Week 14
Final Review

- - -

*Suggested Reading, Reference, Intriguing things will be shared via email on a weekly basis

Final Evaluation:
Written student evaluations will accompany students' final letter grade. You will be graded based on the following achievements and work ethics throughout the course of the semester:

Clarity and content of your projects
Ability to convey ideas through various media
Individual growth throughout the semester
Rigor of work
Process of work
End results for each Project

Transformation

During the past three weeks you have learned about three primary architectural elements: Floor, Wall, Roof. This project explores ground conditions we encounter while thinking of *Ground as Floor.*

The intent of this project is for students to understand their perception of the physical elements we recognize as floor and how they relate to the surroundings. You will work through several levels of understanding and abstraction with a set of data you will gather on your own; further analysis will lead to a more evocative representation of the ground using various media, scales, orientations and material.

evocative (adj.) /iˈväkətiv/: bringing strong images, memories, or feelings to mind.

Objective

Students' work will begin to respond to conventions of the built environment as well as conditions of the natural environment and they will develop their own means of understanding, representing, and designing with these conditions. This project will show ways to look critically at the world around and to explore (through various forms of representation) alternative and new ways to design and create *ground*. Regarding design/exploration processes, students will learn to work with raw data to generate analyses, thoughts, questions, and outcomes related to the initial course goals.

Method

Begin exploring the city by foot. With a small sketchbook, create a series of sketches that focus on both *ground* and *floor*. Think and draw with a critical eye, and open imagination. Keep in mind the following questions:

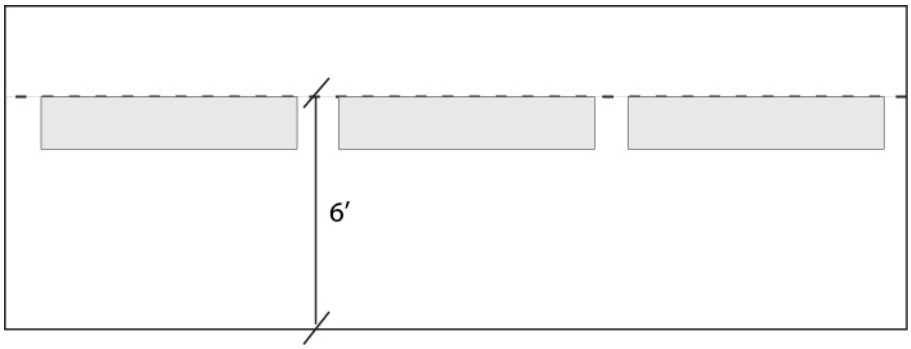
1. What shape does the ground take?
2. How does the ground change in both horizontal and vertical directions?
3. Where do specific ground conditions begin and end; where are the boundaries?
4. What is considered as both ground and floor - one, the other, or both?

Following this sketch activity, return to the visited areas with a camera. Begin capturing a series of images that follow a path through the city. One image will be in color, the other in black and white. Each photograph will contribute of a photo montage that reveals your understanding, criticism, and approach to Rethinking Ground.

*Consider your point of view. From where are you making your *ground/floor* analysis? Perhaps you could think of your path from either different or same points of view...

Continue your analysis by returning to the studio and printing your photographs (both a BW and color version). Create a photo montage with these images and think of them as raw material to work with. Be evocative; the photograph is no longer a photograph, but a vision of the spatial qualities of ground. Create a 11'x44' photo montage of the city ground as floor. Refer to the questions above when constructing this montage.

Your photo montage will be pinned up in the gallery space at the beginning of the next class on Thursday, March 24. All presentations will be placed as shown below.



Readings

Students will not have assigned readings for this project. The intent of this exercise is to leave behind what we the world around us know of as ground and to rethink its definition, purpose, utilization, shaping and transformation.

Assessment

This project will be assessed equally from the beginning to the end of each exercise. Students' ideas, processes, and outcomes are all considered as equally powerful. Individual assessment will be addressed at each desk review following a group review. Students will be able to ask for verbal feedback and evaluation on a weekly basis. The initial grading system in the syllabus will be used for the grading of this project. Recall, grading for this course does not depend on a project being good or bad, it is dependent on your method of exploration and the complexity and evocativeness of the outcomes you devise.

Successful projects will meet and exceed the requirements and notions written above. Remember, this project statement is a guide for your thoughts. Take this opportunity to let loose when analyzing and describing these ordinary conditions we encounter daily.

Re-think *ground*.

The Rhode Island School of Design
Department of Architecture
Spring 2014

Re/Interpreting Ground: Generating Meaning Through Unbounded Ground Conditions
ARCH 5323
Instructor: Allison Johnson

Mid-Semester Feedback Form

The intent of this feedback form is for the student to reflect upon their progress and obstacles in achieving course goals. Your instructor will adapt and adjust the syllabus for more effective learning.

Regarding the student

- What is your ideal learning environment?

- Describe your preferred learning style.

- How does this course respond to your learning preferences above?

Regarding the course structure

Please rate each exercise based on its effectiveness in achieving course goals (below):

	0	1	2	3
Problem 1 - Narrative Path				
Problem 2 - Floor				
Problem 3 - Floor, Wall				
Problem 4 - Floor, Wall, Roof				

Throughout this course students will grow in their ability to:

- re/consider the conventions our world has established
- understand of the relationship between our surroundings and ourselves
- reflect on modes of representing and interpreting an element
- construct/deconstruct a representation of an element
- explore various representation methods specific to an idea, thought, theory, or scheme.

- Evaluate the course organization regarding duration & arrangement of assignments, lectures, reviews:

- Does the lecture content relate to the course assignments in a helpful manner?
List a few things you have learned thus far (personal growth, specific course content, knowledge, awareness, criticism...)

1.

2.

3.

- Are there any outstanding skills or objectives you wish to attain from Re:Thinking Ground?

Regarding teaching methods

- How does your instructor assist in your learning goals?

- How do your peers assist in your learning goals?

Rate the instructor:

	0	1	2	3
Clearly articulates information in lecture				
Clearly articulates information in problem statements				
Offers constructive criticism				
Challenges students				
Knowledge of subject matter				
Organization				

- What are some areas of improvement in the instructor's teaching methods?

- If you were to teach this course, what would you do differently?

- Additional comments regarding student performance, course structure, teaching methods, etc.