

ASKESIS

Askesis, the Greek word that is the basis of the English “ascetic,” is the first and primary dimension of studio, thinking about studio projects, and inquiry in general. It involves a meditative and actual detachment, a difference that will be at first felt in social, schedule, and spatial terms — i.e. you go someplace relatively isolated to do work by yourself — and later form line that defines the originality that stamps your work.

Ascetics in the Biblical tradition go to the desert, where they resist temptations (St. Anthony), adopt a strenuous lifestyle (St. Simon), accomplish great spiritual tasks (St. Jerome), or simply expose themselves to danger and the elements with only limited support from others. This kind of dedicated rough life is essential in one form or other to any deep thought or spiritual enterprise. It is what separates the work of artists and architects from others who, in a day-to-day fashion, have jobs to do and do them. *Askesis* is about voluntarily accepting and even adding limitations to a task at hand. This is the reverse of resisting an assignment or complaining about work overloads. It is the acceptance of a “dangerous assignment” for an unknown outcome.

The factor of risk cannot be ignored, but *askesis* does not require damage or anguish. There should be a point to isolation and dedication; the isolation of *askesis* *itself* should be taken up thematically within the work. In its simplest form, *askesis* is simply self-discipline: working on something through inner motivation and self-directed challenges. It requires a distancing from the actual assignment, a removal from the implied “master-servant” relationship as a model for teaching and learning. While the teacher is still in charge, his/her role is that of a guide in the sense of the saying that “there is no one you can’t learn from.” Your learning in other words does not depend on the perceived quality or expertise of the teacher. It is your responsibility. In practice, however, your *askesis* will bring out the best in any teacher.

As discipline, *askesis* means that physical detachment and mental detachment are two sides of the same coin. The key is to use self-discipline to set up the terms of detachment — e.g. you must yourself set and keep the times you work in studio and not allow others too much influence in the matter. Working in studio is not something done in response to a demand or requirement; it must be something generated yourself. If this is not simply a mechanical standard, but something related to the project, you will be able to see how *askesis* has a self-sustaining quality. *Askesis* will become a real element in your thinking and production. Like the endorphins a runner produces at a certain level of exercise, *askesis* turns into a pleasure, despite the fact that it often begins with and continues with certain pains.

The point of this session is to connect *askesis* as a “practical studio practice” to the themes that have enriched architectural thinking from ancient times to present. *Askesis* is not just about self-discipline; it is the element of order that works from inside the project to discover the project’s autonomous life — something that keeps the project going above and beyond your attempts to guide it in one way or another.

1. **“Starting with a clean slate.”** Every project is an opportunity to start over, to re-think one’s relationship to architecture, adopt new positions to try out. Like a new sheet of paper, the four edges define an inside, entry to which is conditional. Anything on the sheet is now a part of the drawing, a record of the progress of thinking.
 - a. **Isolation = thought.** The “inner speech” that is used to describe thinking (not quite accurately); this model raises questions (to whom is the speech addressed? where does it come from?); what value does uniqueness or difference have — or is it simply an illusion?
 - b. **Places of isolation:** monasteries, cloisters, retreats, ashrams — the key common factor is the idea of a pilgrimage that sets one apart, and is both a temporal process as well as a defense from distraction.
 - c. **Internal vs. external exile:** we know about models of utopias that are distant from settled places, but are there interior locations that accomplish the same effects of isolation? The image of the lonely crowd, etc.

2. **Microcosm of genesis.** With the initiation of a new project through isolation, there is the opportunity to think of how sequences work. Is there a logic that leads organically from first steps to the last? Clearly steps are not simply the unfolding of something already known but rather an enactment of discovery, which involves learning that builds on itself, learns from mistakes, develops internal rhythms.
 - a. **Mechanical vs. organic.** No one in their right mind would hope for a mechanical set of steps mindlessly generated, with no new discoveries at any point. But, what does “organic” mean? At every level, from molecules to cells to complex animals and plants, to ecosystems, to the idea of life in general, we have to revise our idea of “the big picture.”
 - b. **An organ is a transaction.** In the human body, organs mediate from an “outside” to an “inside,” but what these mean is fluid and mostly defined by the organ itself. There is no functional mapping — i.e. the heart is not just a pump, the kidney is not just a filter, etc. The organ is a mapping function, a way of re-locating functions throughout the body and even beyond.
 - c. **Askesis and growth** means that as the project grows so does the knower (maker) and his/her knowledge; part of this is public and sharable, but other parts, true to the logic of askesis, are “idiotic” (= “private”). What is the value of a subjectively good thing that cannot be shared directly?

3. **Askesis as a global-cosmic positioning system.** Like a GPS, askesis works through a mental/spiritual location protocol. “Where” takes on more abstract, deeper meaning, in terms of personal development, which is more than an accomplishment of pre-set goals.
 - a. **Like the monastery ...** askesis’s GPS focuses on the function of exception and the exceptional. The “unsharable” private component of the project becomes, like other forms of secret knowledge, a source of strength without “market value.” Yet, it is the thing that identifies the artist as unique, that *je ne sais quoi* quality — what is called the “unary trait” (what makes you you).
 - b. **The martial arts analogy of “qi” (氣/气)** compares the unary trait to balance, or the resistance to being thrown off balance. Its “inner” nature is also an “outer” relationship to things and other people. It is calm in a storm.
 - c. **Without askesis** there can be no personal progress or learning; it is both a basis for getting work done as well as doing something of value.