

Project Daedalus:

An Earnest Play of Building Between Storytelling and Metaphors

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Every place is built around shared values, norms, histories and myths that are assumed, implied, or tactfully left unsaid. Architecture is at its core an accomplice to the untidy matter of human stories and aspirations, even if the architect's work typically results in concrete and measurable compositions. The making of architecture, in every one of its pleasures and difficulties, involves the crucial task of interpreting among tangible materials and the multitude of implicit forces that characterize a particular place.

My proposition is that literature and storytelling can play an essential role

in this interpretive task, and that they are especially fruitful for architectural pedagogy.

This paper reflects on this proposition via examples of student work produced under my guidance at McGill University.¹ The work was the result of an exploratory design project structured around Daedalus, the prototypical figure of the ancient Greek architect best known for his craftsmanship and cunning intelligence. His works – amongst them the legendary labyrinth that enclosed the half-man half-bull Minotaur – were said to inspire a profound sense of wonder mingled with fear, akin to the presence of the divine.² *Project Daedalus* was not a studio project that resulted in a building design but an elective course which, taking its cue from Daedalus, focused on architectural craft. It asked the students to concentrate on ‘building’ as a verb rather than a noun, an action rather than an object. The final projects emerged through a series of exercises that required students to translate between tactile and literary mediums. For the first exercise, students picked three small objects and wrote about them in a way that revealed something not visible or immediately apparent. As a catalyst for this exercise, students were provided with examples of short literary texts, including Francis Ponge’s poetic ruminations about quotidian objects.³ Students were then asked to imagine one of their three objects as a character, and to write this character into an existing literary work. In two instances of my teaching the project, the students grafted their story onto the myths surrounding Daedalus.⁴ In another instance, students located their story in one of a series of pre-selected imaginary places from literature.⁵ These texts formed the basis for the next exercise which was to transpose aspects of the story into a series of intermediary drawings and collages, further distilling the architectural questions at the heart of each student’s project. In the final stage of the project, students were asked to construct either an interpretation of the character or an armature that allowed their initial object to enact this character.

Overall, I observed that with *Project Daedalus*, literary constructs suspended commitment to a final and concrete outcome, while opening up the oppor-

tunity for play. Unlike traditional approaches to design, such as the *parti diagram* or a formal conceptual premise, students arrived at their general concepts via their creative writing. If the stories distilled general architectural preoccupations, these came already immersed within a universe of specific details. In other words, the creative writing operated as a depository of qualities and atmospheres that sustained play throughout the latter stages of the project.

Architectural educators Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne argue that the very nature of architectural design is that of 'play' conducted in earnest.⁶ Transposing H.G. Gadamer's hermeneutics onto architecture, Snodgrass and Coyne explain that the design process unfolds like a game or a dialogue between the architect and the specific design situation.⁷ The authors note that in sustaining a capacity for surprise, play is what allows unpremeditated possibilities to disclose themselves. Johan Huizinga, who also informed Gadamer's notion of play, was amongst the first to outline that play and poetry are crucial to engaging those elusive subtleties that contribute to a sense of culture. He writes that poetry, 'in its original culture-making capacity, is born in and as play'.⁸

That poetic constructs are a fertile medium for culturally consequential imaginative play has been elaborated by Paul Ricoeur, especially through his understanding of 'metaphor' and 'narrative'. Ricoeur explains that the metaphor, through an unexpected juxtaposition of words, generates a productive tension, which compels us to construct imaginative ways of seeing reality.⁹ He argues that the essential 'function of fiction' is to propel this re-envisioning of reality.¹⁰ In literary texts, metaphoric tensions are woven into a coherence which Ricoeur identifies as 'narrative' or 'plot' for action.¹¹ The value of narrative is that of 'emplotment', by which he means that it opens the possibility for creative action. *Project Daedalus* attests to the possibility for Ricoeur's notion of emplotment to go beyond the medium of language, and to become transposed into creative actions that engage construction processes and building details.¹²

In the projects that follow, we observe how the literary imagination height-

ened the element of earnest play: that each student's creative writing not only uncovered elemental architectural preoccupations but was also suggestive of particular atmospheres and construction processes. Literary constructs enriched the element of play by allowing otherwise unpremeditated possibilities to unfold. I focus on the work of four students who were all in the first year of their master's degree.¹³

Étienne began his project with an exquisitely crafted wristwatch that no longer worked. In his first text, he wrote how the watch 'senselessly tried to haggle her fate in every sense and direction; she was imprisoned in a rotating inferno'.¹⁴ Building on this, Étienne's second text described the Minotaur's labyrinth as a complex but fragile apparatus that was in constant motion. Its machination was a seductive mirage that trapped its victims, not only by confounding their passage but by entangling the passage of time. Étienne writes that Theseus, who in the myth escaped the labyrinth, cunningly discerned 'that its machinations were fragile and delicate, its equilibrium merely hanging by a thread'. Drawing from this, Étienne's constructed object was a delicate headpiece that lured its victim with promises of mysterious visions (Figures 1-2). He interpreted the sensation of time-paralysis by creating the experience of mesmerizing kaleidoscopic visions that were in fact reflections of the victim's own eyes.

Étienne's process was among the smoothest I witnessed: moving from his stories to the drawings, he extracted the metaphor of a continuous thread and found a resonance with a Spirograph that would reveal the clockwork mechanism he had embossed on a sheet of paper (Figures 3-5). While working on the drawing, he felt that it was experientially conducive to a kaleidoscope of mirrors, so he built the delicate seductive headpiece around this. Taking cue from the mechanism of the labyrinth in his story, his headpiece was constructed from fragile segments of nearly invisible plexiglass, also connected by a continuous thread of fishing line.

Christina started with a box of matches, and wrote a poem imagining that a fire match, tightly ordered amongst the others in the darkness of the matchbox, was anxiously anticipating its destiny: 'This excitement of the unknown

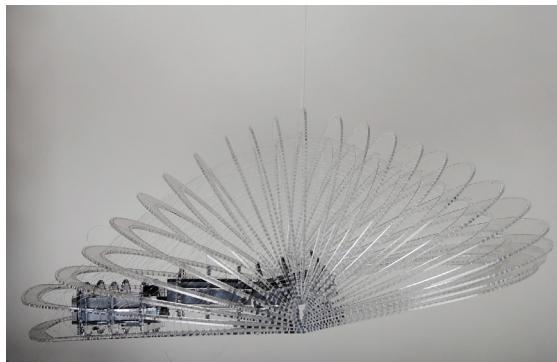


Fig. 1.
Étienne's final construction. (2013)
Source and credit: Étienne Sébillot



Fig. 2.
Étienne enacting the entrapment produced by his
headpiece. (2013) Source and credit: Étienne Sébillot

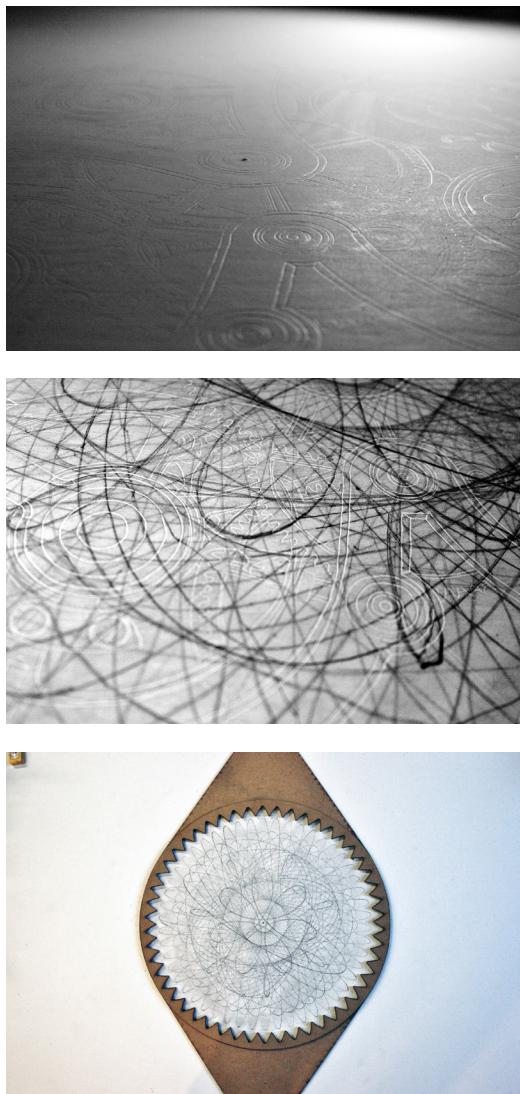


Fig. 3-5.
Étienne's intermediary drawing. (2013)
Source and credit: Étienne Sébillot

is burning inside me. /I am waiting impatiently for that one moment of enlightenment. /Where I will sway with the breeze, /Spreading my sparks through valleys and peaks'. She followed with a story that described the event of the queen's birthday, set in an imaginary place called Lanternland:¹⁵

Only when her Majesty took her place, the great feast began. Lanterns were served with fat, moulded candles, while the Royal Blooded were provided with walnut-oil candles. Special treatment was received by the Queen, which was served with great, stiff, flaming taper of white wax, slightly red at the tip. [The Midnight-oilers] were distinguished by the hanging bags [on which they carried the] Little Lights. Those Little Lights were particularly [shaped to] provide an ignition of a majestic lightshow. [On their own, they] appeared fragile, but once they built up an army they become an unstoppable ephemeral monster.

Taking cues from her description of the various light-emanating characters at the queen's banquet, Christina began to shape and articulate different materials by using an array of fire sources such as matches and torches (Figures 6-11). The text she wrote enabled her to focus design intentions: she looked to capture the regal garment in her *particular* story. Christina eventually came to interpret the tale by building the queen's festive garment as a lantern that would cast light and shadows on its surroundings (Figures 12-14). In other words, her construction sought to render this event palpable rather than merely represent it. More generally, Christina's texts led her to explore questions about ephemerality and the architecture of event. In building the lantern, she discovered the cumulative power of seemingly mundane rituals: in her case the simple habit of lighting a match built up to an intricate performance of shadow and light.

Another student, Edith, worked with a moose tooth that she had found while she was a dental hygienist in northern Ontario. Drawing from this previous vocation, her first text about the tooth noted that it 'began its specificity as early as part of a foetus in a womb.' Grafting her own story onto the Daeda-

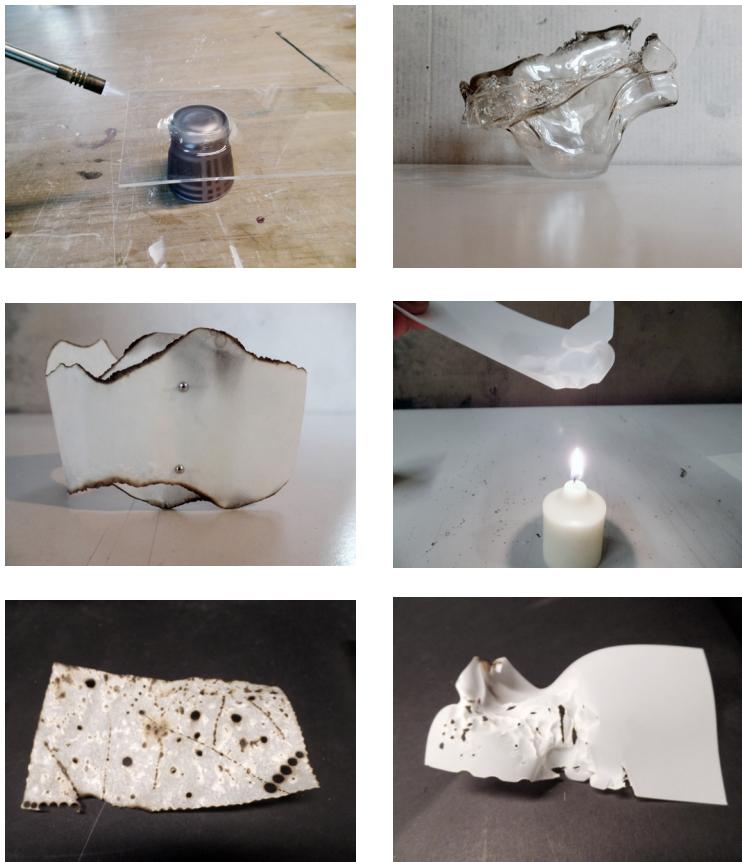


Fig. 6-11.
Christina's building process. (2016)
Source and credit: Christina Kordova



Fig. 12+13+14. Christina's final project: An interpretation of the event of the Queen's Birthday in Lanternland. (2016)
Source and credit: Christina Kordova

Ius myth, she imagined the moment when Queen Pasiphaë gave birth to the Minotaur. She described how the king had a temple built atop a mountain specifically for this momentous event. Edith described the tooth to have fallen out of the queen's mouth during what she imagined would have been an excruciating delivery. She described the Minotaur's birth as so peculiar and horrifying that even the queen's midwives fled screaming. Edith writes that following this abandonment, the king,

scared for his wife, broke tradition and entered the bedchamber. Realising that he was not the father, . . . he turned on his heels and locked the door behind him. The queen was still linked to the Minotaur by the umbilical cord. . . . She had to use her fallen tooth to cut herself from the horrible monster . . . Once she was done severing the chord, she backed away from the creature, never turning her back to it, holding her tooth as her only weapon.

Edith approached the drawing exercise by scratching an image of the tooth's anatomy onto a piece of wood. She eventually located her project – interpreted as the queen's entrapment – in the hard grain that remained after she sandblasted a vertical portion of an already existing wood cabinet. Using dentistry-inspired techniques, she made a series of casts of the tooth and the cabinet (Figures 15-17). From these she cast wax pieces which she joined and built up into a small armature that was eventually cast in bronze. The resulting project was an intricate ball-jointed bronze prosthesis and gouging foot that fated the tooth to a slow labour of carving itself an escape – a process by which it was also destined to grow increasingly intimate with its prison (Figures 18-20).

We can suggest that Edith's general preoccupation was to explore the dilemma inherent in building walls: that they negotiate between wildness and human culture but that in doing so they simultaneously protect and hold captive. This elemental condition is interwoven with the particular details of Edith's text, which tells the story of a queen who has just given



Fig. 15-20. Edith's process: moulds used for casting wax. (2013)

Source and credit: Edith Dennis-LaRocque



Fig. 18-20. Edith's final project. (2013)
Source and credit: Edith Dennis-LaRocque

birth to a monster and must now deliver herself from its rage. The text captures the bittersweet atmosphere of courage mingled with desperation. This atmosphere, as well as the actions described in Edith's story, focused her design intentions and were also suggestive of approaches to building such as carving, gouging and bonding. In other words, the metaphoric power of the story was generative of potential action beyond the medium of literature.

For Robert, it was the first writing exercise that became the stronger force in his project. He wrote about a cigar box that contained intimate mementoes that he shared with his partner:

Seeking out the treasures, one might be disappointed in what they find. To shuffle among the debris is an exercise in wonder. [What] is the worth of a crumpled paper crane? A sign lifted from a hotel room? Taken together, it turns out these are not treasures at all, but a map. And one might still be disappointed – this map only serves to retrace steps, [to] remember places seen and not seen. . . . But only two people can read it.

We notice that Robert's text is less descriptive of atmospheric qualities and more expressive of a particular experience and mode of engagement. Through the writing, he became interested in how something might be simultaneously seen and unseen. He wanted to construct an object that would capture the experience of deciphering an intimate map whose secret could only be unlocked through patience and dedication. He built three nesting puzzle boxes by reinterpreting Japanese joinery in a way that combined laser cutting with hand carving (Figures 21-22). Puzzle boxes have no hardware but are held together through a series of sophisticated Japanese joints. In order to open them, the person must know (or patiently untangle) the particular sequence of movements by which the joints are unlocked. To further bewilder a possible intruder, each of the three boxes had a different puzzle sequence. The largest box would be 'hiding in plain sight' and it was only for the initiate to understand its true value. Like Christina's lantern,

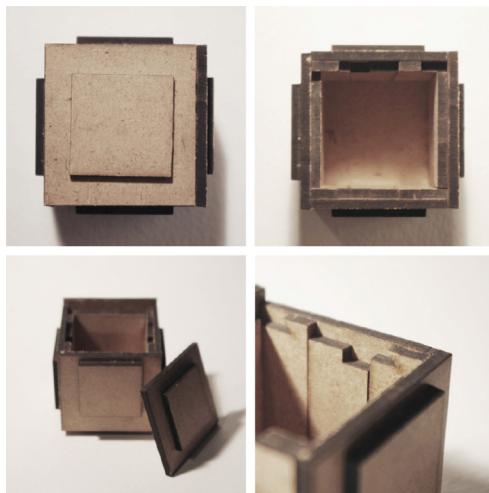


Fig. 21. Images of Robert's middle puzzle box.
(2013)

Source and credit: Robert Hartry

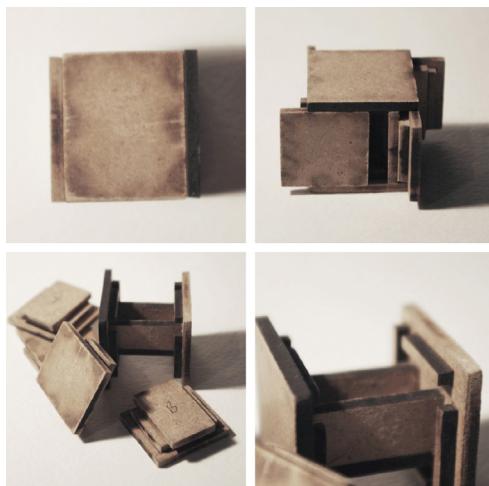


Fig. 22. The smallest of Robert's puzzle boxes.
The two smaller boxes were so delicate that the
 slightest clumsy slip of one's fingers could sabotage
 the clever moves one had previously managed.
(2013)

Source and credit: Robert Hartry

Robert's puzzle boxes made the sensation of wonder and secrecy palpable to those who welcomed their riddle.

While each student started their project by engaging the literary imagination in the same manner, their building process took on a course that was specific to each. Even if these literary constructs focused the students' design intention, they did not constrain the process to a prescriptive mode of engagement. That the students' trajectories were so varied indicates that the literary imagination allows each design circumstance to develop according to its own logic and the specific concerns of a particular design endeavour. As noted in the beginning, architecture operates within a complex constellation of subtle forces and implicit values. To appropriately engage this cultural ground is not a straightforward process: it involves astute transpositions across mediums. The correspondences are complex, slippery, and anything but literal: leaps must be made and intuitions courted. We have seen how the literary imagination can be a deft accomplice to this end – in its capacity to sustain an earnest play of possibilities that can be transposed into acts of building. It is perhaps not a stretch to suggest that the poetic strength of literary constructs holds an essential agility in the training and honing of this architectural perspicacity.

- 1 I am greatly indebted to Prof. Alberto Pérez-Gómez for the opportunity to carry out this pedagogic laboratory in conjunction with his graduate-level history and theory lecture courses.
- 2 For a discussion on Daedalus and how the notion of craftsmanship is important for architectural practice see Alberto Pérez-Gómez, 'The Myth of Dedalus: On the Architect's *métier*', in: *Timely Meditations: Selected Essays on Architecture*, Volume 1 (Montreal: RightAngle International Publishing, 2016), 1-21.
- 3 Francis Ponge, *Le Parti pris des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967); Francis Ponge, *The Power of Language: Texts and Translations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
- 4 Extracts from Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: The Folio Society, 1996).
- 5 Selected from Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).

- 6 Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne, *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 7 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975).
- 8 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 122.
- 9 Elaborated more extensively in Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
- 10 Paul Ricoeur, 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality', *Man and World*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1979), 123-141.
- 11 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 45.
- 12 Although typically encountered in the context of design studio, most teaching tactics employ 'narrative' to emphasize architecture as a spatio-temporal vessel that sustains narratives of human inhabitation. See for instance Wim van den Bergh and Mark Proosten, 'Narrative as an Educational Approach', in Klaske Havik et al. (eds.), *Writingplace* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2016), 110-130. For an extensive discussion of Ricoeur in relation to architecture, including examples of pedagogy, see Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014).
- 13 I am grateful to Étienne Sébillot, Edith Dennis-LaRocque, Robert Hartry and Christina Kordova, who have granted me permission to discuss their work here.
- 14 Étienne's original text read: '*elle avait beau se débattre dans tous les sens, elle était prisonnière de cet enfer rotatif*' My translation.
- 15 Manguel and Guadalupi, 'Lanternland', in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, op. cit. (note 5), 357.