Education, Design and Practice – Understanding skills in a Complex World

• **Paper / Proposal Title:**
Engaging Practice: Developing and Launching a Practice-Based Studio

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• **Abstract (300 words):**
This paper presents a newly launched Practice-Based Studio in Virginia Tech’s MLA program at the Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center. Students were placed in diverse offices where they participated in professional work related to their academic thesis work. It set up a complementary relationship between professional mastery (required by LAAB) and disciplinary mastery (required by the graduate school). Furthermore, it bridges boundaries between academia and practice and between alternative modes of research.
The paper presents and critiques the development of this first, pilot-program and is structured around key methodological issues addressed in planning and implementing the studio.

- Distinguishing the Practice-Based Studio from ‘merely’ getting credit for having a job.

The studio requires specific focus to the work within the firm as well as participation in a rotating seminar that cultivates a “community of practice” among the students and their respective firms.

- Engaging practitioners in the planning process.

Interested practitioners helped develop a list of expected student experiences equally relevant to private firms, public agencies, and non-profit organizations.

- Pairing students and firms.

Students were paired with firms based on their thesis proposal and portfolio and each firm’s professional emphasis and current work.

- Studio organization.

Students worked 20-24 hours per week and also conformed to the conventional academic schedule for midterm and final reviews. Students were required to keep a journal of thoughts and reflections throughout the semester.

- Operational concerns.

Several issues emerged early on: the students’ collective absence from campus, confusion about the interview process, and the degree of trust required of all parties.

- Final outcomes, student reflection and impact.

Firms took seriously the charge to give focus to the students’ tasks, and as a result, students made significant contributions to their assigned projects. The program is likely to lead to significant future collaboration. The firms’ own practice-based inquiry is very evident.

- Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Paul Kelsch teaches in the Landscape Architecture Program at Virginia Tech’s Washington Alexandria Architecture Center. He has professional degrees in Architecture and Landscape Architecture and a Ph.D. in Cultural Geography. His research focuses on the expression of nature in designed landscapes, especially the parkways, memorials and national parks that have shaped the Potomac River into a ‘capital river’. He has conducted several cultural landscape studies of the George Washington Memorial Parkway that have led to a larger study of the intersections
between the ecological processes of the river and the shaping of its landscape as a national landscape.