

I sat down with Carl Lostritto. Here is Carl's biography from the RISD architecture website:

*Carl Lostritto conducts research and teaches in the area of computational design with an emphasis on drawing and media.*

*Before joining the RISD faculty, he taught architecture and design at The Boston Architectural College, The Catholic University of America, The University of Maryland, and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He recently taught a high school level outreach program at MIT and a fabrication and digital craft research studio, which was supported by an Education Committee Grant at the Boston Architectural College.*

*Concurrent to teaching, he operates a computational design consultancy, 0095b6, which partners with artists, architects, and designers on projects of various types and scales including web design, print media, graphic design, prototyping, installations and buildings.*

*He studied in a post-professional research program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology within the Design and Computation Group. His professional architecture degree was earned at the University of Maryland, where he was awarded the Alpha Rho Chi Medal, Thesis Prize, and was recognized by the Center for Teaching Excellence as a Distinguished Teaching Assistant. He also earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Maryland, having graduated summa cum laude.*

Carl is currently an assistant professor on contract. He is up for a permanent full-time position to be decided by next Fall.

RS: How did you gravitate towards teaching?

CL: I went to UMD for my first 2 degrees. Towards the end of my M.Arch I came to the conclusion that my education was deeply flawed. I have since come to the more moderate conclusion that my education and Maryland architecture was slightly but nonetheless profoundly flawed. The great thing about a student at UMD though was that you could teach a studio as an advanced student. You could kind of (and boy do I mean KIND OF --it was a delicate tight rope) carve out as much intellectual autonomy as you were able to shoulder the corresponding responsibility. And besides the fact that the more I invested in teaching the better my own work got, it was apparent that my instinctive gripes about education were actionable in an optimistic and progressive way. Also it was fun. Also looking at the DC practice scene, even in the boom years of 04-08, I could not imagine why everyone didn't choose teaching over practice. There was just so much more making and thinking going on at school.

RS: How do you make sure you are teaching and not telling?

CL: Well the easiest way to ensure that is to not talk as much as I feel like talking. One of my teaching mentors once told me as I was starting that the only thing that will probably not come naturally when teaching would be the need to "wait out the silence." There are of course the legends of the faculty that would just enter the room and sit silently until provoked; sometimes doing this on the first day would mean an hour of silence. I would never do that. But I do sometimes make a goal of

only listening and responding rather than explaining anything. And there are some really good/hard questions that pondering an answer to can be highly functional, but it takes time. And there is silence in that time. But it really works. Sometimes there's the student who will always say something reactionary (or who just can't stand the quiet), and other students, when given the opportunity, will usually respond thoughtfully. In one-on-one situations, asking questions is the best way to gauge understanding. Especially with students who are old enough to have had a job in their field--you learn fast how to respectfully listen, which makes it harder to tell when someone is confused or lost, or bored.

it's never a good idea to tell another human being what to do in almost any situation. But besides not telling them what to do, what kind of input each student needs is different. It's kind of like individual mentorship x 10 (or 12, or 14 or 18). I will talk about this more in the next question.

RS: How do you deal with students' frustration?

CL: First of all, I think sensing/observing frustration by students is sometimes a really good sign. Complacency, comfort, and the cultivation of casual defaults are just the worst things to see happen in a student. If they're frustrated, at least they are avoiding those pitfalls.

Maybe I sound too much like a therapist when I say this but I operate under the assumption that expressing frustration and working through it is always better than stamping it out.

This is somewhat of a generational thing among teachers (with RISD architecture being maybe the exception) but I'm of the mind that talking about one's mental state, struggles, and even systemic frustration is fine and often productive. I don't really care about or try to avoid the conversation "veering off course" or getting too "meta." Where sometimes teachers put on the breaks is with respect to getting "roped into" or "held responsible" for things they can't control. But I think we control so little anyway that these concerns are more reflective of delusions (on the part of teachers) about what our role is anyway. Also teachers have a civic responsibility to make the place their teaching better. So dealing with frustrations really shouldn't be avoided speaking from an ethical perspective. There's also the matter of taking responsibility. Sometimes we make mistakes and contribute unduly to student's frustration. I don't think teachers lose any authority for apologizing or showing uncertainty (usually the opposite actually happens)

But there are two kinds of frustration. There's the rich, no clear solutions kind-- catch 22s, ambiguities of expectations, etc. Then there's the suffocating, paralyzing kind, where all avenues seem closed and work comes to a drag. With the latter kind a teacher has to be ready to provide an "out" -- of which there are many that students usually just don't see. Often it involves things like doing the opposite of whatever you have been doing.

RS: As a professor starting out how did you know you were adding to a student's progress? How did you know you were ready to teach?

CL: This is a tricky one because I'm pretty convinced that a design education is (at best) a really messy, non-linear, personal experience. Looking back on my own education I can point to a few moments of great progress in the context of downright shamefully horrible teachers/pedagogies. That's not to say the quality of teaching and teachers doesn't matter (I am a candidate in this search after all, which requires me to advocate for why I can do this better than somebody else.) and I think it takes way more than just being a good designer, writing some assignments and showing up. But one of the reasons I like teaching now (as opposed to 20 years ago, say) is that there are no clear ideologies in architecture or architectural education. If you're in some kind of "camp" you basically have to be living under a rock. I really cannot say with certainty what is a good kind of assignment brief, for example. But I can tell you that I love to read and collect assignment briefs written by others. And this uncertainty opens up lots of room for experimentation and creativity. I do feel strongly that teaching architecture is a discipline. It's interconnected with research and practice of course (and probably more so than teaching is in other disciplines) but doing good research or being a successful architect does not qualify one to teach. With architecture so much in flux it is especially inappropriate to model teaching after practice. Instead I expect that every teaching academic be able to address the question, "what can you offer to the discipline of architecture through teaching that you could not offer in any other way?"

There was a question on UMD's course evaluations that always led to some of the most meaningful responses by students. It was simply "is this course sufficiently challenging? how so or why not?" Most people I think will answer this honestly because you can save face with both a yes and a no answer. So I will ask students this sometimes, but it's also not hard to evaluate: people who are challenged will make mistakes, experiment, and do unexpected things. If there is challenge and process-based momentum then I'm content. The momentum part is a little more delicate -- it's about creating a culture and reading into the work of students.

Shorter answer: if you want to teach you will probably like it; if you like teaching you will probably relish in it and continually explore/experiment/adapt; if you observe and adapt you will probably do a good job. So basically if you want to teach, you're as ready as you need to be. Then, if you don't love it, get out. If you see someone who seems to not love it, get them out.

As I see it the main challenge is that it can't be an act AND it can't be about being a role model. I'm a person in the mix of the learning with the students. Especially in the context of contemporary pressures of academia, I'm implicated in the students' work. And what I offer best is my genuine reaction and honest input, which I'd like to think involves some sharing of what makes me excited and motivated. However, there's a distance that's required to keep the student-teacher relationship productive. For example, I cannot imagine ever getting angry at a student really in any situation. That means there's some amount of emotional detachment that goes on. If ever it's not comfortable to say something like "your work is not up to par" then that means that distance is not there. But more importantly, there's the importance of being a neutral sounding board so that students can use their interaction with me to

test arguments/assumptions/ideas/thought processes without my emotional bias getting in the way.

RS: Could you explain a quick comparison of grading at the different schools you've taught at?

CL: Ok, I will try:

One of the schools is an anomaly because a significant portion of the curriculum is internship in the professional sphere. Also they have open admission (everybody gets in) with periodic portfolio reviews as gateways throughout the curriculum. Every student has to prove what they know, and grades (other than having passed the required courses) don't factor into these reviews (all faculty participate in these portfolio reviews, at which point a student has to demonstrate synthesis of material and synergy between academia and practice). The goal of studios and workshops is to offer a counterpoint to the patterns of practice and be a kind of intellectual "safe" place where risk and creativity can be nurtured. So frankly, there's not only grade inflation but things generally skew positive. Whether you agree with that principle or not, the portfolio was valued way more than the grade in terms of one's place and one's success in the curriculum. There was huge emphasis on how to pack evaluation into the grading process simply because there wasn't enough contact time so rubrics and expressed criteria were always emphasized to faculty.

One of the other schools had some grade inflation but significant effort spent by faculty to create fairness and evenness. Almost exclusively team grading. So I would trust a gpa despite knowing that it is skewed high. There is a very intense process to get into the major prior to junior year. Then the architecture grades are to a large extent about separating the superior, from the really good from the pretty good. Sometimes I will hear that the strongest students have had trouble separating themselves on paper from the average students to get into grad school.

One of the schools did this weird thing where they asked outside guests to fill out a form where they would say what grade the student should get. I opposed this, as it was basically a kind of cover for faculty to try and de-inflate grades under the guise of "unbiased" input from outsiders. However, it conflated reviews with evaluation, which was a horrible idea. I always refused to do this when asked as a guest (I would provide commentary, essentially writing down what I was saying aloud anyway) and never asked my guests to do anything similar. I was to some extent an "outsider" having stepped in to teach a studio on short notice one semester.

One school promoted a culture where grades are not discussed or emphasized by students. MIT this institution forbids public recognition of high grades (no cum laudes, honor roll or deans lists, for example). At one school it was expected that a grad student would get mostly A's. At this school it was expected that a student would take really hard courses. If you're getting all As you're probably doing something wrong at this school

RISD-Architecture department holds hard against grade inflation. There is a long and thoughtful deliberation among faculty for consistency. Legit argument for why this is worth it: the reputation of RISD grads is extremely high for both admission and employment. However, grades mean wildly different things across different

departments. I have yet to be a part of grading at the thesis level, which is where this kind of hard line becomes hardest to keep.

RS: When grading for design/studio, are you grading the student or the work?

CL: I grade the work and the students' performance. I think it's totally within the purview of grading to incorporate expectations about one's role in creating/enhancing the learning environment. I'm careful to ensure that there are many ways for a student to participate other than being vocal in class. Also it's important to separate performance and participation from "effort"

RS: Are you grading the student along a personal progression, or comparing against the greater context of students?

CL: It's tricky to talk about it abstractly, but let me give an example. Sometimes a student has taken a huge risk, and I had supported this risk, but the nature of risks is that they don't always payoff, so it is easy to say that the risk deserves merit, but rewarding a risk can be like rewarding aggressive behavior instead of rewarding successful iterative processes. I would support risk taking, but failing actually means failing, and the rupture of the learning process deserves a response to reevaluate the nature of the risk and the benefit within the context of the class.