



## PHOEBE CRISMAN

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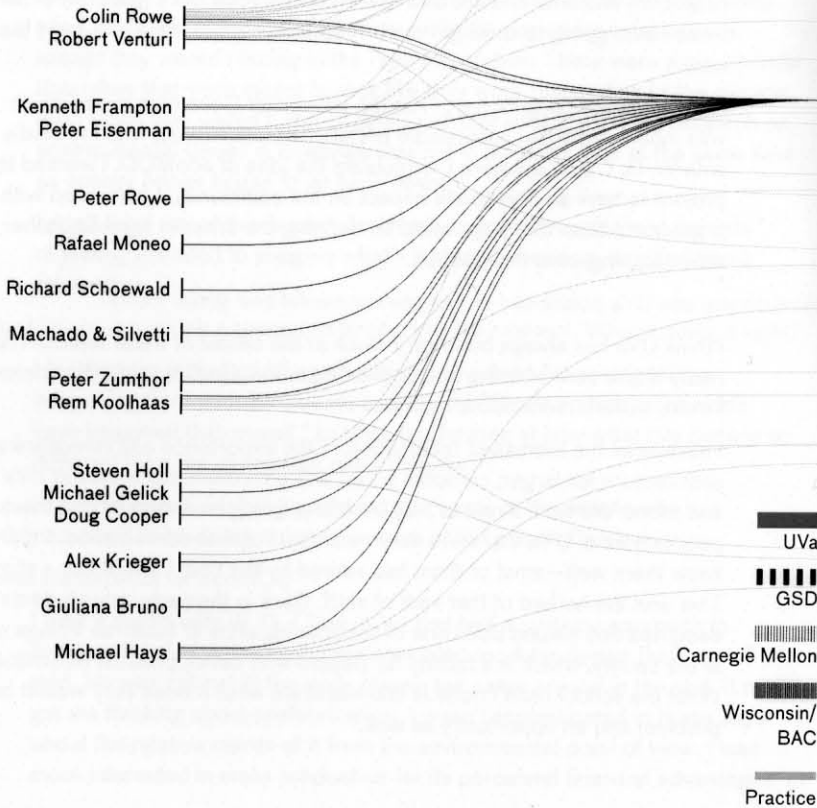
What are your most important influences?

I attended two excellent but very different architecture schools. In the College of Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon, I learned to draw and design and build while completing a BArch. I wanted to make architecture in the public realm and become a licensed architect. After completing several projects while working in DC and Chicago, I went to the GSD to study urbanism and theory to expand my architectural education. There I embraced a very different set of influences and, because these experiences were five years apart, I was a different person as well. At the GSD I was influenced by a

diverse group of professors, too many to name really, but certainly Peter Rowe, Michael Hays, Giuliana Bruno, Rem Koolhaas, Rodolfo Machado, Edward Sekler, and Marco Frascari. The strongest influence at the GSD was Alex Krieger, with whom I then worked after graduation and from whom I learned about the practice of urbanism.

At Carnegie Mellon I took a wonderful course my first year called Society and the Arts. It was about how the arts are a way for humans to find their place in the world. What an amazing opening up of possibilities. There was no turning back. I split my time in undergrad between philosophy and design. I continue to be fascinated by the tensions between writing and drawing, thinking, and making.

In my UVa studios we read and we write and we make things. We also build full-scale things with tools, which for some people seems too far apart. Usually professors who are doing design-build also teach technology, whereas I teach theory. For me it's essential to investigate the relationships between theory and practice. If you are out there working with clients, designing, detailing, and going through the complex process of building within regulations, budgets, and all of those constraints, a very different kind of approach to architecture emerges.



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Following a global trend, there has been a shift away from buildings toward landscape and urbanism. Yet, architecture students are expected, perhaps in their spare time, to develop the knowledge and skills needed to design sophisticated architecture upon graduation. I certainly don't seek to underestimate the importance of those related fields, yet students have such limited time to study even one discipline. There's a general dissatisfaction in the architectural academy with the practice of architecture, and even a hatred of objects. Of course, practicing architects spend most of their time making objects. While integrated within larger, complex systems, buildings are strong forms nonetheless.

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Where do you fall in the discourse of architecture? What topics do you find most relevant to your work?

At this moment in time, the most important issue for me is the state of human existence on the planet—sustainability, broadly conceived. I'm fascinated by how environmental design is intertwined with ethical, social, and economic considerations. Of course things change, but I see too much change that I can't support: environmental degradation, excessive consumption, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the persistent marginalization of women. Feminism is about equality and hence sustainability. It's about the intertwined "four Es" of environment,

equity, economy, and esthetics. It is becoming increasingly difficult to say architecture is autonomous. The way that Eisenman talked about architecture in the '70s makes no sense whatsoever. Feeling that we have so little power as architects, that the only way we can move forward is to retreat from complex issues, is highly problematic. The proliferation of parametrically generated, formally focused plastic objects isn't solving anything—just making more landfill material. I'm concerned with the kind of material waste that I see too often in how architects build and how students model and make things. I am also interested in beauty. People think that if you're concerned with social and environmental issues, you've inherently moved away from esthetics. On the contrary, if a building isn't a beautiful place to inhabit it won't be loved or valued and sustained over time.

What is the translation of those things into architecture? How do architects become effective in addressing those issues?

I'm committed to individual agency and social activism. I don't believe that meaningful solutions to contemporary challenges can all be conceived and realized in a top-down fashion. If each architect would take profound responsibility for her work and refuse to make buildings that unduly consume shared resources and negatively affect human health and happiness, we could make positive changes more quickly. At the same time, LEED and government regulations are powerful too. We need those working in policy to make major structural changes, and we need people at every level who refuse to compromise their ethical values. Unfortunately, few architecture students nationwide receive an adequate education in ethics and sustainability beyond building performance.

What is the place of these issues in architecture pedagogy? Do you think we may be overwhelming our curriculum by starting these issues early on?

My own research and teaching around these issues builds on knowledge and skills developed through the study and the practice of architecture. This moment for me of transgressing boundaries and opening up architecture only comes after I had formed a solid foundation in the discipline. I believe that several studios in the curriculum should focus on core issues, such as spatial sequence, formal investigation, section, structure, and joining materials. We have lost that core emphasis here to a certain degree.

What do you think that's a function of?

There are several factors, too many to discuss here. Currently the school relies too heavily on our recent students to teach foundation studios. I believe it's important go out and practice before coming back to teach. We would do

better to employ designers in practice rather than hire those who just finished graduate school last year. They know the latest software but often little else about the complex process of creating architecture in the world.

Do you think it's more about who teaches and not necessarily what we put in our curriculum?

I think it's both. The experience of a student taking the same course with a different teacher will differ tremendously. The new curriculum confronts students with massive programmatic requirements and unwieldy developments too early in their education, before they've adequately explored the basic elements of architecture through a focused architecture project. Students generate colored boxes and blobs containing labeled functions and mere square footage, rather than rich places to support the bodies and desires of those who will dwell within. Coupled with that approach is a reduced understanding of materiality and how one might manifest a design at full scale. As students spend more time in disembodied digital-model space, they are increasingly disconnected from matter, from sociocultural considerations, and from site—all longtime strengths of the UVa architecture program. A shallow fixation on newness, the iconic, the heroic master architect, and a futile search for numeric validation undermines the values and reputation that UVa developed over time.

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I've asked people about the school's focus on public-interest design and all that, and your name has come up as somebody that actually brought that here.

My studio teaching and professional practice with Crisman+Petrus Architects both focus on the public realm. I'm committed to working in the

community—at the scale of the watershed, the urban district, and the building or installation that condenses that complexity into a legible and inhabitable place. I design catalytic actions, not master plans. I won't work with developers interested in making a fast buck without considering the lifecycle of the building. I'm not interested in community engagement that doesn't lead to good design. While it's crucial to engage people and their ideas, in the end you have to be the designer. But I never call my work public-interest design, because all design should be in the public interest.

You have been spearheading the Global Sustainability Initiative. What is the relationship of what you're doing at the university to the School of Architecture?

The Global Sustainability Initiative is a conceptual framework that unifies the classes I teach, the interdisciplinary academic programs I direct, and my associated research. The global sustainability minor and new major in Global Studies: Environments + Sustainability grew out of a class that I started in 2009 with colleagues Mark White from commerce and Paxton Marshall from engineering. We were concerned about the limited course offerings and general lack of comprehensive thinking about sustainability at UVa. We developed the global sustainability class to help students understand the big picture by using systems and design thinking to make connections across a wide range of sustainability challenges. Now I teach that course every semester to 150 students, most of who come to the A-School from departments outside.

A few years ago I was appointed by the provost to serve on a university committee to develop a new global studies major. Committee conversations focused on foreign affairs, economics, and history, while the physical environment was totally missing. All these really smart people didn't understand the importance of the issues we address in the constructed environment, such as rapid urbanization, the provision of fresh water, or energy usage. I managed to convince the group that what we do in the A-School does matter. By developing a global studies concentration in environments and sustainability, I'm working to bridge gaps between the A-School and the rest of the university. It's not about leaving architecture behind. I think architecture is too segregated and often marginalized, not only at UVa, but also in the world at large.