INTRODUCTION

At the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, the Final Year Architectural Design Thesis programme provides a platform for a great learning experience, where a Bachelor of Architecture student is assigned to explore a design topic that he or she has identified to be of interest and to pursue it deeply. The nature of the year long design process forces the student to reflect deeply his or her capabilities as an architectural designer, be really resourceful and manage well to survive a difficult course as in the words of one student, “it can make life complex, fighting with a lot of feelings, making decisions about the project and yourself”. The graduate who finally submits himself or herself to the design thesis experience, inevitably would be absorbed into a subject that is close to them, reflecting their own personal ideals and possibly influencing their own beliefs and philosophical view of his or her life.

The Design Thesis year encapsulates the ‘final examination’ at the end of an architectural student’s five-year period of learning, best described by one graduate where all that was acquired and learned in that period is finally being used in that final year, including every skill and every knowledge.

Sometimes when thrown into a deep end, the student needs to stand up for himself and just go ahead with that ‘idea’. Having so much freedom to decide on his own, he needs to rise to the challenge where in the beginning would be hard to do, as all this while he had been dependent on the studio master giving every step of advice in his earlier years prior to that final year.

All this conundrum is to do with the Making of the Designer and for the first time in the five years of the student’s life, he has to make his own decisions about critical issues and complex problems, although at the same time he needs to weigh-out the studio masters’ and critic’s views and opinions to find out the best way forward. Therefore, the Design Thesis is not a solitary activity but more of a collaborative work with others.

COMPLEXITY AND CONTEXT

One of the main concerns in the Design Thesis process is whether the issues and objectives derived from the student’s project created enough ‘complexity’ to be challenged at the ‘thesis’ level.

The relationship between Complexity and Context is crucial to be set properly in the beginning stages and for the design thesis process to actually take root and will eventually lead to the desired ‘thesis’ level. The Context is particularly a key factor at the formative and germination process of the design thesis. Context should be viewed holistically and not just referred to the site and surrounding area. It is to do with a matrix or pattern that is in existent, that could be altered and or when the new programme is introduced. It is about “people, events, activities, content, history, culture” and when defining what is Context, it is really broad and deep at that same time weaving events into creating a sense of place.

Weaving existing conditions and situation with the new programme, the Designer would really need to study the insides and underbelly of the area under investigation. Context has a lot to do with the Site. Sometimes the Design Thesis is all about interpreting the Site. Often the Site represents something that we wish to explore and our design tells the story of our exploration.

PROJECT

An introduction to the first of the Design Thesis’ example is a project that represents the Building Type, typified by the work of Ahmad Zuhali Zainon, who was in the 2008/09 Design Thesis batch.

The Mosque project was nominated and submitted for the RIBA President’s Medal Award 2009 representing University of Malaya’s School of Architecture (UM School). We found the project to be very articulate in its contexture approach weaving together both the mosque programme and the urban context. There is an effort to actually create a social programme integrating a homeless shelter into the mosque (later abandoned), which provoked some debate, challenging the idea of the contemporary mosque and its role.
Dang Wangi Road area is part of the old 1970s Kuala Lumpur, transitional and moving, influx with shades of different ethnic cultures straddling between corporate offices and the institutions of Jalan Ampang, Chow Kit Road area and Masjid India area, re-inventing itself constantly, yet reluctant to move forward like much of Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman area. What nature of mosque should serve the people in this area?

Zuhaili, the designer, felt that the special semester was an important time for him to get to know himself better and to “know the thesis well”, where this statement provided an essential organisational time for him to research on the subject as deeply as he could.

The beginning of the design process involved the selection of topic of interest and Zuhaili needed a vehicle or a way to explore his sensitive nature in design. He needed a topic that could bring out the best in his natural designer talents and he said “at the beginning we see the topic…then after that, we search for the site. Then we go deeper into the programme and the issue of the topic. So after doing some research on the topic, for me at the end of the special semester, I’m quite confident I’m ready to do the thesis”.

**PROGRAMME AND CONTEXT**

The Mosque design struggled in finding the essential quality within the purity of the traditional mosque concept and if the programme is not done right in the beginning and set out in a way that precisely defines the (type of) mosque, whether it’s a community mosque or a mosque based more on aesthetic value, the design would be compromised. Mosque or places of worship is a very good subject to explore in terms of complexity as the building typology is strong traditionally, as referred to the first Mosque of the Prophet in the 6th Century Medina. Zuhaili stated that, “I just noticed at the end of semester one that I was proposing a shelter for the homeless…it’s like a new thesis challenge but…then I also have another thing which is the mosque itself. I should actually decide earlier regarding the programme (to integrate the shelter)”. Eventually, Zuhaili had to abandon the idea of the shelter as it would be too complex to attempt (as it was too late) and got in the way of investigating the aesthetics deeply, which he went into a great detail.

**CONCEPT AND DIAGRAM**

For Zuhaili, the Diagram was very important as the core natural process of the thesis is to do with the building typology and the contextual nature of the site. The context of the mosque activities relating to the context of the site, was often the focus of discussion and Zuhaili managed to convince the critics with his diagrams. “I did it in the second semester where I came up with all the diagrams and everything, then only the panel (of invited critics) can clearly see my presentation and idea”. His good drawings skills was critical to represent his basic design ideas.

When asked which diagram is the most important, Zuhaili did not express specific ones, but tried to explain, his interpretation and his ideas, like how he created the ablution space based on the issues of ablution space.

On the reason why the key drawings were important, Zuhaili stated “because during (finalising the design)...I’m trying to show the idea to present God through nature as it is God’s creation. So the details like the sunlight and everything else is to bring a living silence in the mosque. From that column detail and also the perspective they can relate to those ideas.”

**PROCESS**

Design thesis has a similar process to a research thesis where the process allows for contribution to new knowledge and original work. When posed the question on originality, Zuhaili stated that “I went back to during the time of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) mosque where there is a multipurpose aspect and traditionally, as referred to the first Mosque of the Prophet in the 6th Century Medina. Zuhaili stated that, “I just noticed at the end of semester one that I was proposing a shelter for the homeless…it’s like a new thesis challenge but…then I also have another thing which is the mosque itself. I should actually decide earlier regarding the programme (to integrate the shelter)”.

Zuhaili underlined that, “I think the lecturer, they know the problem well. The most important part for me is the questions from them that made us think as they asked the provocative question. For me studio pin up is the most important session because we can spend a longer time with the lecturer to present our work and we show everything that we have before that we extracted for the interim crit. So even the ‘little-little’ sketch also we show during the pin up which the lecturers would comment on that and thus help me for my next stage.” Hence, the collective decision-making process is very helpful with the familiarity of the lecturer seen weekly for crits.

**CONCLUSION**

The case study on Zuhaili’s Design Thesis is part of the content derived from the Design Thesis Manual book which represents three years of research on practising the Design Thesis studio and writing about it in my blog ‘Life is a Design Thesis’. The stories revealed here are based on a personal research project conducted at the UM School of Architecture, during the period from 2008 to 2011, representing three cohorts of final year Bachelor of Architecture course graduating students.

The writings will provide valuable insights for the current and future design thesis students and academics in the UM School in particular and other architectural design course students in general. All architecture students and academics from elsewhere could benefit from our experience as arguably, the cases are not particular only to the UM School. Much of the research outcomes described as commentary and quotes in this book was based on interviews with the studio masters, visiting critics, students and six of our graduates for in-depth interviews on their work. The narratives of their experience is an important expression and content to be shared, where it is something to be anticipated about, really learn and study to prepare for the thesis year for other students.

The book reveals themes investigated and are specific to a Design Thesis including the Design Process, Complexity and Context and other themes. The first part of the book are the Essays that professes broad concepts and ideas in general by studio masters and visiting critics, whereby the second part focused on the individual case studies. The final and third part provided specific guidelines touching broader subjects and conversely, deeper themes that the University of Malaya School of Architecture in particular explores and providing a manual that advices students on the approach and methodologies.