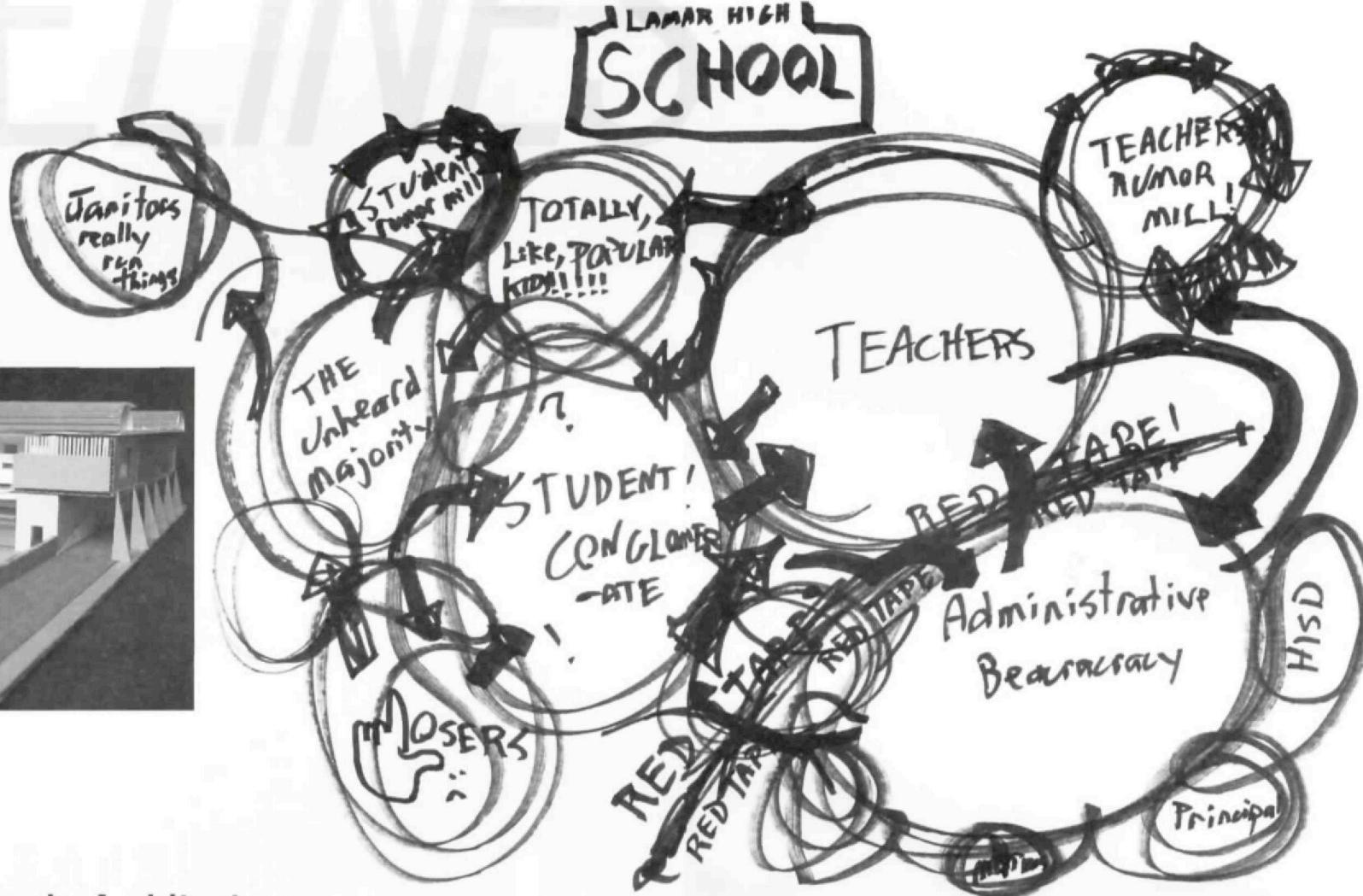
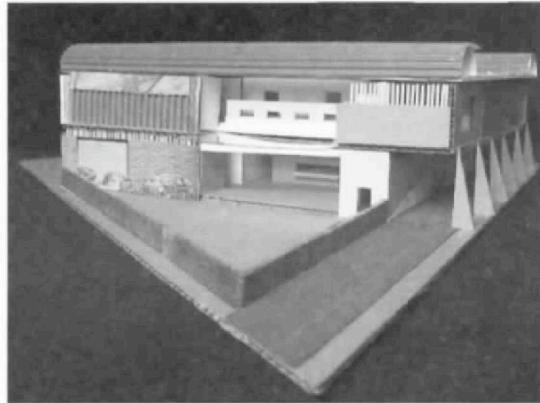


Above: High school student Alberto Ortiz's model for a museum district school.  
Right: Zackary Van Brunt's conceptual map of the spheres of influence at work in his high school.



## Mapping a Future in Architecture

The distinctive and inquisitive voice of radio personality Ira Glass competes with the nervous energy in the second floor studio at the University of Houston College of Architecture. It's the first day of the annual Summer Discovery program and nearly 60 would-be architects are busy at their desks, mapping their worlds at three different scales. Working along with an episode of NPR's *This American Life* streaming from a laptop on the topic of mapping, these students do not yet comprehend the sophistication of the things they are revealing. Armed with only black sharpie markers and tabloid sized office paper, the students struggle to represent (from memory) maps of their bedrooms, their high schools, and the route they took that morning from home to the UH campus.

An unlikely first project for an introduction to architecture course, this exercise asks the students to consider their most familiar and intimate surroundings, and the personal relationships they establish with the built environment. Unlike the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) featured in Rafael Longoria's "Mapping Houston" (Cite 64, Summer 2005), this approach values the students' own experiences and memories over precise recording of "the facts." The work produced is surprisingly original, and offers more insight into how they perceive their own position in the home, institution, and the city than carefully drafted floor plans or accurately rendered perspective drawing ever could.

Students in Summer Discovery are selected from high schools across Houston and occasionally beyond for the five-week intensive summer program designed to give them a taste of architecture school, and to prepare them for applying to college architecture programs. Now in its tenth year under the direction of Drexel Turner, the Program began as an outreach initiative of the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston. The teaching team headed this year by Kari Smith is an ensemble of recent graduates and current students from Rice and UH.

As Ira Glass says at the start of the radio program on mapmaking, maps ask us to look at the world and consider just one thing, to the exclusion of everything else. This kind of looking allows the student's individual vision and voice to come forward. They are challenged to choose what will be represented, and what will be absent; in essence, to decide what matters. For beginning students this kind of critical thinking and decision making takes them much further toward what it means to be an architect than learning basic drafting skills and CAD software would.

These first lessons in selectivity, subjectivity, representation, and contextualization are difficult concepts to grasp. At first glance, Zackary Van Brunt's map of his high school is unrecognizable as cartography. Lacking exposure to conventions of contemporary mapmaking allowed him to create a more fluidic

representation of relationships and information that resembles the bubble diagrams architects often employ for programming. Closer inspection reveals the complexity of the unique language he has created in order to portray the relationships and power dynamics of a public high school. The size of the circles pertains not to numbers of people, or even to space within the building, but rather to spheres of influence within the system. Arrows, tangencies, and adjacencies mark relationships between groups as well as chains of command. For instance, in Van Brunt's view, the janitors "really run things": His diagram illustrates their connection with the "unheard majority" and their distance from the principal and administration. Overall, the most intriguing maps reveal the mapmakers own hidden agendas, personal fears, desires, life experiences, and cultural positioning.

The complicated analysis developed in this early assignment readily translates into the final project for the studio—designing a small school in the museum district. Students worked in small groups to craft the program for the school. Having already considered their perceptions of relationships to their own high schools through the mapping exercise, they were able to engage in thoughtful discussions during the program development phase. Participating in the design of their own programs creates a greater level of engagement with the project and a deeper investment.

Without pre-defined program or square footage requirements, the students came up with five distinct school programs, among them a culinary arts institute (complete with in-house, student-run restaurant) and a television and radio learning center. Furthermore, the students were challenged to determine, on their own, square footage needs based on the site restrictions and opportunities; the number of students, faculty, and staff; and the kinds of learning environments and activities they wished to accommodate. Often a student would start with the furniture required for a single work station, for instance, and then calculate the spatial needs from there, an approach that led to very carefully considered rooms and a more comprehensive and memorable understanding of space planning.

The studio is dedicated to guiding each student in the understanding of the practice of architecture and the clarification of his or her personal direction. Activities aim to establish and foster a process-oriented working environment, where knowledge is gained from experimentation and iteration. Even students who decide that architecture is not for them have learned through experience to expand their initial assumptions in solving problems. With this experience they are better positioned to know what to expect from an education and career in architecture, and, more importantly, to know a little bit more about themselves and their relationship with the built environment.

— Kayte Young and Kari Smith