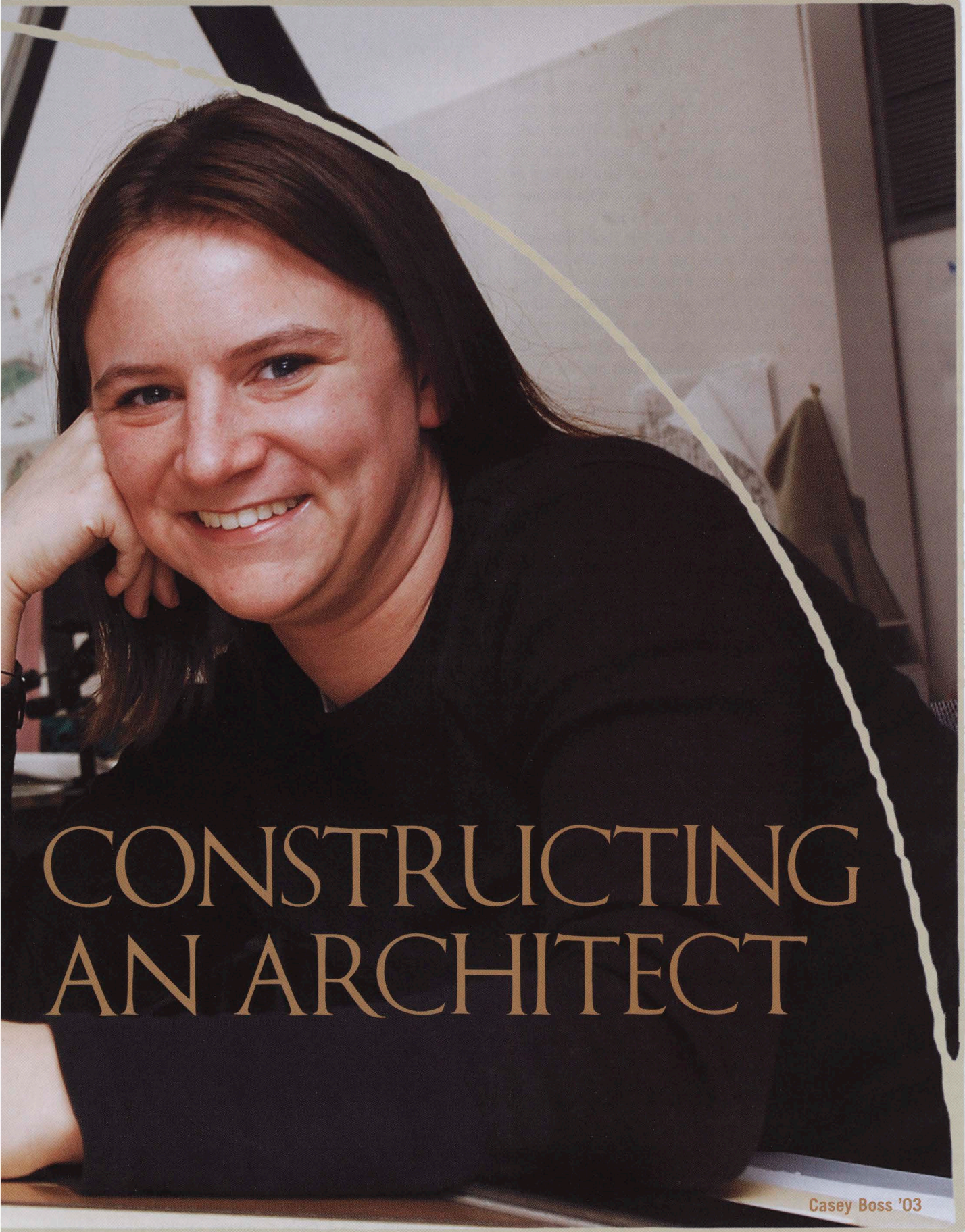


Fifth-year architecture students grapple with a comprehensive, yearlong thesis project that prepares them for professional work

By Margaret Costello

Photography by
John Dowling



CONSTRUCTING AN ARCHITECT

Casey Boss '03

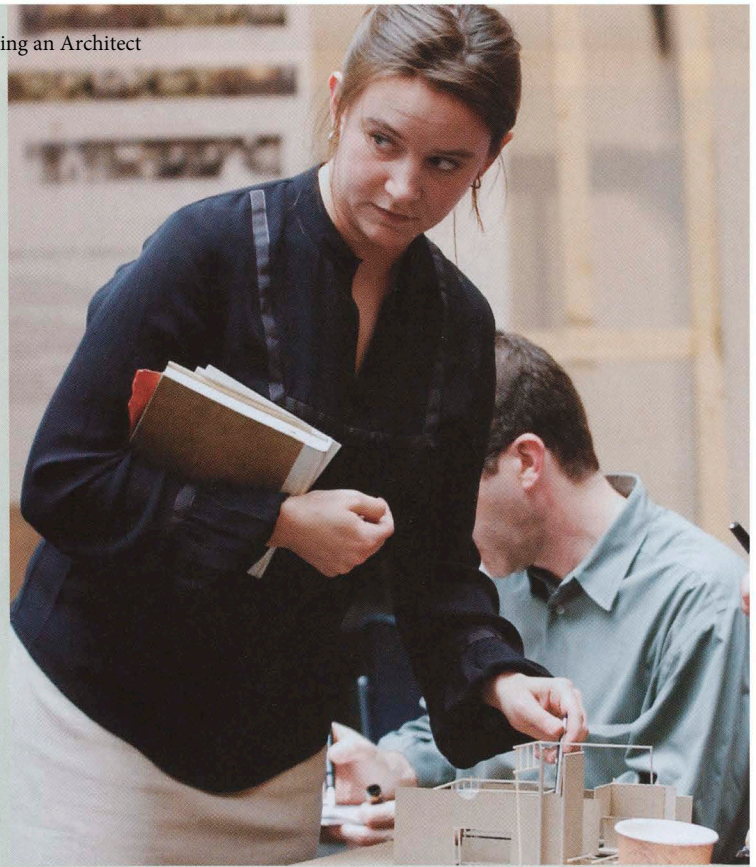
FIFTH-YEAR ARCHITECTURE STUDENT CASEY E. BOSS '03 impatiently kicks off her heels, tucks loose strands of hair behind her ear, shouts directions to an underclassman, and turns back to pinning photographs on a wall inside Slocum Hall. “Breathe, remember to breathe,” she reminds herself aloud. On the other side of that wall, classmate Nick Saponara '03 tugs at the tie stifling his hasty movements, wipes sweat from his forehead, and grumbles “Should I hang *all* of this stuff?”

This is the frantic build-up to the moment that these fifth-year architecture students have worked toward all year. It's time for the final presentation of their architecture theses—and they stand before representational models, charts and graphs, drawings, and computer-generated images that they labored over for hundreds of hours. In a few minutes, juries of four professors will convene and render judgment on the content and quality of the work. Each student's presentation—a culmination of five years of studios and critiques—will be completed in less than an hour. “Right now, I just want to get it over with,” says Saponara, whose eyes dart from his pin-ups to the jury members taking their seats.

IN MANY WAYS, THE ARCHITECTURE THESIS IS A RITE OF PASSAGE. It is an incredibly intense, yearlong process in which both bachelor's and master's degree architecture students are responsible for all aspects of a project and develop their own approaches to architecture. Each student chooses a site location, the building type, the architectural form, and the philosophical and social values the project will objectify. Until this point in their education, students have worked within professors' established guidelines. “In a fundamental way, the thesis experience demands that students make sense of their education and figure out what is important to them as architects,” says Professor Christopher Gray, former chair of the undergraduate architecture program. “The thesis is a point of completion where the student becomes the protagonist and moves from being a student to a peer.”

Fall semester focuses on Thesis Preparation, a three-credit independent study course in which each student meets regularly with a two-member faculty advising committee and develops the project's groundwork. Throughout this semester, students have three formal committee reviews, during which they present their research and provide updates on their emerging plans. They often travel to the locations of their projects to analyze them in context through sketching and research documentation. A few weeks before the semester ends, they each create a “book,” a lengthy document that outlines their architectural intentions and how they will apply them to their chosen sites. The semester ends with a presentation of the book, which serves as the blueprint for the spring semester's work. A similar review process occurs during second semester, with higher expectations and more detailed designs, and culminates with final thesis presentations in April.

THE LEAVES OUTSIDE SLOCUM HALL TRANSFORM INTO COLORFUL bursts of orange and gold as brisk winds portend winter's arrival in two short months. As Kristine Mummert '03 walks across campus, she carries a sketch pad, ready to draw anything she sees that sparks a new idea for her thesis project—a facility in



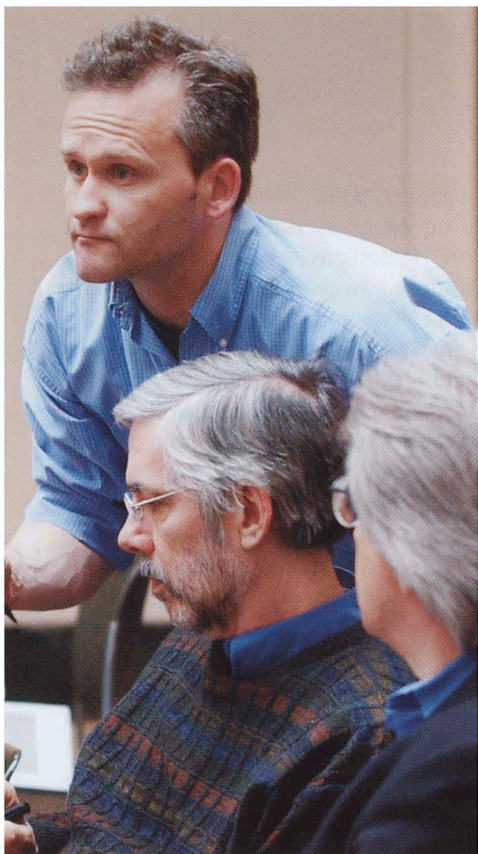
Casey Boss '03 refers to a model and diagram to explain her thesis to a jury of professors during her final thesis presentation in Slocum Hall.

Philadelphia's old Naval Yard for women with eating disorders. “Thesis is always on my mind,” Mummert says. “Throughout our education, our professors have prepared us for this year. It's a big deal because we're proving ourselves.” It's only halfway through first semester, and she already considers sleep a luxury. But what's sleep, when your identity as an architect is on the line? “Thesis is such a personal project that it's as revealing as an autobiography,” Mummert says. “Sometimes critiques make you feel like you're standing there naked in front of everyone.”

Having heard all the hype about fifth year, architecture students expect the worst. “What you hear from upperclassmen is that you work in the studio all the time,” says Sarah Mossien '03. “That's very true, but I also managed to have a job and be involved in several committees within the School of Architecture while working on my thesis. I haven't had any free time all semester.”

Saponara says his fifth year began at the 2002 graduation ceremonies as he watched classmates from other colleges receive their four-year degrees, knowing that his hardest year was still ahead. Architecture students must complete their theses before receiving a professional bachelor of architecture degree. “In a lot of ways I feel like my class graduated last year,” Saponara says. “It almost feels like we're graduate students. I'm seeing campus from the outside.”

ONCE INSIDE SLOCUM HALL, THOSE FIFTH-YEAR STUDENT FEELINGS of the “old senior” dissipate into round-the-clock project preparation, model making, brainstorming, and communal commiseration with classmates. “The building has an interesting hum, especially toward the end of a semester,” says Gray, who describes the school as a big family and a physical home for its students. “It's a slightly frenetic combination of stress and high energy. It's messy vitality.” The building is open 24



hours. Students have their own design tables and work space where they store materials, stash midnight snacks, and create their architectural proposals alongside their closest friends.

“There is something special that occurs in the ‘trial by fire’ of thesis,” says John Enright ’86, who met his wife, Margaret Griffin ’86, when they were freshman architecture students. “You form strong bonds with the people you share the experience with, and you take those with you for your entire life.”

Today, the couple run their own firm, Griffin Enright Architects, in Los Angeles, and Griffin returned to Syracuse a few years after graduation to teach. “The fifth-year thesis project is one of the strongest components of the school,” Enright says. “It is steeped in tradition and each year shows the breadth and depth of the school as a whole.”

In the working world, architects must develop and present their ideas with conviction and clarity to a variety of audiences: clients, construction teams, and sometimes entire communities. “Architecture students are taught to do the same kind of presenting and defending of their designs,” says architecture professor Anne Munly. “There’s this constant appraisal of your work by faculty, peers, and yourself. It’s not like writing a paper where if you don’t do well, you’re the only one who knows. Everything here is public.”

WITH THANKSGIVING BREAK ONLY A WEEK AWAY, THE STUDENTS switch into high gear, as their thesis proposals are due when they return. “All 90 of us are in this together and help each other through the tough times,” Mossien says. “We work next to each other and give our opinions to enhance each other’s projects.”

Saponara is exploring negotiated boundaries and orientation in his design for a new subway station at 2nd Avenue and 96th Street in New York City. Boss is interested in photography and use of perspective in creating an addition to a Boston theater with a nightclub in the basement. They have visited, diagrammed, photographed, and studied their respective sites extensively. Now they review the material and try to make sense of it in relation to the larger theoretical ideas they want their designs to incorporate.

“Last week, my parents called and asked how I was doing,” Saponara says in late November. “I told them I’ve been up for two days, and they thought I had only gotten a couple hours of sleep. But I literally had been up for two days.” Boss makes sure she sleeps at least three hours a night. “I need a small amount reg-

ularly, otherwise I’m not productive,” she says.

Anxieties run high as rumors circulate about classmates who have had negative reviews or who may withdraw so they can repeat the preparation course. Witnessing classmates’ failures or setbacks is particularly difficult, because fifth-year architecture students are like teammates working toward the same goal—surviving thesis. “You can work forever and get nowhere, but you have to keep working,” Boss says.

WHEN GRAY BECAME AN SU PROFESSOR ALMOST 30 YEARS AGO, he says incoming freshmen were told, “Look right, look left, one of those people won’t graduate.” It was more a game of survival. “Today, it’s a different culture,” he says. “It’s still rigorous, but we want everyone to be successful.” Now, most students who remain in the architecture program through sophomore year will graduate, although some must stay on after Commencement to complete their theses. This year, approximately 15 of the 93 thesis students withdrew from the preparation course in the fall or failed and had to retake the course in the spring, Gray says. Among those students was Ilon Keilson ’03, who completed the thesis preparation course in



Ilon Keilson ’03 works on his thesis at his desk in the loft of Slocum Hall.

spring and finished his project over the summer. “I was not on pace to be ready by the final day,” he says. “It does not reflect on the amount of work I had done.” He had extensively researched faceless memorials and examined connections between architecture and philosophy, but had not developed enough specific material about his site, the islands of Boston Harbor. “I consider thesis the time when I establish myself as an architect,” says Keilson, who plans to work at an architectural firm overseas this fall. “I’ll be working on the idea of architecture as philosophy for much longer than the two semesters the School of Architecture assigns to thesis, so I had problems picking a place to test it.”

Professor Munly says that devising the philosophical framework and theoretical guidelines by which to design a site is the project’s most difficult element. “Thesis requires students to bring to the table the issues important to them,” Munly says. “Students often struggle to identify the issues that transcend

the particular project and are generally applicable. Once they have established that, then they test the idea through their designs of a specific site.”

ON DECEMBER 10, A FREEZING RAIN COATS THE OUTSIDE OF Slocum Hall. But inside things are heating up for Saponara, who is presenting his thesis intentions to professors Munly and Scott Ruff, his faculty committee that has supported and critiqued him throughout the semester. Saponara has studied and charted the kinds of people who would ride the new subway line by walking from one end of the Manhattan neighborhood to the other. Along the way, he gathered data from newsstands about the kind and number of newspapers sold each day in hopes of designing a subway station that will reflect the riders’ interests and demographics.

“Your analysis is beautiful,” Ruff says. “That’s one of your strengths. Now you need to focus on finding the aesthetic and start considering what form it will take. Spend the first few weeks of next semester trying out some ideas. Make that leap of faith.”

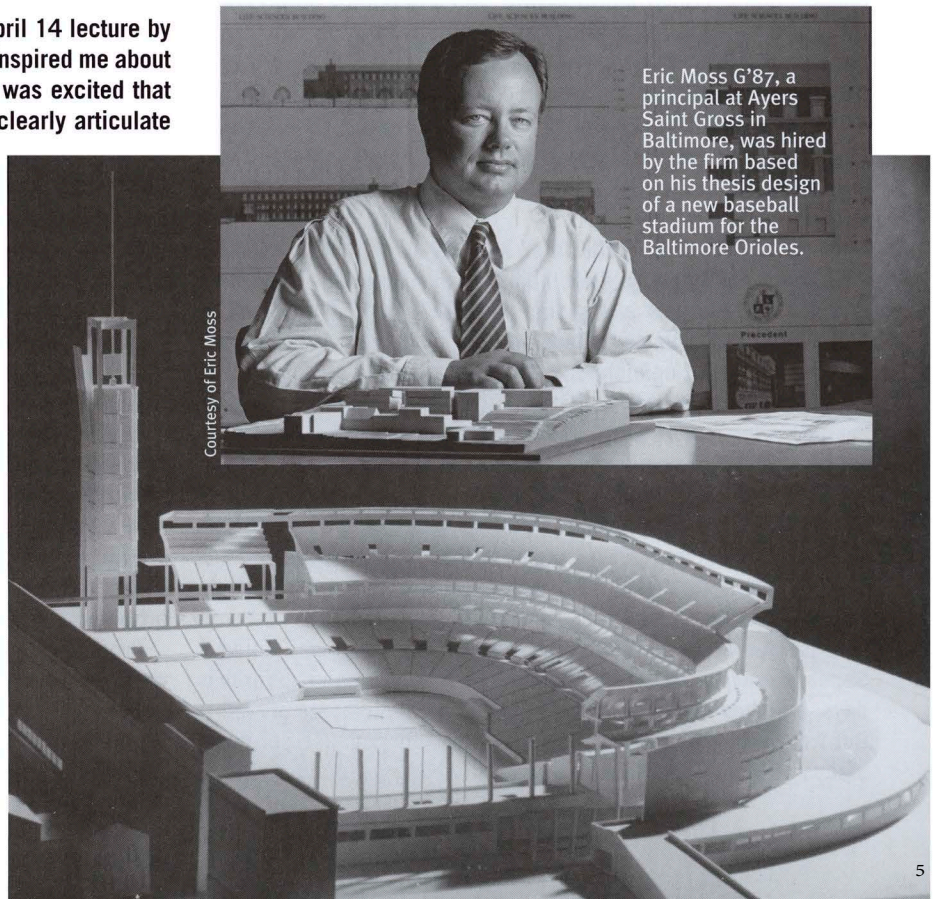
SPRING SEMESTER BEGINS WITH PORTFOLIO PREPARATION, JOB searches, and interviews—typical senior worries about future plans—and, of course, thesis work. Neither Boss nor Saponara feels they’ve made enough progress on thesis. During the first of three reviews, Boss says her faculty committee voiced concern about how little model building she had done. Meanwhile, Saponara, who was named a School of Architecture Class Marshal for Commencement, eyes the graduation countdown above his desk. He interviews with Teach for America and several architectural firms, attempting to solidify future plans. He claims his thesis has temporarily taken the back burner to cheering the men’s basketball team to the national title, and he marvels that his reviews continue to go well.

Boss has a breakthrough while attending an April 14 lecture by visiting architect Beatriz Colomina. “The lecture inspired me about what I was doing with my thesis,” Boss says. “I was excited that someone whose work I had been reading could clearly articulate what I had been struggling to do. Her work, in a sense, validated mine, especially when I was questioning my work so much.” Boss has not left her work area in the Slocum loft for eight hours. Her creative juices are flowing and she sustains her muse with pretzel sticks, carbonated water, and a hypnotic love song played on repeat. “I work until I can’t go any longer,” she says.

THIS IS THE NORMAL LIFESTYLE OF THESIS students, and it’s commonly accepted as one of the most intense periods in an architect’s career. “You can’t work much harder than on thesis,” says Eric Moss, who completed a thesis project at Syracuse to earn a master of architecture degree in 1987. “You just can’t dedicate yourself like that for your entire career. We’d all live short lives if we did. Don’t get me wrong, architects work hard, but we try to be humane. Nothing is ever quite like thesis.”

Moss is now a principal at Ayers Saint Gross in Baltimore, and his thesis story has taken on legendary status in the School of Architecture and at his firm. He designed a baseball stadium for the Baltimore Orioles that moved away from the generic, cookie-cutter style of the ‘60s and ‘70s into a more contextual structure that maintained the area’s and baseball’s history and spirit. He was invited to exhibit his thesis at the school’s Super Jury, an opportunity for the top dozen master’s and bachelor’s degree students with the highest grades to present their projects to a panel of outside judges. The judges are mostly distinguished architects and educators from across the country who decide which three students should share the \$6,000 worth of cash prizes attached to the James A. Britton Memorial Awards for Best Theses. Adam Gross ’79, partner and cofounder of the Baltimore firm that was vying for the actual contract for Oriole Park at Camden Yards, was one of the judges. He saw Moss’s presentation and offered him a job on the spot. “That made all the all-nighters worthwhile,” Moss says. “I had been so wrapped up in my thesis that I never thought about what I would do tomorrow, and here I was, having a job just given to me. From there, things got even more surreal.”

His thesis grabbed the attention of national newspapers, Baltimore radio personalities, and the Orioles’ management. He was featured in the book, *Ballpark: The Making of an American Dream*. Elements of his thesis project were incorporated into the actual stadium design, and perhaps most importantly for Moss, an avid baseball fan, it changed the way the architectural community approached stadium design. “These firms that specialize in stadium design all caught the wave and are doing things that are much less generic and more site specific,” says Moss, whose forte is now in designing new and



Eric Moss G’87, a principal at Ayers Saint Gross in Baltimore, was hired by the firm based on his thesis design of a new baseball stadium for the Baltimore Orioles.

Courtesy of Eric Moss

renovated facilities for colleges and universities.

Moss uses his story to inspire thesis students whom he interviews each year during recruiting trips to Syracuse. "I've had students call me and ask, 'How do I do that? How can I do something that will bring me acclaim?'" he says. "I wasn't seeking it. I was just like everybody else, working hard. The rest was just a matter of good fortune." But employers do value graduates who have successfully completed the rigorous thesis experience. "The thesis is always the last project in students' portfolios and should represent their best work to date," Enright says. "So, of course, the thesis becomes the best measure of a student's capabilities. Thesis becomes the student's first attempt at tackling a holistic view, in his or her own terms, of how architecture can change our environment."

AT 2 P.M. ON APRIL 29, THE MOMENT ARRIVES FOR SAPONARA and Boss. Several students and friends are on hand to watch as Saponara begins. Working on two hours of restless sleep, he introduces his project and methodology, carefully describing his research, plans, models, and illustrations. He falls into a comfortable groove and calmly answers questions from his faculty jury.

On the other side of the wall, Boss works through her nerves by giving a quick 10-minute overview of her project and intentions. She then uses questions from faculty to prompt more detailed explanations of her thesis. Professor James Cooper expresses frustration at having to coax information out of her. "I'm beginning to grasp what's there," he says. "It's a really interesting study. But I wish you could reveal a little more without so much prodding." So she does. She grabs an intricate cardboard model with removable walls—which corresponds to sleek, computer-generated illustrations of the building—and uses both visual tools to explain the overlap of space between the nightclub and the theater and the perspectives of each clientele.

With little fanfare, the presentations are done. No applause, no speeches, no wrap-ups. The professors slip away to side rooms to discuss grades. Saponara, who finished a few minutes earlier, finds Boss, and they take a moment together to decompress from a year's worth of stress. Neither has many words left. They return to their respective sides of the wall to remove their materials and make room for the next thesis students. Professors discreetly deliver their grades to them. The students' facial expressions reveal little, and both are surprised to learn they are among 12 students selected to present at this year's Super Jury. Those presentations are a much more relaxed and pleasurable experience—a perfect ending to an exhausting year, they say.

A FEW WEEKS HAVE LAPSED SINCE THOSE FINAL PRESENTATIONS.

Boss and Saponara reflect on the whirlwind that enveloped graduation, a farewell to friends, and a temporary relocation to their parents' homes in Wayland, New York, and Yonkers, New York, respectively. At this point, they describe their thesis presentations as "a blur," with little memory of what they or their jurors actually said. But the thesis process itself is unforgettable. "For a year, we all loved hating thesis," says Boss, now a design intern at Ballinger, an architectural firm in Philadelphia. "But now I just love it. I got to the end of the year and came



Nick Saponara '03 fields questions from professors about his designs for a proposed New York City subway during his final thesis presentation.

away with a project that I really like and take pride in." Saponara maintains a bittersweet fondness. "Thesis was a great experience that I'll look back on as being very valuable to my education—but not for a second would I want to do it again," he says. "I've got the official branding of having completed my rite of passage, so I'm ready to go into the workforce."

Saponara, a University Scholar who spoke at Commencement, has a thesis story that ranks with Moss's ballpark project. Saponara chose his New York City subway site based on his interest in transportation systems and how the long-proposed 2nd Avenue subway line would affect the Big Apple. Little did he know that his top choice in future employers, Fox & Fowle Architects in New York City, would be involved in the actual construction of the subway. His thesis and in-depth study of the project set him apart from other qualified graduates in securing a position with the firm, he says. "I'm really invested in the new subway line from an academic standpoint, which is different from the real-world conditions that the project's team is facing," he says. "They didn't hire me because I have all this knowledge that will revolutionize the design, but more because I bring an exceptional energy and interest to the project. I couldn't have asked for more from my thesis and senior year. It's been pretty much perfect."