

A HOUSE FOR THE ALIEN FROM BALTAN (V)お¥o(V) Teaching Architectural Design Concepts to First-Year Students

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The design process in architecture does not follow rigid rules; it may be as variable as the solution to the problems. The idea generation phase of the design process is the most difficult one. Also, the capacity to creatively solve problems directly relates to the designer's repertoire, life experience, and knowledge. How do we teach the students to find creative solutions to design problems? What are the tools to enhance creativity? On the one hand, young students don't have experience, and their knowledge is limited. On the other hand, they bring many preconceptions, pre-judgments, and prejudices to their academic work from their personal experiences. Unfortunately, young students are not a white canvas; freeing their mindsets and teaching them to stimulate their creativity is challenging. Architectural design education is project-based and taught through the studio system. This paper discusses the method used at Akashi College Architectural Design Studio IB to teach the students the idea generation phase of the design process, or architectural design concept. The method used is storytelling; the students must create a story and, based on this story, develop an architectural concept. The students are asked to design a house for the Alien from Baltan, a villain from the Ultraman TV series by Tsuburaya Productions Co. Baltan first appeared in 1966, in Episode 2 of Ultraman "Shoot the Invaders."¹ After watching the episode, the students were asked: What happened to Baltan after he was defeated? Where is he living now? How does he live? Is he alone? What does he eat? How big is he? Does Baltan sleep or use the toilet? The students create a story and later transform this story into architecture using models and drawings. This paper will describe and analyse the students' Alien from Baltan house designs from 2008 until 2024. We will show that all the students were able to create a story. Most of the students successfully transformed this story into architecture using models and drawings.

Keywords: design process in architecture, architectural design education, design concept, Alien from Baltan house

Introduction

Architectural design is a creative process that combines problem-solving, technical knowledge, and innovation. For students, especially beginners, the idea generation phase can be difficult due to limited experience and deeply ingrained preconceptions. To support creative development, architectural education often uses the studio system, which emphasizes hands-on learning and experimentation.

At Akashi College, the first-year course Architectural Design Studio IB introduces students to the design process through a unique, storytelling-based assignment: designing a house for Alien Baltan, a character from the Ultraman television series. This imaginative exercise helps students develop narratives and translate them into architectural concepts, encouraging creativity while exploring core ideas such as form, function, and context.

This paper examines the effectiveness of this approach, used from 2008 to 2024. The methodology includes an analysis of the students' designs, tracking how their architectural responses evolved, and interviews with fifth-year students to assess the assignment's lasting impact. We begin by outlining the goals of Studio IB and the role of studio education in architecture, then explain the choice of Alien Baltan as the design subject. Finally, we analyse the student works and insights from the interviews to evaluate how storytelling supports the development of design thinking.

Architectural Studio IB

Architectural studio courses serve as the backbone of architectural education. In these courses, students are required to integrate knowledge from various subjects to design buildings and architectural structures. At Akashi College, the architectural studio curriculum increases in complexity and difficulty as students progress through the program. In the first year, the primary objective is to familiarize students with the fundamentals of architectural representation, technical drawing, model-making, and the initial stages of the design process. Teaching technical drawing and model-making within studio courses is a distinctive feature of architectural

¹ According to Article 35 of the Japanese Copyright Act, it is permissible to use copyrighted materials for educational purposes.

education in Japan. In contrast, at numerous institutions overseas, these skills are taught as separate, standalone courses during the first year. Architectural Studio IB is a second-semester course for first-year architecture students at Akashi College. In the first semester, in Architectural Studio IA, students are introduced to the fundamentals of technical architectural drawing and model-making. In Studio IB, the focus shifts toward the fundamentals of architectural design, with the primary objective of introducing students to the process of generating design ideas within an architectural context. Design thinking in architecture is often described as a form of storytelling (Rowe, 1994). Unlike goal-oriented problem-solving in other disciplines, architectural design does not aim to find predefined solutions. Instead, architects imagine, narrate, and invent new worlds (Rowe, 2024). There is no single correct answer, but neither is there a completely wrong one. These abstract ideas can be especially difficult for young students to grasp, as they often lack the life experience and creative repertoire necessary to engage in open-ended design.

Students in Studio IB are typically around 15 years old, having just graduated from junior high school. They tend to have limited experience and knowledge, along with preconceived notions shaped by years of education focused on finding the "right" answers. As a result, they often struggle with the open-ended nature of design thinking. A common classroom exchange—where a student asks, "How do I do it?" and the instructor replies, "How do you want to do it?" illustrates this tension. Helping students break free from rigid thinking and encouraging creative exploration is a central pedagogical challenge.

To foster creativity, the course introduced a fantasy-based design assignment, a widely used strategy for teaching design thinking. Initially, the studio used a traditional exercise: designing a house for an artist or celebrity. However, this approach proved ineffective. Students had difficulty selecting an artist, and many were unable to complete the assignment. Moreover, because each student chose a different artist, it became difficult to facilitate class-wide discussion and idea-sharing about their design processes.

To address these challenges, we modified the assignment to use a shared, fictional context, specifically, a fantasy setting in which all students would design within the same imagined world. This approach helped to eliminate the difficulties students faced when choosing an artist and allowed for greater engagement with the creative process. More importantly, it created a shared framework for discussion, enabling students to compare, critique, and develop their ideas collaboratively. The fantasy setting functioned as a common narrative scaffold that sparked imagination and encouraged the development of architectural ideas without the constraints of realism.

Using fictional worlds (*isekai*) to teach design is not merely a pedagogical trick; it is grounded in established theories of design thinking. According to Rowe (1994), the design process involves speculative reasoning and the construction of imaginary situations. By introducing students to these practices early in their education, we

aim to shift their focus from solving predefined problems to exploring possibilities and developing design narratives. In Studio IB, students were tasked with designing a "house for the Alien Baltan." The assignment imposed minimal constraints: the house might be situated anywhere—on the ground, below the surface, or floating—and its design could range from realistic to completely imaginary. However, each student was required to define the characteristics of the setting and the lifestyle of the Alien Baltan. This open-ended task encouraged students to construct a narrative context together with a user profile, and to articulate an architectural response to both. Through this process, they began to engage with fundamental architectural concepts, such as context, function, and form, without depending on real-world precedents or being constrained by the limits of their knowledge and experience. The results of this pedagogical shift were encouraging. Students demonstrated increased motivation and creativity, and studio discussions became more dynamic and collaborative. Some imagined floating cities, others designed subterranean dwellings. Freed from the expectation of producing a "correct" answer, students explored bold, unconventional ideas. More significantly, they began to internalize the notion that architectural design is not about finding definitive solutions, but about generating proposals, about imagining what could be, rather than determining what must be.

Alien Baltan: The Ultimate Tokusatsu Villain

There were several compelling reasons for choosing Alien Baltan as the subject for the architectural design assignment. First and foremost, Baltan is instantly recognizable in Japan, even to individuals who have never watched Ultraman. The Alien Baltan (Barutan Seijin), initially introduced in Ultraman Episode 2, Shoot the Invaders! (1966) is one of the most iconic figures in the history of Tokusatsu, a turning point in Japanese pop culture by blending post-war anxieties, science fiction imagination, and groundbreaking special effects.

Tokusatsu, or "special effects," refers to a genre of Japanese post-war film and television that heavily utilizes practical effects, miniature sets, rubber suits, and imaginative storytelling. Rooted in the trauma of World War II, especially the nuclear bombings, Tokusatsu evolved as a form of creative expression that addressed national fears of destruction and rapid modernization. Core works in this genre include Godzilla, Ultraman, Kamen Rider, and Super Sentai. These productions explored themes of survival, mutation, alienation, and the struggle between good and evil, often through the lens of science fiction and fantasy.

Alien Baltan is widely regarded as the ultimate Tokusatsu villain, not only within the Ultraman series but across the broader landscape of Japanese special effects media. This status is owed to a unique combination of narrative depth, visual originality, psychological impact, and cultural symbolism. The backstory of Baltan is particularly significant. Hailing from the Planet Baltan, which was destroyed by a nuclear explosion, the Baltan race was forced to flee into space. Their attempted

invasion of Earth stems not from malice, but from desperation, a search for a new home. This tragic narrative mirrors post-war Japanese experiences of nuclear devastation, displacement, and existential fear. Baltan is not simply a monster, but an intelligent being shaped by loss. In this sense, Baltan represents "the enemy who is also a victim," embodying the moral ambiguity and emotional complexity rarely found in typical villains.

Another factor contributing to Baltan's iconic status is its unforgettable design. Created by the legendary designer Tohl Narita, Alien Baltan features a hauntingly insectoid appearance, giant pincers, glowing eyes, and a bug-like exoskeleton. It is one of the few Tokusatsu antagonists that appears distinctly non-human while remaining oddly expressive. This unsettling yet memorable design has proven to be timeless: still eerie, still effective, and widely referenced in Japanese media and popular culture. Alien Baltan has transcended its original context to become a cultural icon.

According to Article 35 of the Japanese Copyright Act, it is permissible to use copyrighted materials for educational purposes. This special provision supports teaching and learning by allowing limited use of such materials while still protecting the rights of creators.

Ultimately, the primary reason for choosing Alien Baltan as the subject of a design exercise was conceptual: Baltan has no home. Dispossessed and alienated, Baltan is a character who desperately needs a house. This narrative premise provided an ideal foundation for a design task that encouraged students to creatively explore ideas of shelter, identity, and belonging, while engaging deeply with cultural and symbolic themes from Tokusatsu.

Analysis of the Students' Works from 2008 to 2024

The "House for Alien Baltan" project has been conducted at Akashi College since 2008, producing a diverse range of imaginative responses from students over the years. This section analyses key trends in the students' work, based on their drawings, models, presentation boards, and recurring themes. The evolution of their design approach reveals both pedagogical progress and shifts in student creativity. Early Years (2008–2010) Limited Narrative, Visual Experimentation

In the earliest years, students generally focused on imagining Baltan's lifestyle, what he liked or disliked, whether he lived alone or with others, but rarely created full narratives. Most designs placed Baltan in isolated settings, such as deserted islands, oceans, or mountains, far from human civilization. While the alien's form inspired architectural shapes, students did not always construct cohesive stories. The drawings were mostly in pencil and consisted of a few pages, often lacking in layout and color. Only one student in 2008 used colored pencils, and few included titles or text explanations on their boards. Some imaginative ideas emerged nonetheless, such as Baltan working as a barber or having automatic doors in his house, but these remained conceptual rather than narrative-driven.

Narrative Development and Material Expansion (2011–2014)

From 2011, students began incorporating clay models and site maps, showing a more integrated understanding of spatial context. Font design and text began appearing more frequently on presentation boards, indicating increased attention to storytelling and visual communication. By 2012, a notable theme emerged: cloning. Several students designed Baltan clone factories rather than houses, earning the class the informal nickname "the clone class." These designs reflected deeper engagement with speculative world-building and hinted at influence from contemporary media and science fiction. From 2014 onward, color became more prominent. This shift likely resulted from a change in course materials, colored pencils were added to students' supply lists, encouraging more expressive visual presentations. Many students began giving their projects creative titles, further solidifying the narrative aspect of their designs. Cubes and geometric forms were popular in this period, possibly reflecting a shift toward more structured and modular concepts.

From 2015, student narratives became increasingly bold and diverse. For example, one student imagined Baltan retiring on the moon, while another envisioned him marrying a human he had rescued from the 2011 tsunami, with whom he later had children. Others envisioned Baltan as tired or worn out, suggesting emotional depth and psychological interpretation. Projects from this period often showed clear influence from pop culture. For instance, two students developed proposals for canning factories in which Baltan was processed as food, reflecting thematic influences from dark fantasy manga such as Tokyo Ghoul (Ishida 2011–2014, depicting the conflict between humans and flesh-eating ghouls in Tokyo) and The Promised Neverland (Shirai 2016–2020, portraying children raised in an orphanage as livestock for demons). Narrative consistency also improved. Most students who developed full stories gave their projects clear titles and often chose matching fonts for presentation boards to reinforce their concepts. Others, even without titles, expressed ideas visually through bold font design and color. Several students created not just a single dwelling, but apartment buildings or entire cities, reflecting an expanding understanding of urban scale and spatial complexity.

Common Patterns and Trends:

Across all years, some consistent patterns emerged. The most common scenario involves Baltan living alone, hiding from Ultraman, or training for revenge. These narratives often proved contagious, with classes adopting similar tones or shared ideas. For example, in 2009, several students imagined Baltan and Ultraman peacefully retired and living together, while in other years, more adversarial narratives prevailed.

In terms of form, circular and spherical shapes appeared most frequently, likely inspired by Baltan's insectoid anatomy. Several students situated Baltan's house inside or atop trees, inspired by his insect-like appearance. While most students imagined Baltan at a human size, others experimented with size, designing houses that played with scale and surreal settings.



Figure 1: example of students' works

The selection of the site location was also an important aspect of the assignment. Students were asked to choose where Baltan would live, and many selected remote or unconventional places, such as desert islands, underground, Hokkaido, Okinawa, or even alien planets and galaxies. Some students designed Alien Baltan's house next to their homes or inside their rooms.

The "House for Alien Baltan" assignment at Akashi College has proven to be an effective and imaginative introduction to architectural design for first-year students. By using a fictional character as the client, the project encourages students to move beyond conventional thinking and engage with design through storytelling, world-building, and empathy.

Over the years, the assignment has evolved alongside the students' growing skills and changing cultural influences. Early works focused more on form and basic lifestyle considerations, while later projects incorporated rich narratives, creative site selections, and more sophisticated visual presentations. The gradual inclusion of materials like colored pencils and clay models contributed to this evolution, enhancing the students' ability to express their ideas. The recurring themes, such as isolation, revenge, or coexistence, show how students use design to explore emotion, character, and context. Additionally, the interviews with fifth-year students indicate that this early assignment had a lasting impact, helping them understand the importance of creativity, storytelling, and client-centered thinking in architectural design.

5th-year students Interview

In interviews conducted with fifth-year students, we examined how much they remembered about their first design assignment and how it had impacted their academic development. They perceived the movie as a deeply sad story and expressed sympathy for the character. Alien Baltan, portrayed as a space ninja without a home, evoked themes of stealth, alienation, and survival. These elements made the project both emotionally engaging and creatively stimulating.

Student 1: "I barely remember the details of the assignment, but I do recall that it was the most creative project we had at the time. Since it was also my first design experience, I found it quite difficult to come up with ideas. Wanting to try something new, I made a round design with a spiral staircase, but it was incredibly hard to draw. I remember thinking, 'I never want to do that again'." (Figure2-1)

Student 2: "Designing a house for a non-human subject introduced an element of fantasy, which made the experience feel fresh and exciting. Each student developed their own story, leading to variations in setting and family structure, which made the process enjoyable. Unlike the Studio IA assignments, where we traced famous architectural drawings, this was our first opportunity to conceive and illustrate our own ideas. It left a strong impression on me. This assignment also connected well to the next task, which was a design competition. Through this experience, I realized that the essence of good design lies in how compelling a story you can create within given constraints." (Figure2-2)

Student 3: "I remember the project clearly because it was my first experience with architectural design. Since the subject we were designing the house for wasn't human, details like scale were flexible, and everyone's ideas were different. It was fascinating to see each student's personality come through. I especially enjoyed imagining what might happen after the events of the film. It was a unique assignment that I proudly shared with friends from other schools. The project also reflected the creative spirit of our college. From the various interpretations of Alien Baltan's house, you could sense the collective character of our class year." (Figure2-3)

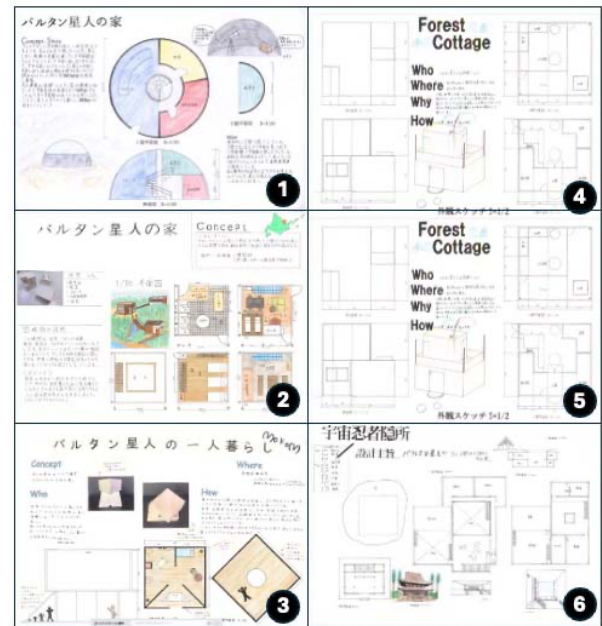


Figure 2: Interviewed Students works

Student 4: "I was so focused on drawing the plans accurately that I had little time to consider the design itself. Inspired by the concept of a space ninja, I placed the house in a forest. In the end, I used many squares and cubes, as I lacked both the ideas and the technical skills to produce more complex forms." (Figure2-4)

Student 5: "I don't remember the exact details of my design, but I do remember being strongly influenced by the idea of Alien Baltan as a 'space ninja.' I incorporated hidden tricks and features, like those found in traditional ninja houses. While other students imagined Baltan living in isolation in the forest, I envisioned a more integrated life, where he could coexist peacefully with nearby residents. I realized that an important part of the assignment was capturing Baltan's character as presented in the film. I also learned that creating an interesting story within the constraints of the project was key to a meaningful design." (Figure2-5)

Student 6: "What left the strongest impression on me was watching an episode of Ultraman Q at the beginning of the project to learn about Alien Baltan. From the video, I gathered that Baltan had stealth abilities, becoming invisible, creating clones, and shrinking in size, along with the tragic fact that he was ultimately defeated by Ultraman. Those traits became the basis for my design. I was especially struck by the idea that if Baltan were

discovered by Ultraman, he would be destroyed, so I created a story centered around him living in hiding.

Now, five years later, I no longer remember my specific design intentions, but I do believe that thinking deeply about the story of a fictional, non-existent being became a turning point for me. It helped me understand the value of narrative in design. By constructing a story first, my architectural ideas became more concrete, and I found it easier to clarify what I wanted to express." (Figure2-6)

The comments from the interviewed students clearly demonstrate that the assignment was highly effective in introducing them to the design thinking process. The six students interviewed were from the 2021 class—referred to as the 'ninja year'—since, as they noted, Alien Baltan's ninja-like qualities left a strong impression on them. All students empathized with Alien Baltan and expressed a desire to help him hide from Ultraman. They explained that the project allowed them to break away from conventional design methods and to explore their creativity within a structured yet flexible framework.

By designing a house for Alien Baltan, a non-human and fantastical subject, the students were prompted to move beyond traditional architectural constraints, such as human scale and functionality, and instead to focus on imaginative storytelling, contextual thinking, and emotional engagement. Several students emphasized that the assignment encouraged them to integrate the character's narrative and background as essential components of the design process, which enabled them to explore architectural ideas in greater depth. The freedom to create a house for an alien character with unique traits, such as invisibility, shapeshifting, and stealth, pushed the students to envision new design possibilities and to approach architecture not merely as a technical exercise, but as a medium for narrative expression. Furthermore, the diversity of ideas and solutions, ranging from hidden houses in forests to more integrated designs, demonstrated the students' ability to think critically and creatively. This freedom and flexibility, alongside the requirement to work within certain constraints, closely mirrored real-world design challenges, where the balance between creativity and practicality is crucial. The project not only deepened the students' understanding of architectural design but also emphasized the importance of story-driven design thinking, a skill that would serve them well in future projects and competitions.

Conclusion

The House for Alien Baltan design assignment at Akashi College has proven to be a powerful and imaginative entry point into architectural education. By engaging students with a fictional, non-human client, the project fosters narrative-driven design and enables students to explore architecture beyond conventional limitations of human use, function, and form. Beginning the assignment with a viewing of Ultraman (1966), Episode 2: Shoot the Invaders, has also been effective in captivating students and encouraging them to think beyond conventional frameworks.

The interpretations of Alien Baltan vary widely and often spread contagiously within each group of students. Over the years, different classes have developed recognizable "themes": the "ninja class," the "insect class" with houses in trees, the "underground class," the "Ultraman-friend class," and even a class that imagined eating canned Baltan. The assignment itself has continued to evolve, reflecting not only the students' growing skills and access to new tools, but also the refinement of studio pedagogy. While early projects emphasized form and basic spatial concepts, later work demonstrated stronger narrative cohesion, greater visual sophistication, and increased thematic diversity.

The recurring themes, ranging from revenge and isolation to peaceful coexistence, revealed students' engagement with emotion, personality, and context in design. The students' creative responses demonstrate that, even at an early stage of education, they are capable of working with complex ideas when guided toward imaginative exploration. Interview insights confirm the assignment's lasting impact: students consistently recalled it as a formative experience that shaped their understanding of architecture as a creative, story-driven discipline. The assignment also fostered empathy, imagination, and confidence, qualities that later informed their participation in design competitions and real-world architectural challenges.

Ultimately, the House for Alien Baltan assignment demonstrates the pedagogical value of storytelling in architectural education. It offers a compelling model for how creative, character-based design tasks can cultivate curiosity, originality, and deep learning among beginning architecture students.

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