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Portfolio as Narrative

Reframing Architectural Identity Construction

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Author-produced. Presents a conceptual pedagogical framework developed through the Architectural Narratives portfolio studio at Lo/Be Lab. It does not report empirical study outcomes. Comments, citation requests, and counter-evidence welcome at seth.looper@gmail.com.

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ABSTRACT

The architectural portfolio is taught, almost everywhere, as a graphic compilation problem. Yet the work it is really asked to do is identity work: helping a student see, and then author, the through-line that turns a folder of disparate projects into the trajectory of a single designer. That work is formative throughout a design education, and it becomes visible wherever the portfolio is read closely, including at the school-to-practice transition. This paper argues that the architectural portfolio is best understood not as a graphic-compilation problem but as a genre-and-identity problem, and that reframing it accordingly transforms what the portfolio studio can do. The paper presents a pedagogical framework developed across iterations of Architectural Narratives, a hybrid graduate and undergraduate portfolio studio at Kent State University's College of Architecture and Environmental Design. The framework integrates two theoretical anchors that the design-education literature has tended to read separately: Cohn's framework of visual narrative comprehension and McAdams's narrative identity theory. It puts them to work through four pedagogical moves: reframing the genre, discovering the red thread, structuring the narrative arc, and translating cognitive load into layout. Following the conceptual-paper convention articulated by Bohm (2025) and Tschimmel (2025), the paper does not present empirical evaluation of student outcomes; it offers the framework as a structured pedagogical proposition, grounded in studio practice and theoretical synthesis. The reframing has implications for architectural curricula, for portfolio assessment, and for the wider DRS Design Pedagogy SIG conversation about authentic learning, designerly well-being (Stables, 2013), and signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005).

KEYWORDS architectural pedagogy · portfolio · narrative identity · visual narrative comprehension · reflective practice · design education

1. Introduction

In the first week of Architectural Narratives, I ask each student to bring two things: their current portfolio and a moment their work was misread. The portfolios are almost always beautiful. They are also, almost always, unreadable as design positions. They show rendered surfaces without the structural pivots that produced them, final plans without the briefs that constrained them, polished hero images that do not explain why the building looks like that. The misreadings the stu-

dents recount, whether from a critic, a reviewer, or an application, tend to circle one phrase: we could not get a clear sense of you as a designer.

This mismatch, between the artifact the student has been taught to make and the reading the artifact is asked to support, is the practical opening of this paper. It is, I will argue, not a graphic problem and not a problem of student skill. It is a genre problem. The architectural portfolio has been taught as a compilation form (Stevens, Balendonck, Nullens, & Hilven, 2023; Webster, 2008) inside a profession that increasingly demands it function as identity work: as the legible articulation of a designer's stance, trajectory, and decisional logic across projects.

For most architecture students this asks for an unfamiliar move. The studio trains them to go deep inside a single concept, developing one project's idea and resolving it under critique. The portfolio asks for something the studio rarely teaches: to look back across many projects, say what each one actually did, and find the logic that runs through them. The student has to become the reader of their own body of work. That backward, cross-project work of articulating an identity is what this paper is about, and it is the part the concept-deepening studio tends to leave undone.

The design-pedagogy scholarship has theorised the architecture studio extensively (Schön, 1983, 1985, 1987), the architectural jury and crit (Stevens et al., 2023; Webster, 2008), the signature pedagogies that shape professional formation across the design disciplines (Shulman, 2005; Vesti, Laursen, & Tollestrup, 2023), and the broader properties of studio learning (Jones et al., 2025). The literature lacks a framework that treats the portfolio itself as a constructed identity-work artifact whose pedagogy can be designed, taught, and theorised on its own terms. Where the portfolio appears in the literature, it appears as a deliverable to be assessed, a vehicle for employability competencies, or a final-term workshop topic. Adjacent contemporary work approaches the function and stops short of theorising the artifact: Bhattacharya and Khan (2025) develop process-oriented templates that scaffold reflective documentation for neurodivergent design students, with the template, not the portfolio, as the unit of analysis; Lévy and Hummels (2023) operationalise a forward-projected, situated vision through the ProVi framework, with vision, not the portfolio that carries it, as the contribution; Stables (2013) names designerly well-being as a capability orientation that pedagogy should support, with capability, not the artifact that demonstrates it, as the orienting construct. This paper offers the framework the literature lacks.

The framework was developed across iterations of Architectural Narratives, a portfolio studio I have taught at Kent State CAED as adjunct faculty. It is grounded in two theoretical traditions: the cognitive science of visual narrative comprehension (Cohn, 2014; Cohn, Jackendoff, Holcomb, & Kuperberg, 2014; Cohn, 2019) and the narrative-identity tradition in developmental psychology (McAdams, 2001, 2013; McAdams & Pals, 2006). The portfolio in this combined frame functions also as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989) between the school and the firm, an artifact flexible enough to satisfy multiple social worlds while maintaining a common identity across them. I argue that reading these traditions together, and turning the synthesis into practice through four concrete studio moves, gives architectural educators a structured way to treat the portfolio as a site of identity construction rather than a deliverable to be graded.

Three research questions organise the paper. **RQ1.** What cognitive and pedagogical work does the architectural portfolio do, beyond compilation, when it is asked to function at the school-to-practice threshold? **RQ2.** How can a portfolio studio be structured to support designer identity construction, drawing on both cognitive science and narrative psychology? **RQ3.** What does framing the portfolio as narrative reveal about the architectural pedagogy that produced it, and what does it imply for the DRS Design Pedagogy SIG conversation about authentic learning, designerly well-being, and signature pedagogies?

Section 2 develops the theoretical foundations across three sub-sections (the portfolio as understudied pedagogical object, including its boundary-object function; visual narrative comprehension; narrative identity and the red thread). Section 3 describes the Architectural Narratives studio as the practitioner site and declares the methodological status of this paper as conceptual rather than empirical. Section 4 presents the four pedagogical moves with the studio exercises and protocols that operationalise each. Section 5 discusses implications for curriculum, assessment, and the wider PedSIG conversation. Section 6 closes with limitations and a forward research program.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1 The architectural portfolio as understudied pedagogical object

The portfolio has a paradoxical status in architectural education. It is treated as the load-bearing artifact of professional transition: graduate admissions, internship applications, firm hiring, and increasingly visa and licensure processes all read the portfolio as the evidentiary core of the candidate. Yet across most accredited architecture programs, formal portfolio instruction is brief, instrumental, and back-loaded, a final-term elective or a one-week workshop near commencement. The portfolio is what students take out of the program, not what they construct through the program.

This is at odds with a generation of design-pedagogy scholarship arguing that the artefacts students produce are also the means by which they become designers. Schön's account of the architecture studio as the exemplar of professional education (Schön, 1983, 1985, 1987) frames studio as a designed environment for the cultivation of artistry through coaching in real settings; the portfolio, in that frame, is not a downstream byproduct of studio but a parallel reflective surface where what was learned through making is articulated as design position. Shulman's account of signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) sharpens this: each profession has characteristic forms of teaching that reliably produce particular kinds of professionals, and architecture's signature pedagogy, the desk crit, the pin-up, the jury, is already a narrative pedagogy in which students learn to talk their work in front of skeptical others. The portfolio is the post-jury continuation of that practice. When portfolio instruction is separated from studio, the signature pedagogy is broken.

The DRS Design Pedagogy SIG has, over the past several years, pushed against this separation under the banner of authentic learning and democratic design capability (Borekci, 2023; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Within that broader conversation, several recent threads bear directly on the portfolio. Bhattacharya and Khan (2025) propose Naranote, a digital template for narrative note-taking co-designed with neurodivergent design students; their pilot work found Naranote landed more effectively in retrospective portfolio workshops than in the time-pressured project studios it was originally piloted in, a finding consistent with the framing of portfolio construction as deserving its own designed conditions rather than being threaded into project deadlines. Lévy and Hummels (2023) operationalise Projected Vision (ProVi) through five elements: a reflective space of annotated prior work; a standpoint, the designer's current position, including the lenses through which they view the field; a horizon, a vision statement of the preferred future practice; a path connecting standpoint to horizon as a sequence of achievable actions; and a refreshing moment for reassessment. Stables (2013) names designerly well-being as the orientation a capability-developing pedagogy should support, arguing for an iterative, learner-agentic, context-rich pedagogy rather than the management of pre-defined outcomes; her capability orientation, developed for K to 12 design education, treats the learner's growing power to design as the pedagogical goal rather than the learner's compliance with externally specified outcomes, a framing the present paper extends into the higher-education professional-transition moment.

A third theoretical thread sits at the intersection of these. Star and Griesemer's (1989) construct of the boundary object, an artefact flexible enough to satisfy the local information needs of multiple social worlds while maintaining a common identity across them, names what the portfolio is doing institutionally that the dossier framing obscures. The portfolio is read at once by the student (constructing identity), the studio (assessing pedagogy), the firm (assessing hiring fit), and the graduate program (assessing admission fit). The boundary-object frame matters for Section 5's argument that pedagogical investment in portfolio construction is also investment in the school-to-practice partnership itself, a partnership that, in design education specifically, has been the subject of a sustained research program on what firms require from designers and how design education shapes those requirements (Dziobczenski & Person, 2017).

This paper extends the threads above by anchoring them in two more foundational traditions, the cognitive science of how readers process sequential visual material and the developmental psychology of how individuals construct identity through narrative, and by demonstrating the synthesis in an architecture-specific portfolio studio. Table 1 sets up the genre distinction the rest of the paper relies on.

Table 1. *The dossier portfolio and the narrative portfolio compared across five pedagogical dimensions.*

Dimension	Dossier portfolio	Narrative portfolio
Primary pedagogical function	Administrative verification; skills compilation	Metacognitive reflection; identity construction
Temporal focus	Retrospective; documents completed work	Tri-temporal; links reconstructed past, present action, projected future
Cognitive orientation	Passive recognition; high visual complexity; disjointed semantic flow	Active retrieval; structured visual storytelling; reduced cognitive load
Philosophical premise	Anthropocentric; mastery over form and material	Ecologically relational; empathy, universal design, more-than-human agency
Assessment orientation	Static grade-based evaluation of finalised product	Process-oriented; evaluation of reflective journey, pivots, learning agency

2.2 Visual narrative comprehension: vocabulary for the layout critique

The architectural portfolio is, in its medium, a sequence of images. Reviewers do not read it as a database; they read it as a visual narrative, moving page by page, building expectations, updating mental models, and noticing breaks. The cognitive cost of those breaks is consequential for how the work is received.

Cohn's research program on the cognition of visual narrative (Cohn, 2014; Cohn et al., 2014) culminates in the Parallel Interfacing Narrative-Semantics (PINS) Model (Cohn, 2019), which describes sequential image comprehension as the continuous interaction of two representational levels: a semantic level that builds meaning into an evolving mental model of the discourse, and a narrative-structure level that organises semantic information into coherent hierarchical sequences. When a sequence of images aligns the reader's narrative expectations with the semantic content presented, comprehension is fast, retention is high, and the reader assigns the work persuasive weight. When the sequence breaks, when a new spatial frame appears without setup, when a hero render arrives without the brief that motivated it, when the implied chronology of design decisions is shuffled, the reader's mental model must update under load. Electrophysiological studies in this research program

show that comparable structural breaks in comic and sequential-image reading produce distinct event-related brain potentials: left-anterior negativities (interpreted as prediction error against forward-looking narrative-structural expectations) and posterior P600 effects (interpreted as prolonged restructuring) when narrative-constituent boundaries are disrupted (Cohn et al., 2014). I cite this ERP work to establish the parent paradigm's empirical seriousness, not as evidence for the portfolio-reading case: whether portfolio reading produces these specific neural signatures is an open empirical question. The architectural portfolio is, in structural respects, closer to information visualisation than to the comic strip. Readers self-pace, navigate non-linearly, and combine text, image, and diagram in a hybrid register. The cognitive-science apparatus travels here as a translation rather than a verified empirical mapping.

What that translation gives the portfolio studio is a vocabulary for the layout critique that names what students experience as cognitive load and what readers experience as the work not narrating. The critique sentence shifts from this looks busy to this spread forces three mental-model updates without warrant. The portfolio becomes teachable in the same vocabulary the discipline uses for the design of buildings: sequence, hierarchy, threshold, datum.

The framework names and addresses three failure patterns. *Outcome-without-process*: a polished interior render appears with no upstream evidence of the spatial conflict it resolved; the semantic content has no scaffold. *Density-without-hierarchy*: a page-spread crowded with plans, sections, and details at uniform visual weight invites the reader's attention to scatter; nothing is read because everything competes equally. *Sequence-without-direction*: project order reflects chronology of execution rather than the narrative logic of the designer's argument; the implied argument shifts page by page. Each pattern is a candidate for layout-critique intervention informed by the visual-narrative vocabulary, and each is taken up in the studio exercises described in Section 4.

2.3 Narrative identity and the red thread

The cognitive-science frame describes how the portfolio is read. Narrative identity theory describes what happens to the maker during construction. McAdams's research program (McAdams, 2001, 2013; McAdams & Pals, 2006) holds that human beings construct personal and professional identity by composing an internalised, evolving life story that selectively reconstructs the past and anticipates the future, synthesising episodic memories, current values, and future goals into a sense of unity, continuity, and purpose. McAdams's thematic coding of life-story narratives foregrounds two paired constructs from Bakan's work, agency (the protagonist's capacity to affect change) and communion (interpersonal connection and belonging), together with redemption (the synthesis of suffering or failure into growth) as a distinctive narrative form. To these three I add a fourth element I call temporal alignment (the harmonisation of reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future), synthesised from McAdams's broader life-story unity criteria as a working pedagogical category. The four together have direct architectural-portfolio analogues.

Each element has a direct architectural-portfolio analogue. *Agency* surfaces in the portfolio as the designer's documented capacity to make decisions under constraint: structural pivots, programmatic re-briefs, the moment the proposal turns. *Communion* surfaces as the documentation of collaborative practice and stakeholder engagement: who else was in the room, whose needs shaped the move. *Redemption* surfaces as the explicit treatment of failure: the iteration that did not work, the critique that landed, the constraint that became a generator. *Temporal alignment* surfaces as the architecture of the portfolio itself: the through-line connecting an early academic exercise to a graduate housing proposal to a stated future commitment.

I find it useful, in the studio, to give this through-line a name borrowed from a recurring cultural metaphor: the red thread. The metaphor captures what students need to find: a persistent organising principle that weaves through disparate work and makes it legible as

the trajectory of a single designer. A workable red-thread statement, in my practitioner-derived working heuristic, exhibits four qualities: persistence across varied physical and digital contexts; clarity of creative orientation; distinctiveness from other designers; and integrative logic that explains the portfolio's choices. The four qualities are not derived from McAdams; they are diagnostic criteria that have proven useful in the studio context and that a planned subsequent empirical study would test against student-rated and reviewer-rated outcomes.

Two further theoretical anchors connect the McAdams frame to the architectural-pedagogy literature. Lave and Wenger's account of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) describes the way newcomers become full participants in a community of practice through progressively increasing engagement. The portfolio, in this frame, is the artefact through which the newcomer architect makes their peripheral participation legible to the community they are seeking to enter. Brookfield's account of the critical witness in adult learning (Brookfield, 1995) describes the role another person plays in confirming or disturbing the learner's emerging frame. The studio critique and the peer-portfolio session are both instantiations of the witness mechanism through which the red thread becomes articulable.

The framework rests on two intersecting loops. The reader's cognitive-integration loop (the Cohn frame) cycles between semantic and narrative-structural processing, mental-model updating, and the experience of coherence or break. The maker's narrative-identity construction loop (the McAdams frame) cycles between agency, communion, redemption, and temporal alignment. The portfolio sits at the intersection, simultaneously legible-to-reader and constitutive-of-maker. Read through this combined frame, the portfolio is not the documentation of identity already formed. It is the medium through which identity is constructed.

3. The Architectural Narratives studio: context and methodological framing

The framework presented in this paper was developed across iterations of Architectural Narratives, a hybrid graduate and undergraduate course at Kent State University's College of Architecture and Environmental Design (CAED). The course is structured as a fourteen-week term combining lecture, in-class workshop, peer critique, and one-on-one desk conversation, at workshop-scale cohorts. Students come from both the M.Arch and B.S.Arch tracks, and the cohort typically includes international students preparing for graduate school applications, mid-program undergraduates assembling internship portfolios, and final-term M.Arch students preparing for firm hiring.

The course is framed, against the local norm, as a portfolio workshop distinct from project studios. Bhattacharya and Khan (2025) observe that process-oriented templates feel like an extra administrative burden when introduced into fast-paced project studios but become more useful when offered in dedicated portfolio workshops where students have facilitated time to step back from active designing, look at their creative process holistically, and separate their experiences into clear narrative chapters. Their own pilot found that students completing process templates during intensive studio courses often experienced them as an additional task within an already structured deadline-driven course, while in a separate portfolio workshop the same templates were absorbed more readily. The framework presented here is designed in alignment with that observation: it is a portfolio workshop in their sense, not an additional layer on top of an active project studio.

A note on the methodological status of this paper. This is a conceptual paper. It presents a pedagogical framework, developed across semesters of studio practice and informed by formative iteration of the studio's exercises and prompts. It does not present empirical evaluation of student outcomes. Comparative measurement of student portfolios, pre- and post-course, against control cohorts, and longitudinally at six- and

twelve-month intervals after course completion, is the subject of a planned subsequent study, undertaken under a research-ethics protocol in development. Following the genre convention recently articulated by Bohm (2025) and Tschimmel (2025), I declare the paper's status explicitly so the reader can calibrate the claims accordingly: what follows is a structured pedagogical proposition, grounded in studio practice and theoretical synthesis, offered as the conceptual scaffold for subsequent empirical work.

The paper also sits within the genre of practitioner-researcher contributions in design education that translate sustained design-and-teach practice into design-research publication, exemplified by Heiss, McGee, Page, Aung, and Flynn (2023) on embedded design PhD researchers in industry contexts. The practitioner-observer role I occupy with respect to the Architectural Narratives studio mirrors, at a smaller scale, the role Heiss and colleagues occupy with respect to their industry-embedded design projects: in both cases, the framework being theorised is one the author has helped to construct in practice, and the disciplinary contribution is the structured articulation of what that practice has made teachable.

Where the framework's exercises, prompts, or rubrics are described below, they describe the studio's design intent rather than reported student outcomes. Where prior-cohort work is referenced, it is de-identified and used only to illustrate the framework's intended use, not as data from a research study. A schedule overview of the studio's structure is given in Table 2 in Section 4 below.

4. The pedagogical framework: four moves

The framework turns the theoretical synthesis into practice through four moves, taught in sequence across the fourteen-week term. Each move pairs a conceptual reframing with concrete studio exercises and a small set of evaluative heuristics that students apply to their own and others' work. Table 2 summarises the full studio protocol; each sub-section below picks up one row.

Table 2. *Architectural Narratives studio protocol: weekly arc, pedagogical move, exercise, artefact, and theoretical anchor.*

Weeks	Move	Exercise	Artefact	Theoretical anchor
1	Reframing the genre	Two-portfolios reading; locating self on Table 1 dimensions	Framing-prompt draft v1	Schön (1983, 1987); Shulman (2005)
2–5	Discovering the red thread	Self-evaluation along five reflective dimensions; card-sort triangulation; peer-dialogue session; narrative compression cycle	Red-thread statement v1–v4	McAdams (2001, 2013); Brookfield (1995); Lave & Wenger (1991)
6–9	Structuring the narrative arc	Five-section portfolio template; per-project arc; process documentation	Portfolio architecture map; per-project storyboards	Campbell (1949); narrative-grammar literature
10–13	Cognitive load and visual sequencing	Spread audit (paired); layout heuristics applied to candidate spreads	Final portfolio spreads	Visual narrative comprehension (Cohn, 2014, 2019)
14	Integration	Final crit; reflection journal submission	Final portfolio; reflection journal	All of the above

4.1 Move one. Reframing the genre: from archive to narrative

The first week is a genre intervention (Table 2, row 1). The studio introduces Table 1 as a working comparison and invites students to locate their existing portfolio along each dimension. The exercise is designed to give students a vocabulary for locating themselves in the dossier mode they have largely been taught and to frame the framework as an extension of what they already know rather than a critique.

The framing exercise is paired with an artefact analysis I call the two-portfolios exercise. Students are given two de-identified portfolios, one constructed in the dossier mode, one in an early narrative mode, and asked to read each silently for three minutes, then to write for five minutes on what the portfolio is telling them about the designer. The exercise is constructed to surface the genre difference experientially before any theory is presented. The exercise is designed on the assumption that the dossier portfolio leaves the reader able to list the projects but not to describe the designer, while the narrative portfolio leaves the reader with a designer-impression that may be incomplete but is coherent. The exercise gives the rest of the course a shared referent the studio can return to.

The move closes with the term's framing prompt, which each student is asked to begin drafting in week one and to revise across the term: who am I as a designer, and what does my work say about that. The prompt is deliberately under-specified. Quick answers tend toward flat statements about software or sectors; sustained engagement tends toward something that does identity work.

4.2 Move two. Discovering the red thread: structured self-reflection

Weeks two through five are devoted to the red-thread inquiry (Table 2, row 2). The aim of this stretch is for each student to read their own studio work as evidence and to say, from it, who they are as a designer: what they are good at, where the work is still weak, and what holds the projects they have chosen to keep together. The studio uses a sequence of structured reflection exercises adapted from a method catalogue I have developed in adjacent work (Looper, 2025b, 2026a, 2026b): narrative compression, the iterative reduction of a statement from paragraph to one word; card-sort triangulation, the physical sorting of project cards along self-chosen and peer-suggested axes; and a peer-conversation-as-mechanism protocol for paired reflection. The sequence has five parts.

First, students complete a written self-evaluation along five dimensions I have adapted, with modification, from the standpoint element of Lévy and Hummels's (2023) ProVi framework: current skills, values, design preferences, professional standpoint, and projected horizon. Lévy and Hummels treat standpoint and horizon as two of five ProVi elements; in the studio I unpack the standpoint into four sub-dimensions and retain horizon as the fifth, an adaptation rather than a direct application. The self-evaluation is private and not shared; its function is to produce internal material for the subsequent exercises.

Second, students conduct a card-sort exercise on their own work. They print one card per project, carrying a thumbnail and one-sentence description, and physically sort the cards on a studio table by self-chosen criteria, first along an axis they invent, then along an axis a peer suggests. The exercise is designed to externalise pattern recognition. It creates conditions under which the apparent salience of projects can shift: a project initially treated as an outlier may resurface as load-bearing under a second axis, and a project foregrounded for one reason may relocate when sorted against a peer's framing.

Third, students draft a one-sentence red-thread statement and submit it for peer dialogue in groups of three. Each group session follows a structured protocol: the speaker reads their statement aloud, the two listeners reflect back what they heard without amending it, and only then is the speaker allowed to revise. The protocol is designed to make the witness mechanism (Brookfield, 1995) explicit and to slow the speaker's revision impulse.

Fourth, students take the revised statement through a narrative-compression cycle: the paragraph version, then the sentence version, then the keyword version, then a one-word distillation. The compression is not the deliverable; it is the diagnostic. The compression cycle is designed to surface where a statement's integrative logic is robust and where it is still soft, the soft places being the loci of further revision in the fifth step.

Fifth, students return to the paragraph version armed with what the compression cycle showed them. The five-part sequence is designed so that the statement at the end of week five functions as a working draft, not a final deliverable. The compression-and-rewrite cycle is intended to make the statement durable across the remaining nine weeks of layout work without freezing it prematurely.

4.3 Move three. Structuring the narrative arc

Weeks six through nine translate the red thread into structural decisions about the portfolio's architecture (Table 2, row 3). Several narrative grammars are available; the studio uses Campbell's monomyth (Campbell, 1949) as a transitional scaffold, less because the heroic frame is universal than because it is familiar to novice designers and converts cleanly into a five-section template at both the portfolio and the per-project level. The monomyth carries well-documented gender, cultural, and colonial critiques (Northup, 2006), and the studio treats it accordingly: as one available narrative grammar among several, offered as a default scaffold that students are invited to invert or replace when their work argues against the heroic frame.

At the portfolio level, the monomyth scaffolds five sections: an opening establishing the designer's biography and red thread; a call introducing each project's brief, site, and constraints; a trials section documenting the design process (iteration, pivots, conflicting requirements, resolutions that did not work); a climax presenting the final design as the logical resolution of the established conflict; and a return closing each project with reflection on outcomes, human impact, and what the project added to the designer's developing position.

At the per-project level, the same arc operates. Students are asked to spend deliberate time on the trials section, the section their previous portfolio practice has typically suppressed, and to treat process documentation as evidence of agency in the McAdams sense (Section 2.3). The framework is designed to convert a project that previously presented as a single completed image into a multi-spread argument about a designer's decisional logic.

The monomyth is offered as a default scaffold, not a mandate. Students whose work argues against the heroic frame, projects responding to collective rather than individual agency, projects in which the return is the constraint rather than the resolution, are encouraged to invert or break the structure consciously. The framework is designed to hold even when departed from; the pedagogical purpose of the scaffold is not the structure itself but the vocabulary for structuring that students gain by working through it.

4.4 Move four. Cognitive load and visual sequencing

The final four weeks translate the visual-narrative vocabulary (Section 2.2) into a layout grammar (Table 2, row 4). The studio adopts five layout heuristics, each tied to a cognitive mechanism (Table 3).

Table 3. *Five layout heuristics derived from visual-narrative comprehension research, with their cognitive function and architectural-portfolio application.*

Heuristic	Cognitive function	Portfolio application
Sequential ordering	Reduces semantic-integration cost; mirrors the structural-coherence patterns described in visual-narrative research	Arrange projects to show the evolution of a spatial idea from site analysis to occupancy
Visual metaphor	Accelerates comprehension; triggers schema activation through analogy	Use analog drawings or graphic icons to represent abstract environmental forces
Visual hierarchy	Mitigates divided attention; prevents cognitive overload	Allow the key section drawing or conceptual diagram to dominate the page-spread
Emotional engagement	Strengthens memory trace encoding; enhances persuasive rhetoric	Frame design choices around universal usability and affective spatial atmosphere
Information density	Facilitates pattern recognition; allows insight extraction within seconds	Eliminate redundant visual textures; maintain consistent scales and clear keys

The heuristics are taught with a spread audit exercise students conduct in pairs. Each student trades a candidate spread with a partner; the partner reads it silently for thirty seconds, then describes aloud what the spread is telling them and where their attention went. The exercise is designed to externalise the reader's cognitive process in real time, giving the spread-designer evidence of where the visual-narrative interface is breaking. The pedagogical aim is that the spread audit converts the critique register from aesthetic judgement to predictive cognitive observation.

The cumulative output of the four moves is not a finished portfolio. It is a portfolio that the student is now reading, as a constructed narrative subject to both cognitive and identity-level evaluation. The framework's intended legacy beyond the term is a vocabulary for talking about layout decisions that does not collapse into matters of taste.

5. Discussion: the portfolio as identity workshop

My central pedagogical claim is that the portfolio is best understood not as the product of design education but as a workshop site within design education, a designed environment in which the architecture student does the identity work that the rest of the curriculum has been preparing them for but has rarely been organised to support directly. Three implications follow.

Curricular implication. In the architectural programs I have observed across nearly two decades of practice and teaching, the portfolio is commonly treated as a final-term deliverable: a graphic problem to be solved in the weeks before commencement. The framework presented here argues for a different model, a dedicated portfolio workshop, distinct from project studios, distributed across the curriculum at strategic intervals (typically end of foundation year, mid-program, and pre-graduation). The argument is not for more portfolio instruction; it is for the recognition that portfolio construction is the medium through which architectural identity becomes legible, and that the medium needs the same designed conditions the project studio receives. The DRS PedSIG conversation about authentic learning (Borekci, 2023) has the right vocabulary for this argument; what has been missing is the architecture-specific operationalisation.

Methodological implication for assessment. When the portfolio is treated as a narrative workshop, assessment shifts from artefact-only evaluation to artefact-plus-reflection-plus-pivots. The rubric the framework proposes evaluates four dimensions: the artefact's success as a designed object (the visual-narrative-readable layout, the visual hierarchy, the spread sequenc-

ing); the artefact's identity work (the legibility of the red thread, the integrative logic across projects); the documentation of the designer's process (the explicit treatment of failure, pivot, and constraint); and the meta-cognitive component of the term's reflection journal. The framework holds that the artefact alone is necessary but not sufficient: students who produce technically polished portfolios without the reflective and process layers are positioned to revise; students whose artefact is rougher but whose identity work is articulate are positioned for technical-coaching gains that come more readily than the reverse. The assessment rubric encodes a pedagogical position about which work matters more.

Theoretical implication for the wider PedSIG conversation. As Section 2.1 established, the portfolio operates as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989) across four readerships: the student constructing identity, the studio assessing pedagogy, the firm assessing hiring fit, and the graduate program assessing admission fit. What follows from that framing for the PedSIG conversation is that pedagogical investment in portfolio construction is also investment in the school-to-practice partnership itself, the conditions under which design students and design-receiving organisations construct one another (Dziobczenski & Person, 2017). The portfolio is one of the principal boundary infrastructures of that partnership. Reframing it as identity workshop is a precondition for reframing the partnership more broadly, a research direction I take up at greater length in parallel work on industry-education partnership infrastructures in architecture.

The framework extends three threads in the existing LxD and DRS conversation. It extends Bhattacharya and Khan's (2025) work on inclusive co-designed scaffolding by adding the cognitive-load dimension of layout-as-narrative. It extends Lévy and Hummels's (2023) ProVi framework by anchoring forward-looking design vision in the McAdams narrative-identity constructs rather than treating vision as a standalone scaffolding element. It extends Stables's (2013) designerly-well-being framing by giving her capability orientation a specific artefact through which capability becomes legible at the professional-transition moment: the portfolio's red thread is, in the framework's terms, the capability orientation made articulable for the school-to-practice threshold. The synthesis is not in any single source; it is in the operationalised pedagogical framework that ties them together inside an architecture-specific studio.

6. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

I have argued that the architectural portfolio is best understood not as a graphic-compilation problem but as a genre-and-identity problem, and that reframing it accordingly transforms what the portfolio studio can do. The portfolio, treated as a narrative-identity workshop rather than a compilation deliverable, becomes a site of metacognitive development that bridges studio learning and professional practice. The framework presented above, integrating Cohn's framework of visual narrative comprehension and McAdams's narrative-identity theory through four pedagogical moves and threaded through the boundary-object frame, operationalises that reframing for the architectural studio. The framework was developed across iterations of the Architectural Narratives studio at Kent State CAED and is offered as a structured pedagogical proposition for the architectural-education community and the wider DRS Design Pedagogy SIG.

The framework's pedagogical aim is ultimately formative rather than presentational. By having students review their studio work, name its strengths and its weaknesses honestly, and compose those projects into a legible account of a single designer, the framework is designed to support both the making of the portfolio and the clearer sense of self that comes from reading one's own work: the vocabulary to say who one is as a designer and why the work looks the way it does. Whether the framework produces that effect, and whether it lasts, is an empirical question for the study outlined below; the claim advanced here is one of design intent.

Four limitations bear on the present argument. **Single-institution and architecture-specific scope.** The framework was developed in one US accredited architecture program at workshop-scale cohorts; transferability to other architecture programs and to non-architecture design disciplines is not established. The framework's monomyth move, in particular, may carry cultural assumptions that require adaptation in other contexts. **Conceptual rather than empirical contribution.** The paper presents the framework and its operationalisation; it does not present comparative measurement of student outcomes pre- and post-course or against control cohorts. Subsequent empirical evaluation is the subject of a planned ethics-approved study. **Author dual role.** I am both the designer of the framework and the practitioner-observer of it; the formative judgments that shaped the framework's iteration are partial and have not been double-coded. A second-coder analysis of recorded studio sessions and the planned evaluation study would address this in the subsequent empirical pass. **Population characteristics.** The cohorts to date have skewed toward students preparing for graduate school applications and firm hiring at large-firm M.Arch entry; the framework's behaviour for students entering small-firm practice, alternative-track careers, or non-US professional contexts is not yet known.

Three forward research directions are open. First, a planned longitudinal study at six- and twelve-month intervals after course completion would test whether the framework's effects persist into firm hiring and graduate admission outcomes, and whether the four red-thread qualities proposed in Section 2.3 hold up as diagnostic criteria against student-rated and reviewer-rated outcomes. Second, a comparative study of the framework's adaptation in non-architecture design disciplines, industrial design, graphic design, interaction design, would test whether the architecture-specific moves transfer, partially transfer, or require disciplinary reformulation. Third, the framework's boundary-object framing (Section 5) connects to a broader research program on industry-education partnerships in design that I am developing in parallel; the portfolio-as-boundary-object move is the conceptual hinge between the present paper and that program, and developing the hinge into a full theoretical contribution is the subject of subsequent work.

The architectural portfolio is asked, every year, to carry the weight of professional transition for thousands of emerging architects. The current pedagogical convention, that the portfolio is a graphic problem to be solved at the end, is inadequate to that weight. Reframing the portfolio as narrative is the small move that lets the larger weight be carried.

Lo/Be Lab welcomes collaboration on the open research lines described above, particularly from architecture-education, design-management, and narrative-psychology research programs equipped to conduct the empirical validation work. Inquiries can be directed to seth.looper@gmail.com.

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