

# Qualities of a good project

*At Powderhouse, projects are the work that young people and staff will be doing together. Whether within seminars, lab groups, as part of off-campus experiences, or independently, these projects will take many different forms, use different media, and happen on many different scales and scopes. This document is our first attempt at articulating what we mean when we talk about project quality, answering the question: If not rubric- or competency-based, how will we communicate to staff and students what it means to do a high quality project? For us, the important thing is to capture the sense of taste and aesthetic that went into conceiving of and designing a project as much as the rigor and depth deployed in doing it.*

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When it comes to projects, “quality” at Powderhouse Studios is simple:

- **Is the project meaningful?**
  - Does the doing of the project matter?
  - And/or is the project necessary, useful, or beautiful to you or someone you care about?
- **Is the project ambitious?**
  - Does the project stretch you in meaningful ways where you will have been able to honestly say you’ve grown for your efforts?
  - Is the difficulty gratuitous? Because that’s the wrong kind of hard.
- **Is the project deep?**
  - Does the project engage powerful ideas?
  - Is the engagement itself deep, *i.e.* do you develop real ownership over ideas, leaving you in a position to independently use those ideas for your own ends?
- **Is the project real?**
  - Is there an independent standard of performance for the project?
  - Does it *actually* engage with the real world? *i.e.* could the project stand alone, separate from its context as having been done in a school or at Powderhouse?
- **Is the project fresh?**
  - Does the project hang together?
  - Are its ideas coherent?
  - Does it have aesthetic integrity, an internal integrity of design?

Ultimately, we would like to have a one-pager for each of these project qualities which incorporates relevant movie clips, GIFs, dichotomies, stories, and case studies (*Nightmare Before Christmas*, etc.) which will help to communicate what each word means for us at PHS and how we can see these qualities in staff and student work.

Until then, a few, flavorful framings...

[Kanye West on “dopeness”:](#)

*For me, first of all, dopeness is what I like the most. Dopeness. People who want to make things as dope as possible. And, by default, make money from it. The thing that I like the least are people who only want to make money from things whether they're dope or not. And especially make money at making things as least dope as possible.*

[Ira Glass on the taste gap:](#)

*Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. A lot of people never get past this phase, they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have. We all go through this. And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you gotta know its normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week you will finish one story. It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions. And I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met. It's gonna take awhile. It's normal to take awhile. You've just gotta fight your way through.*

[Christopher Alexander on quality:](#)

*In my life as an architect, I find that the single thing which inhibits young professionals, new students most severely, is their acceptance of standards that are too low. If I ask a student whether her design is as good as Chartres, she often smiles tolerantly at me as if to say, "Of course not, that isn't what I am trying to do.... I could never do that."*

*Then, I express my disagreement, and tell her: "That standard must be our standard. If you are going to be a builder, no other standard is worthwhile. That is what I expect of myself in my own buildings, and it is what I expect of my students." Gradually, I show the students that they have a right to ask this of themselves, and must ask this of themselves. Once that level of standard is in their minds, they will be able to figure out, for themselves, how to do better, how to make something that is as profound as that.*

[Peter Drucker's stonecutter parable:](#)

*An old story tells of three stonecutters who were asked what they were doing. The first replied, 'I am making a living.' The second kept on hammering while he said, 'I am doing the best job of stonecutting in the entire country.' The third one looked up with a visionary gleam in his eyes and said, 'I am building a cathedral.'*

[John Ciardi on translation of Dante's \*Inferno\*:](#)

*When the violin repeats what the piano has just played, it cannot make the same sounds and it can only approximate the same chords. It can, however, make recognizably the same "music," the same air. But it can do so only when it is as faithful to the self-logic of the violin as it is to the self-logic of the piano.*

## Readings & resources

### Internal

- [6 October draft from Diana Lebeaux](#)

### External

- [Qualities of Quality](#)
- [Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance](#)
- ["What's the Big Idea?"](#)
- [The Reflective Practitioner](#)
- [Ira Glass on the taste gap](#)
- Christopher Alexander's foreword to Richard Gabriel's [Patterns of Software](#), specifically the passage beginning with, "Here I am at a grave disadvantage".