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## UO M.Arch application essay

**We value the breadth of experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds that our students bring to the School of Architecture and Environment. Why are you interested in architecture at the University of Oregon? How will your unique experience and background contribute to our program?**

(1,000 words maximum)

I am a Filipino American who grew up in the US, the Philippines, Morocco, and India. I am an artist, illustrator, designer, photographer, and writer who has studied art and design up to the graduate level. Combined, I have a year's worth of residential construction experience, both in Portland with a contractor who specializes in high-end modern homes, and on the Oregon coast — where I helped design and build a 2,200 square foot, shingle-style cottage for my parents.

This house is where my interest in architecture really shifted from the periphery to the center. I can't take sole credit for an inherently collaborative endeavor, of course, and I won't make any claims as to the actual strength of the design — other than to note that my parents love the house and that their neighbors have told me it is beautiful. What I will say, though, is that the design-build process — at least as an exercise in creative shapeshifting, from observer and brainstormer to draftsman, 3D modeler, builder, liaison, and user — revealed something curious to me: this felt more liberating than total creative freedom, somehow. It wasn't just that wearing different hats within the scope of a single project felt like a natural fit. The very premise of making something as indispensable as shelter meant that, for better or worse, I was now accountable to a tangible place in the world.

This wasn't always the case. Over the years, the Peace Corps, the World Wildlife Fund, and the US Agency for International Development charted our family's rambling course across the planet, between megacities, and through and around wildly divergent cultures. In a way, all of these places are home — at least to the extent that the call to prayer, the smell of paan, or the sight of lechon are enough to make one feel homesick. At the same time, we lived wherever we were assigned — someone else's country, someone else's house, someone else's furniture. We never really had a permanent place to call home, whether it was a hometown with lifelong friends or a physical dwelling imbued with collective memories. As a TCK (Third Culture Kid), my point of origin is a literal 'no place' — neither citizenship nor residence alone fully describe

where I come from or who I am. Hence the ‘third culture’: a personal (utopian?) synthesis of place, language, myth, vision, voice.

This is an ongoing conversation, and for me, art has proven fertile grounds for its development. Cut-and-paste remix culture was as close as I could get to understanding both my own personal experience and larger patterns of cultural production in the early 21st century. East and West, high and low, minimalist and maximalist — all of these dichotomies and each of their constituent parts were fair game for inspection, reverence, disassembly, and reconstruction. But as much as I often delighted in the possibilities of this pick-and-choose approach, I couldn’t shake a certain sense of ambivalence in treating the world like so many interchangeable game pieces. Something else, in parallel, was afoot: the delivery mechanisms for cultural content were starting to have greater implications for society than any of the actual content itself.

This interest in technology continued on through my MFA studies, where I was fortunate to work with a cohort and curricular ethos both rooted in plurality and hands-on making. The iconoclast in me, though, decided to take up 3D printing, and before long, I discovered that it was possible to generate 3D models of things based only on their photographs — to guess an object’s shape in three dimensions based only on information from two dimensions. To me, this indicated a pernicious assumption embedded within the apparently benign rationale of the “If you liked that, you might also like this” formula: that quantifying everything would allow us to predict and streamline all of human behavior. Every action, habit, financial transaction, political choice, casual hookup or life partnership — no matter how messy or ambiguous, no matter how trivial or culturally devastating — could be leveled and reduced to an object in a collection, an item on a menu, an entry in the index of a book that knows every detail of the reader’s life. Is this what cities hoped to be? Is this what ‘design’ promised for the future?

Fast forward a year, and I found myself asking the same questions about our beach house. Just how much of our lives — our futures, our fates, our gardens of forking paths — are condemned, or freed, by design? Do we have any room for glitch or chance? Does the plan preclude us from whim or will? Is there space for the user to make mistakes, to improvise, to author their experience, to call it their own? (Does the design allow for third cultures?)

I saw this in the work of Alejandro Aravena when he won the Pritzker in 2016. His ‘half-house’ project — as well as much of Shigeru Ban’s oeuvre, the legacy of Rural Studio, and countless others who work in the public’s interest — stood apart from much

of what I thought I knew about architecture. Place-making didn't have to be about monuments or celebrity, absolute hierarchies or aesthetic supremacies. It could embrace uncertainty and paradox, complexity and contradiction, climate change and disaster relief. It could do a lot with a little, it could respect the specificity of its environment and its people, it could be timeless — and it could actually, really, be built. This is why I'm applying to the University of Oregon. I know what it's like to be on-site every morning, to grind away for months at something big and beautiful, to make it happen. I also know that the world is much bigger than modernist mansions in the hills or holiday homes on the coast — though that's cool, too! — because the world I know is the one my parents brought me up in. And it needs us.