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Users as architects: thinking big/reading small

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Abstract

Using the realm of the city to explore new 'ways of seeing' the urban experience raises an important issue of not only who designs the city, but how it is interpreted by those who live in it. This need not be seen as a passive relationship where architects and planners make the big decisions and are therefore central in determining how the city is used. Far from it. This paper explores ways in which users are architects in shaping the future of London.

In schools, design often centres on the hand-held product and from here, its associated meanings and values. (There is little reason to focus on the large scale in the design and technology Orders.) This paper seeks to evidence how a specific view of architecture offers students in design and technology opportunities to creatively explore a 'lived-in' relationship with architectural products that differs from analysing the use of smaller scale, everyday products. Research focuses on how theories concerned with analysis of human activity can frame development of 'reading' in design education. As such, this paper reflects part of a wider research brief on language and the culture of design in secondary schools.

The city is not confined to the spatial scale of the building, or indeed that of the city itself, but encompasses the whole, multiscalar landscape produced by human activity: from the corporeal to the global, the worldly to the intimate. (Borden et al, 2001)

Keywords: city, architecture, user, creativity, critical involvement



Figure 1: Crumpled paper or new building?

Surely it is the supreme illusion to defer to architects, urbanists or planners as being experts or ultimate authorities in matters relating to space. (Lefebvre, 1991: 94)

In thinking about users as architects we might be led down the DIY path. The current *Changing Rooms* culture reflects a lifestyle concern with interior decoration – dealing with the surface of home design. Yet rarely are walls taken down, holes put in roof structures or windows blocked up; the architecture isn't actually used (or abused) but controls the design process. It is there, it is built, and it is intended for a particular purpose and is respected as such.

Hand-held or small-scale objects (most often used

in design and technology for product analysis) are moveable – we can put them in different locations and see their potential or try them out for a different job and find they can be used in ways that weren't necessarily intended by the designer. For example, the mangle used by James Dyson's mother was surely not intended as inspiration for his new washing machine. It is this aspect of creativity, concerned with improvisation of the rules associated with the product (by the user) juxtaposed with the intended meaning as determined by the designer that is of interest here. Yet being able to 'see' how urban space might be used differently is seemingly problematic if you can't pick up the bricks or move the concrete – it requires a huge leap of imagination to juxtapose types of human activity with buildings. (The term 'built environment' itself suggests permanence and solidity.)

As users we adhere to all kinds of codes in architectural territory just because we are told to do so. We buy and use spaces, we buy and use objects, in the ways they were designed, for certain purposes, with no intention of using them for anything else. (Rendell, 1998: 243)

The *Designs on London* project encourages students to make that leap of imagination within a much broader view of what architecture means. It is a creative citizenship project involving over 20 education centres working with eight architecture practices based in London. The aim of the project is for young people to contribute their commentaries, visions and warnings and proposals towards the Greater London Assembly (GLA) policy on spatial development for the city. To this end, students and teachers are linked with some of London's leading architects to present their outcomes to the mayor and the GLA through two major exhibitions – one of which is to be held at the Royal Institute of British Architects during architecture week this year. Students have been asked to work within one of four perspectives on the city:

- global/European city
- healthy/green/safe city
- full flow/water city
- multicultural/city of villages.

These perspectives have given students an opportunity to bring their own subjective experiences and understandings of the city to a wider community of active interest in urban development.

With a focus on the user 'occupying' architecture (Hill, 1998) there is an emphasis on finding new or fresh ways to look at the urban experience that centres on what people *do* in places. 'Reading' urban space has offered students of design and technology opportunities to engage in the critical process with architecture – a process that has been evidenced through exciting and innovative designs.

Reading places

Studies on semiotics and product semantics in the field of design (Julier, 2000; Krippendorff, 1995) have explored how visual languages determine meaning in products.

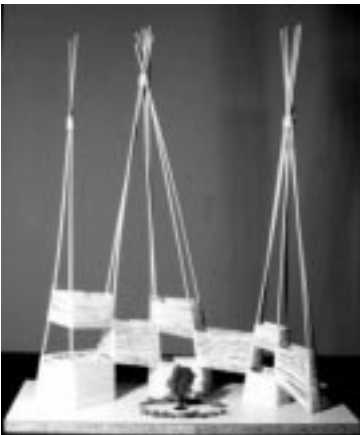


Figure 2: This proposal is for a different kind of housing development. The spaces are gardens between the houses.

Designers will ascertain what emotional values they want the consumer to attach to the product. They then develop forms which instigate the associations to, hopefully, inculcate those feelings. (Julier, 2000: 94)

Applied to architecture, one might in a similar way read buildings as physical creations with specific materials, scale and structures – a product designed and, more importantly, unused. I would argue that this kind of analysis focuses on a view of the designer (or architect) as central in determining interpretations of the product – not the user or consumer. Michel de Certeau offers a theoretical framework that subverts this 'strategic' reading of space.

A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, clientele, targets, or objects of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model.

I call a 'tactic', on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localisation), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. (de Certeau, 1984: xix)

Tactical action can be characterised through knowing how to get away with things, joyful discoveries, asking 'What if?' De Certeau suggests that there is a 'permanence' in everyday practices that are 'tactical in character' – from the 'tricks and imitations of plants and fishes... to the streets of modern megalopolises' (de Certeau, 1984: xviii)



Figure 3: *Shadows of difference.* (Photograph taken on site visit with students to Creekside, Deptford. They were asked if this was graffiti or was it part of a conversation – a question that prompted them to read signs relating to human activity.)

Students looking at the Ferrier Estate in Kidbrooke focused on reading signs for how people used that space. Bus stops situated at the end of the estate and not in the centre meant that people didn't use the paths running alongside the

housing as they felt unsafe at night. These paths are unkempt and vulnerable. Public green spaces had been used for dumping cars. Housing is above ground level therefore most people could leave this nasty bit behind. And so on...

At another local school, students hadn't been out to 'read' the site and when asked what was wrong with the place came up with comments such as 'boring', 'nothing to do', 'grey'. Their drawings reflected a concern with strategic, large scale, shopping malls, clubs and leisure centres.

The contrast between how students read the estate was reflected in how they expressed their first ideas. Those who had specifically looked at user interaction with the space started jotting down words as stories, descriptions, poems to kick-start their design process. Students at the other school produced definite drawings of specific shapes of building.

When asked what was going on inside the shopping centre, this student shrugged and went on to describe how he'd seen something similar in Florida and it should be modern looking, like that. He was then asked if he liked shopping? 'No, it's boring.' His concern was with the look of

Inside view

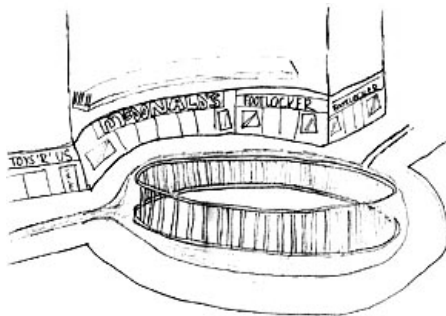


Figure 4.

the building and how this snapshot idea could be planted in the area. Although living here, these students tended to read London at a strategic level – in many ways similar to the original developers of the area that they were trying to change.

[But] since he is incapable of stockpiling (unless he writes or records) the reader cannot protect himself against the erosion of time (while reading he forgets himself and he forgets what he has read) unless he buys the object (book, image) which is no more than a substitute (the spoor or promise) of moments 'lost' in reading... (de Certeau, 1984: xxi)

Without developing abilities to criticise a place, students tended to rely on their 'snapshot' view of the area and the resulting proposals were for today, not the future.

...And non-places

Certain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense they are non-places, or rather, imaginary places: banal utopias, clichés. (Augé, 1995: 95)

In his 'introduction to an anthropology of super-modernity', Marc Augé suggests that the increasing amount of time we spend in supermarkets, airports and hotels, on motorways or in front of TVs, computers and cash machines results in a profound alteration of awareness. These 'non-places' so described by their uniformity and excessive information affect the way we read places so that our perception of what we see is partial and incoherent.

This theory highlights an issue for further research – that of the dumbing down effect of information overload on creative abilities. A recent Radio 4 report on the *Today* programme highlighted how previously keen and interested gardeners are now finding that their interest is satisfied vicariously by watching gardening programmes such as *Ground Force*. In this project, the concern with clichéd images of shopping malls meant that some students experienced difficulties in justifying the need for their idea.

As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality. (Augé, 1995: 94)

Augé goes on to say that the plurality of places makes huge demands on our powers of observation and description, resulting in a feeling of disorientation that 'causes a break or discontinuity between the spectator-traveller and the space of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through'. (Augé, 1995) In focusing instead on being an active citizen rather than a tourist, able to critique what s/he sees going on in the city, more successful students have and are producing truly innovative proposals for the future of London:

The student schemes produced a new vision for the capital; a city of giant tree houses, futuristic glass floating structures and gardens of landscaped offices... People who decide on the future of cities are politicians, planners and architects. No one ever takes this group of people, aged between 14–25, and asks them what their vision is. Now they have been given a voice. And they have come up with extraordinary things. (Christophe Egret, director at AlsopArchitects, *The Independent*, 20 May 2000)

Designs on London is fundamentally about getting to the point where students make a case for

change through a range of media appropriate to their design work. It doesn't mean the completion of a beautiful, 'perfect' architectural model – and this has clearly made a difference to the way students view design:

The work I've done on this project is definitely different to my other work on this course (we've done a lot of product design and this meant looking at basic sizes and shapes.) In this project I've mixed woods, metals and styrofoam as well and I've come up with better designs... You don't have to go into so much detail; you put down rough sketches instead – you put it all down straight away and then come up with it after. (Design and technology A' Level student)

Creating spaces

If we see a place as an assembly of elements then it is possible to follow through de Certeau's theory that space is an animation of this. In other words a place becomes a space when transformed by people through 'tactical' actions. Also Architects appear to have embodied this theory through their design of the award winning Peckham Library, where space for people interaction in and around the actual construction has been deliberately conceived as part of the design. Hence the library is set in the sky (or nearly...) forming a space underneath. This is used by people for a whole range of stuff and as such can be seen as an integral part of the architecture (rather than 'messing it up').

Kapi's Wall

One student presented us with a drawing of a spray can as a building.

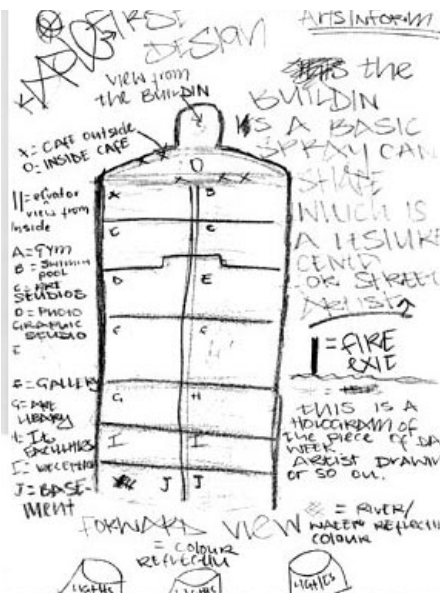


Figure 5: Gino, Year 10 student, Northbrook School.

The building was to be an art gallery for graffiti artists. On looking back through his sketchbook we found several examples of his own graffiti art and this prompted discussion about the thrill of graffiti.



Figure 6.

Suddenly it was clear that the enclosed gallery space wasn't right for this kind of art – having started with the strategic concept of a rather clichéd building this student ended up with a 200m white wall next to a railway junction with giant spray cans and an adjustable cradle.

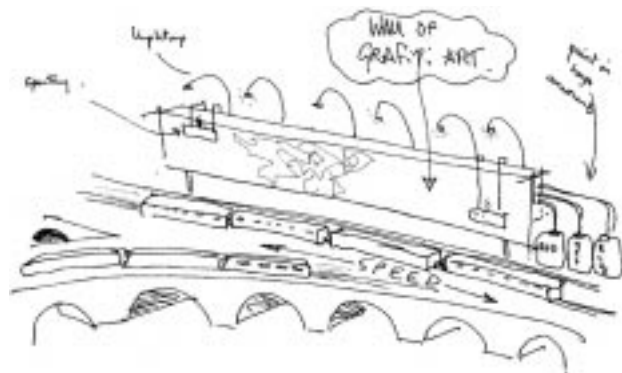


Figure 7.

The gallery reflects a concern with strategy – a planning approach to design that defeated the purpose of graffiti. Rather questions such as 'How do you get away with it?' or 'Where do you buy the cans?' reflect a tactical approach to design – and in seizing the moment the innovative idea reflecting concepts of speed, non-permanent, danger, audience was there. He is intending to give out small graffiti cards as gifts at the final presentation of his proposal.

...each building must be confronted as an object unattached to any predetermined narrative. It will not fit, it insists on expressing only itself... Robbed of his lifeboat of familiarity, the critic is thrown back on that most frightening of questions: do I like it? (Appleyard, 1993: 10)

This student is very happy with Kapi's Wall – his teachers comment on his huge interest in the project and increased motivation in design and technology lessons.

Conclusion

Developing critical capability is active engagement with design – to critique how meanings and values are produced in the realm of urban space offers students opportunities to think big by reading the small.

Anyone who seriously contemplates the political possibilities inherent in knowing a place, in being not merely a resident but an active citizen, sees the necessity of developing the critical tools to expose and to critique how meanings and values are produced and manipulated in the realm of the urban space. We must therefore realise, with Michel de Certeau, that subjective self-knowledge and collective understanding of the community are the necessary stores from which the particularities of real cities can be revealed to resist the totalising concept of the ‘city’. (Borden *et al*, 2001: 19)

In developing a critical framework for product analysis of architecture, students have been required to think beyond the limits of the hand-held object to criticise the large scale (including global) products that influence the way we live. The project raises several issues specific to the design and technology curriculum in secondary education:

- fitting in with existing architecture can severely curtail students’ imagination
- seeing what people do in and between buildings identifies the space
- places that don’t function on human interaction/socialisation can be seen as non places
- design process that doesn’t demand (and reward) students’ critical abilities supports bland ideas
- most successful students could describe the smallest detail of their design and its widest concept (redefining what we usually call scale in design and technology)
- if teachers of design and technology get tied into the ‘motivation factor’ of students taking something home to ‘show off’ what they’ve done in the subject then this limits the potential for innovative design
- preconceived understandings of architectural terms such as building, structure and built environment should be challenged to open up debate about owning architecture
- separate assessment and weighting of design and making in GCSE design and technology means that the final outcome is rewarded only for ‘quality of finish’ supporting a skills-based approach to making

- a proposal is about being brave in making a statement and justifying it. The wide range of critical tools must be recognised and rewarded in this process.

Figure 8:
Dustbin
Garden,
Deptford.



And the places people live in become puzzling. The street is a scene of outside life... a scene of human differences. (Sennett, 1990: 9)

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