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Continuity in Architecture, Manchester School of Architecture

ODDMENTS AND EPIGRAMS

Continuity in Architecture

The Manchester School of Architecture is an innovative collaboration between the Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester, uniting two schools of architecture with over 100 years of educational experience to create one of the largest architecture schools in the UK. The Master of Architecture studio atelier system actively engages with many aspects of contemporary thinking to provide an education that is distinct and focussed, wide ranging but also with depth.

Continuity in Architecture (CiA) was established in 1994 and for over twenty years the atelier has been promoting a particular approach to the development of architectural solutions; one with profound integrity and which is contextual, expressive, and environmentally appropriate. Modesty and cooperation are emphasised and as such, the atelier encourages a response that does not generate a gratuitously flamboyant or overtly icon-centric solution or attitude, but instead advocates an approach that embraces a close and sensitive contextual reading of place. Within the atelier, this discriminating understanding of the situation generates propositions that are thoughtful, discerning, and totally appropriate to the individual and particular circumstances of the site. The atelier has created a motto to encourage this way of thinking: Remember, Reveal, Construct,

This is a discussion about a specific project completed by a group of post-graduate students, the majority of the project follows the normal trajectory that has been developed over the last 20 years. This is a semi-live project which has a direct connection with government policy and includes community interaction.

The Neighbourhood Planning Agenda in Bollington

Neighbourhood Planning is a highly controversial policy. It was part of the Localism Bill introduced by the British Government in 2011 that shifted the responsibility for the decisions about the size, shape and location of neighbourhood development from central to local government. Communities are now asked to decide upon the nature and character of their particular district and actively participate in decisions about future developments. In theory this should be a positive move and quite straightforward; the UK has a housing shortage and rather than a top-down imposition of new properties, the bill allows local people to decide upon their own development strategy. However, well-meaning residents who have little or no training in planning, or skills in urban and rural development are making decisions too quickly without sufficient consultation or knowledge. This means that residential developers have been able to buy up packages of land and develop areas of the greenbelt and other bits of countryside that had so far been unavailable to them. More appropriate brownfield sites are often overlooked in the need to act swiftly and decisively, and developments are not always the ones that are most advantageous to the community.

Bollington, is a small post-industrial town in Cheshire in the North West of England, just within commuter distance of Manchester. It is a town defined by its topography; with heroic remnants of the Industrial Revolution such as the canal and the dismantled railway, contrasting with a calmer and more picturesque local vernacular of cottage, terraces, and greens. Despite the remnants and detritus of warehouses and factories, it is an attractive and desirable place to live. Until recently Bollington did not attract commuters – it does not have a train station and the journey by car is just too long to be comfortable, but this has changed as house prices in other areas rise. Over recent years the population in Bollington

has been steadily rising and this has created the need for a number of new developments in the area.

The Neighbourhood Plan is not yet in place, indeed, the discussion has hardly even started, and yet the town council has already approved a number of substantial new-home developments. These were designed in a disconnected and haphazard fashion without a wider plan of the area being considered. The loss of the mills and other large industrial buildings has provided the town with a number of notable building plots which have been bought by housing developers (e.g. Bellway Homes). These have been somewhat unsympathetically developed as cul-de-sacs of semi detached family homes.

In November 2014 Cheshire East Council agreed to support the production of a Neighbourhood Plan for Bollington, thus providing the local community with more control over the future developments in the town. This was led by a group of passionate and interested local residents that included architect (and Continuity in Architecture alumni) Peter Millburn-Brown, who saw an opportunity to connect the process to architectural education, drawing parallels to similar contextual projects undertaken during his own postgraduate studies. This partnership were tasked with the development of a masterplan for Bollington, an assignment which would include the identification of areas of appropriate development, propositions for new buildings, suggestions for the redevelopment of existing structures, and recommendations for areas of public space. To be successful, the Neighbourhood Plan would need to address the parcels of land available for development and the type, design, layout and quality of the buildings themselves.

The inclusion of live agendas, such as this one, within architectural education has become increasing in popularity in recent years. This is in contrast with the twentieth century tendency for architectural education to be driven by the more traditional idea of a student creating a given project on a given site. This adjustment reflects the changing nature of the profession. One of the key advantages of this Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach is the development of employability and life long learning skills which can set the context for a lifetime of formal and informal continued professional development. The job of an architect requires architectural design skills alongside the ability to analyse, organise, collaborate and communicate ideas; that is to solve problems. Within architectural education there has been a inclination to create a simulated setting which allows a students to show off the full range of drafting and design skills but not necessarily the additional skills required to deal with real life problems.

Continuity in Architecture were determined that the students should have the opportunity to react to the live context of the Neighbourhood Plan, while also taking into consideration the wider context of the town. This is advantageous to both the atelier and the committee. The atelier could look at the problem outside of the restrictive framework set by national legislation and test ideas more freely, meeting wider curricular objectives but also bringing a new way of looking at the situation. Experience has shown that Neighbourhood Planning is a lengthy process requiring many layers of consultation. While the committee were bound by these timeframes, the atelier could be more responsive and also more creative, using drawings, models and interventions to investigate the area in a different manner.

Work began in September 2015, and the academic-year-long studio project was broadly split into five parts: Interrogation, Intervention, Planning, Realisation and Dissemination. The outcomes for each project were exhibited in Manchester and Bollington.

PART 1 : Interrogation

The first project was to find out things about the place. This is how Continuity in Architecture always begins: with the acquisition of knowledge. The initial purpose of this analysis is to

remove any preconceptions and to alleviate any assumptions, so that the qualities of any built environment are not immediately coloured by supposition or prejudice. The cohort of students were divided into four overlapping groups and each examined something specific: Town Evolution (historic maps, historic narrative, key figures), Buildings (typology studies, elevation studies, key building analysis), Topography (site sections, site models), and Geography (culture, climate, population, flora, occupation). When all information was collected, the groups observed the emergence of a pattern which led them to divide the information into two categories: Heroic Remnants (Geology, Mills, River, Canal, Railway, Cotton, White Nancy) and Slow Vernacular (Houses, Doors, Windows, Churches, Persistence, Growth, Population, Territories, Townscape).

This research was presented as a book: *Oddments and Epigrams: An Intimate Interrogation of Bollington*, and became a resource which was made available to all of the students and to the Neighbourhood Planning Committee.

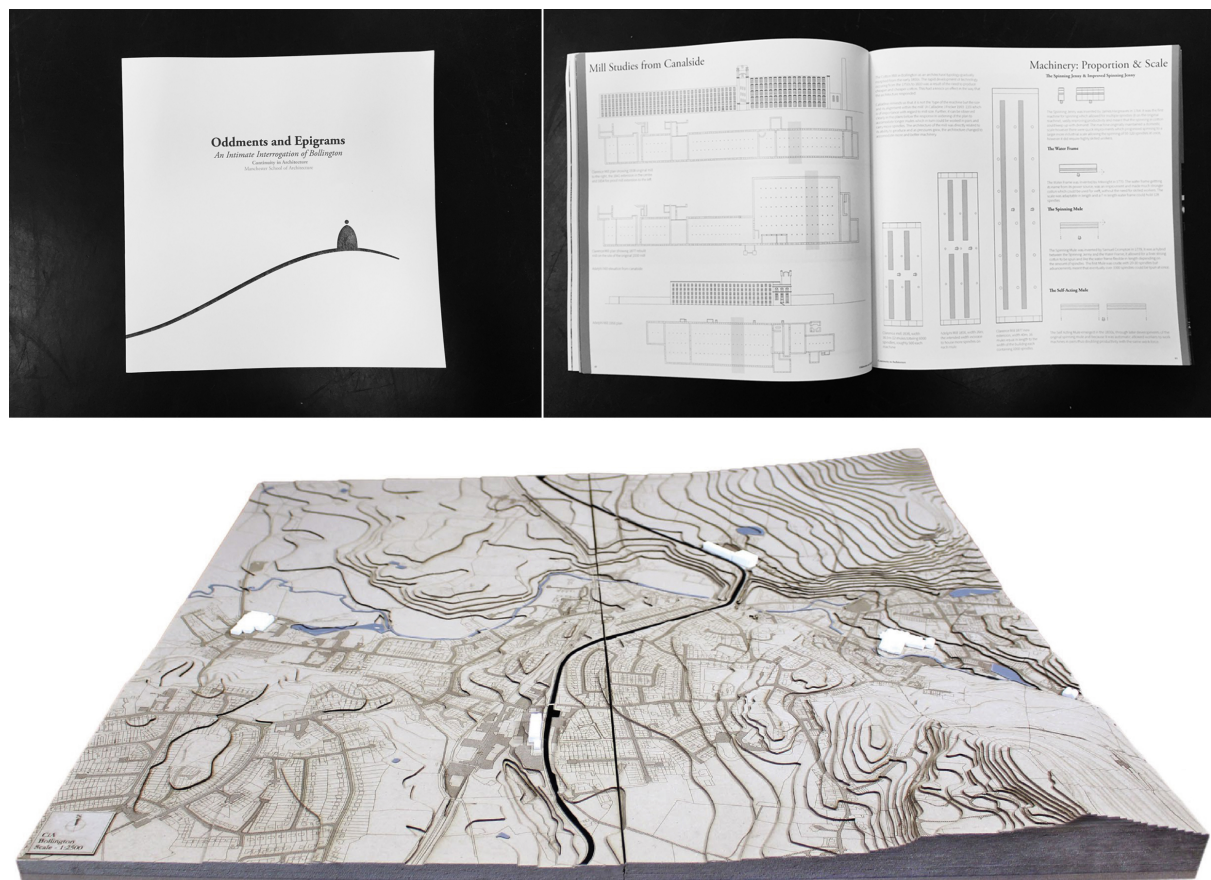


Figure 1. *Oddments and Epigrams: An Intimate Interrogation of Bollington*. Continuity in Architecture, 2015.

PART 2 : Intervention

With reference to this found material, the students were required to change the town in some way. Again this was a typical Continuity in Architecture project which required an act of transformation based upon the attributes, qualities and character that were discovered. The students did not design a functioning building, but instead explored the qualities of how something more abstract could become part of the urban environment. This was an attempt to understand the relationship between a specific place and its surroundings. The proposals may have had a simple basis, the need to gain height to take advantage of a view or vista, or perhaps provide a definite link between two disconnected elements. This reverses the

more normal form follows function argument, it turns it upon its head, for now, the form of the new elements are dependent upon the form of the existing, so it is form follows form.



Figure 2. Ingersley Vale Mill in Lights, Robbie Stanton. Reflections from a Barbers Shop, Christina Lipcheva. Golden Casting, William Priest. *Continuity in Architecture*, 2015.

Each proposition was designed to connect to earlier research about Bollington, and acted as a method of engaging with the local community within the wider objectives of the Neighbourhood Plan. The ideas were diverse and bold; one student used mirrors to reflect the heroic elements of the town back to the everyday lives of its residents, another explored materiality by casting and installing a concave golden stone into a drystone wall, a third student used light to redefine the ruin of Ingersley Vale Mill. Others used techniques once local to the area, one created a kinetic machine driven by the River Dean, another used the Devore process of engraving on velvet to create a panel imprinted with the elevation of the Clarence Mill, and there was a project to reinstate the interior lining of the monument White Nancy into an end-terrace house. All ideas were collated in an exhibition in Bollington Arts Centre in January 2016. This prompted the local community to discuss and comment more broadly on the way they thought their town should develop.

PART 3 : Planning

'Intervention' was a precursor to a much more serious project: 'Planning'. The students worked with an urban planning specialist from Think Place and, through a series of design workshops built upon the knowledge of the place to develop a proposal for the town. They highlighted a series of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats the town. These were: Movement, History and Heritage, Townscape, Sport and Culture, Landscape and Economy.

Working momentarily outside of the Neighbourhood Planning Legislation allowed students to make big marks in the town, to undo previous developments and consider the ideal situation. The proposal identified six possible sites for housing developments; these were difficult brownfield sites as well as more traditionally expansion plots. The sites were collected into three main groups; one highlighted the civic zone, another focussed upon the recreational centre and the last looked at the industrial area. Each group were tasked with the planning and development of a collection of proposals for a hybrid mixture of community, commercial and residential uses. Through dialogue with the local community this plan has continued to evolve, questioning how the town might develop in the near future and what type of developments should be sought.

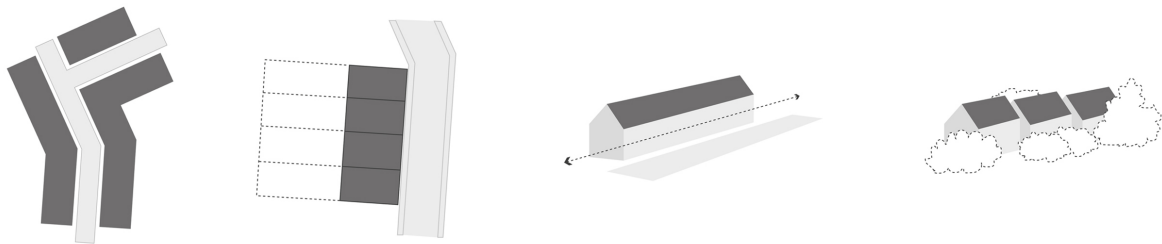


Figure 3. The Rules of Play and Sites of Bollington, Continuity in Architecture and Think Place, 2016.

PART 4 : Realisation

Again using the typical Continuity in Architecture approach, 'Realisation' asked the students to use the knowledge and attitude that they had developed over the course of the programme and apply it to the design of small to medium sized buildings including a number of new homes. These were single, communal, collective, or hybrid. The construction of a building within any situation creates a direct connection with the context; that is the past, the present and the future. The understanding of the inherent qualities and conditions of the site can provide clues to the design of the place. This knowledge can be used to activate, liberate and instigate a new future for the place.



Figure 4. Homes, Dalia Juskaite. Walkers Retreat, James Donegan. Town Square, James Shackleton. Continuity in Architecture, 2016.

The students designed 23 building across the town; this included 80 houses, some live-work communities, a series of public buildings, businesses and leisure facilities, and over 150 car parking spaces, all of which was in line with the objectives of the overarching Neighbourhood Plan. This work was presented in a second exhibition in Bollington, in a joint exhibition with the Policy Documentation for the Neighbourhood Plan. This provided residents with a collective vision for the future of the town.

PART 5 : Dissemination

The Neighbourhood Plan Collaboration for Bollington was completed in a single academic year and was since disseminated in a final plan and series of notional building designs, two exhibitions and two academic papers. It has opened up a conversation with the local community about the type of architecture that might be fitting for Bollington, an architecture based upon an informed opinion of place. The project has continued with a small collection of staff-led students developing further proposals for the town.

By acting collaboratively, this project has helped empower local people to contribute towards the future of their own town. It has provided the Bollington with a plan that is suited to their needs, because it is based upon a thorough examination of the place itself. Through engagement with the over arching curriculum in architectural education, the project bought together local residents and students with mutual benefit to both the future of Bollington and the educational objectives of the atelier. It is in this context that the student becomes aware of their role in the dissemination of ideas to the public, to communicate with people in the context if their daily lives.

Neighbourhood Planning will continue to create controversy on both a local and a national level as the power to decide upon the future of places is transferred to the local community. This devolution has the potential to engage local people in the decisions that are made about their homes, but has the danger of opening up large parcels of land to profit hungry developers in a bid meet ambitious targets set by national government. Commercial players on Neighbourhood Planning Committees often outnumber well-meaning residents, who with little or no training in planning, or skills in urban and rural development are at risk of making decisions too quickly without sufficient consultation or knowledge. This project takes the Neighbourhood Plan beyond what is normally expected by generating real proposals, through drawings and models. This allows the general public to comment on ideas that they can visualise. The project should be viewed as an example of best practice in Neighbourhood Planning and disseminated further on both a local and national level.

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Collaborators

Michael Burdekin, Sandra Edwards and Peter Milburn Brown: Bollington Neighbourhood Plan Committee, Tim Boddington: Bollington Civic Society, Bollington Arts Centre, Gary Colleran: Flanagan Lawrence, Garry Colligag: Think Place, David Lambert: GA Studio, Annie Shaw: Manchester School Art, Andrew Knight: Hargreaves Foundry.