The Way We Live Now: How Architectural Education can support the Urban Development of Small Settlements.

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INTRODUCTION

Continuity in Architecture, a post-graduate atelier for research, practice and teaching at the Manchester School of Architecture, has been working directly with local communities to develop meaningful and productive proposals for the development of new homes that are appropriate for the changing needs of a 21st Century population, while also remaining sympathetic to the environment in which they are constructed.

This chapter will examine the evolution of Neighbourhood Planning and discuss the projects that the atelier have undertaken in recent years, before offering some thoughts for the development of future initiatives. It is split into a number of parts; part one describes the aims, aspirations and agenda of Continuity in Architecture, part two discusses the nature of a 'research through doing' project within an academic institution, part three describes the background to the research, the particular circumstances of the relationship with the Neighbourhood Planning Committees and the projects that have been completed so far, and part four will reflect upon what has been achieved and will look to the future.

CONTINUITY IN ARCHITECTURE

Continuity in Architecture is a postgraduate atelier, which has been established at the Manchester School of Architecture for more than 20 years. The atelier runs programmes for the design of new buildings and public spaces within the existing urban environment. The emphasis is on the importance of place and the idea that the design of architecture can be influenced by the experience and analysis of particular situations. This interpretation of place can provide a contemporary layer of built meaning within the continuity of the evolving town or city.

The atelier is built upon the principals of Contextualism and agrees with Thomas Schumacher that: "Some middle ground is needed. To retreat to a hopelessly artificial past is unrealistic, but to allow a brutalising system to dominate and destroy traditional urbanism is irresponsible" [1]. The text emerged as a reaction to Modernism and is now more than a generation old, but given how critical the significance of heritage and the built environment is to our cultural future, it is now more relevant than ever.

Continuity in Architecture is inspired by the efforts of architects working within the existing urban fabric to produce a responsive architecture of narrative, space, intervention, and detail. We aim to show that the ideas and methods we examine in the studio have real and profitable applications. The main source of our architecture is the place itself. We reflect upon the persistence, usefulness and emotional resonance of particular places and structures. We are interested in the qualities of places that

have persisted and we prefer a reading of history that stresses the permanence of tradition as the subject of architecture.

Figure 1. Analysis in Bakewell using Serial Vision. [2]
Brull, Continuity in Architecture. 2016.

Tradition in architecture in this context is the embodied meaning of buildings and cities produced by centuries of lived experience. Discovery and recognition are a vital part of the design process – the architect has a duty to analyse and describe a place before it can be altered. As stated by Zucchi when discussing the work of De Carlo, "De Carlo refers more frequently to morphology than typology because, according to him, typology isolates a form from its use (and potentially from its context) whereas morphology is interested in a form only in as far as it relates to other surrounding forms and to the pattern of activities that produced them." [3]

RESEARCH THROUGH DOING

The aim of a 'research through doing' project within a school of architecture and design is to construct knowledge through the acquisition of insight and understanding. Design lies at the heart of the educational programme, and certainly within the design studio itself, it is the central locus; thus doing within architectural and design education is the design process itself. At post-graduate level, the design process is inquisitive and analytical. Research is an activity signified by the gathering of insights about an object of research; the aim of this process is the collection of knowledge. Since design and research are inextricably linked, there is a direct relationship between knowledge production and the design process.

Design and scientific problem solving can be vastly different in that scientific understanding generally leads to a logical and concrete solution, while more artistically orientated problem solving can generally be compared with the deciphering of a riddle. Research into architecture is a hybrid subject located at the interface of connecting fields of art, science and technology; an activity defined primarily by production, of physical or virtual products. Thus it can be argued that architecture and design are concerned with production.

Within all research, but especially research by doing, there is a fundamental difference between understanding and examining. Understanding is based upon a comparison, while examining requires a penetration of the object. That is, understanding is exercised at the surface of the object, whereas examining takes place on the inside; examining is more profound. When examining an object, place or

thing, the investigator is involved with it; there is an insightful relationship between the investigator and the investigated. This implies a coming together of the theory of the design and the practice of design. This suggests that the knowledge gained from doing is less objective, and so it is more revealing. Therefore, in research by design projects, it is the design process that forms the route through which new insights; knowledge, practices or products come into being.

The inclusion of live agendas within architectural education have been increasing in popularity in recent years and this is in contrast with the tendency of the twentieth century for architectural education to be 'product' orientated most commonly concerning a traditional design brief to create a given building on a given site[4]. One of the key advantages of a 'Problem Based Leaning' (PBL) approach is the development of employability and life long learning skills which begin to set the context for a lifetime of continued professional development, both formal and informal. 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 students to show off the full range of drafting and design skills but not necessarily the additional skills required to deal with a real life problem. "Much design education is very remote and esoteric and even where design work has a 'real life' context there is a tendency to 'tailor' the design brief, often for valid educational reasons, in order that the creativity of the student is not limited by the reality of the context of the design problem."[5]

Continuity in Architecture are determined that the students should have the opportunity to react to the live context of small settlements, while also taking into consideration the wider context and the live agenda of a small urban environment, whilst also meeting the wider curricular requirements of the course.

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

It is well documented that the UK has a shortage of well-constructed and affordable housing. The situation is still deteriorating and is now commonly referred to as the 'Housing Crisis'. The Royal Town Planning Institute have reported upon this and explain that the cost of housing, whether in private ownership or rented, now commands a disproportionate amount of peoples' income. This is not actually a current trend, the cost of housing and people's earning have for sometime been divorced, indeed since 1975 real house prices have increased by 126 per cent. The RTPI support this statement with an explanation of the current situation:

> "More than three million households in the UK now spend more than a third of their income on housing … The number of 25-year-olds who own their own home has more than halved in the last 20 years (20 per cent, compared with 46 per cent two decades ago) … Average house prices are now at 7.9 times average earnings; this is particularly difficult for many young aspiring homeowners … There has been an 88 per cent fall in the amount of social housing built compared to 20 years ago …The number of homes being built which are classed as "affordable" has fallen to its lowest level for 24 years (only 32,000 new homes) … The UK is building 15 per cent fewer homes than it was in the five years before the downturn in 2008 … The number of "working households" living in poverty (7.4 million people, including 2.6 million children) has reached record levels in part as a result of the housing crisis (especially in London and southern England) and high rents in the private rented sector."[6]

There are a number of reasons why this housing crisis has arisen, these include 1) Legislation - the power for the construction of affordable housing was removed from Local Councils, and very rigid planning legislation that makes it difficult to build within the countryside (or Greenbelt), 2) Nimbyism

- the idea that many residents do not want the tranquillity of their current situation spoilt by the influx of a great many new residences, 3) Wealth tied up within property - if house prices drop, so does the individual worth of the population, 4) Land not being available in the places where the housing need is greatest, and finally 5) Land Banking - owners are not prepared to do anything with their land, they would rather just let it accumulate value.[7]

Neighbourhood Planning was part of the Localism Bill introduced in 2011 by the British Government. It passes responsibility for important decisions about the development of the built environment from centralised government to the local community. This was a laudable attempt by the then Conservative government to redistribute decision-making powers and thus speed-up the construction of new homes. The Localism Bill was very much part of the twenty-first century movement towards the primacy of the individual and the placing of importance upon ideas of community, family and civic responsibility. One of the most significant aspects of contemporary society is the need for the individual to lay claim to the control of many aspects of the circumstances of life.

Traditional government, in which policy is formed by experts and administered by state officials, is increasingly being challenged. Top-down enforcement of regulations, rules or directives is no longer acceptable to many people who feel that the individual or small collective is much better placed to make important decisions about things that happen within their own neighbourhood. Thus Neighbourhood Planning should, in theory, be a very good thing. The community is much better positioned to understand the needs and capability of their environment. Neighbourhood Planning certainly enables communities to play a much stronger role in shaping the areas in which they live and work, it provides an opportunity for communities to set out a vision for how they want their community to develop in ways that meet identified local need and make sense for local people. However, there is the danger of well-meaning, but ill-informed individuals making decisions that have massive implications for the community. Town and Country Planning is difficult; it involves an intimate understanding of the qualities of what is already there, combined with a specific knowledge of the economic, political, social and cultural power structures of the place, and the needs and aspirations of the current population. To be truly effective as a vehicle for social change, the Neighbourhood Planning Committee need to have the ability to envisage an alternative future. The other problem with Neighbourhood Planning is the possible infiltration of the group by parties with less philanthropic and much more vested interests in developing the area.

Continuity in Architecture has been working on developments within small towns in northern England and Wales for a number of years. This encourages theories and ideas to be developed and tested at a small and controllable scale within the studio context. Projects have been completed in: Preston, Cartmel, Grange-over-Sands, Colwyn Bay, Bollington and Bakewell. The more recent projects have begun with two simultaneous investigations; the first examined the actuality of the place, the second considered what "home" means in the twenty-first century.

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter describe 'the city (and by our own extension, the town) as a didactic instrument'[8] that is, a place in which a desirable discourse can be formulated - and it is through these conversations that the evidence for the argument of interpretation is collected. The reading and understanding of the message of the built and the natural environment provides the basis for the discussion. We have developed a range of ways of summarising our approach, the most persistent of which is a distillation of our pedagogic method into three words: 'Remember, Reveal, Construct'.

The nature of the home has, over the last generation, radically changed. Many of us are no longer able to live or even desire to live in comfortable three bedroom homes with small gardens and parking for two cars. Shared housing, family homes, co-housing, communal living, affordable housing, live work units, starter homes, multi-generational living, adaptable home, homes for life, downsizing, up-scaling, and homes with shared facilities are all relevant issues and pertinent to the way we live now.

This duel investigation means that all of the subsequent design projects are informed by highly contemporary ideas about the modern lifestyle combined the strong tradition of the locality. A sympathetic reading of place and culture introduces alternative views, difference, variation and change that leads to design projects which consider the surrounding vernacular traditions, the history of the site and the needs and aspirations of the future local population (much of which the local residents may not be aware of).

Over the academic year 2016-17, Continuity in Architecture has been working in the Derbyshire town of Bakewell. This is small settlement, about 50km to the south of Manchester, set within the beautiful and highly protected Peak District National Park. The town has a higher than average elderly population, income, and house price. Development of the Bakewell Neighbourhood Plan had already begun; the town was aware that they would be obliged to construct about 150 new homes within the next decade, and they had established where exactly the social need for housing was, but they had not decided exactly where the housing could be constructed. This number of new homes was a somewhat controversial proposal within the extremely conservative conservation area.
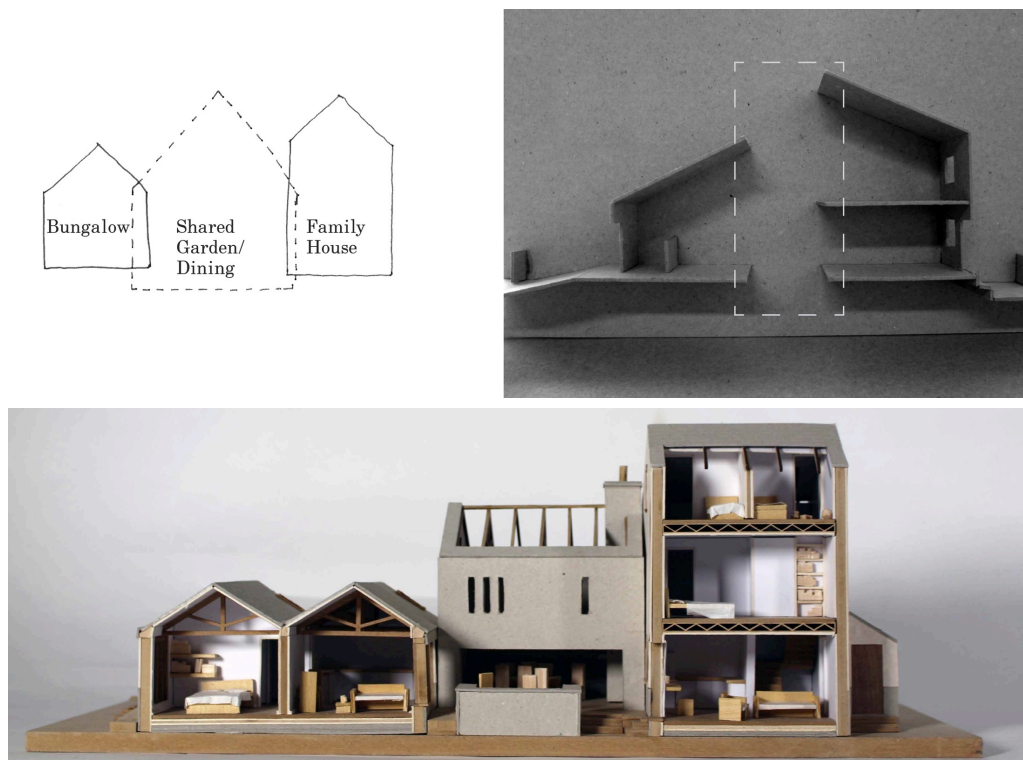
*Figure 2. Project for two homes for one family with a shared dining room.
Parkinson, Continuity in Architecture. 2016.*

The project lasted for the whole academic year, the first semester of which focussed upon the design of a theoretical home on a small, complicated site on the edge of the town centre. This allowed the students to develop their own ideas about the manner in which the home should be occupied, combined with a particular reading of the place. This was a 'research through doing' project. The students developed some initial ideas about the physical and social context before they started to design, but these were extensively explored through the design project. The process of design encouraged reflection, which in turn highlighted further aspects that needed greater investigation. This cyclical exploratory process yielded highly productive results that formed the basis for the second semester project. Three distinct housing types emerged: Live-work units, Multi-generational living

(Figure 2) and housing with shared facilities; which challenged the housing types currently on offer in the town. The results were shared by the whole group, so for example, one student who was exploring live-work units would pass on their findings to another student who had maybe looked at communal-living. The design proposals were deliberately radical, but not gratuitously inappropriate. The 'ideal' was for a design that completely served the needs of the contemporary society, was obviously of the 21st Century, but also looked as if it could have always been there.
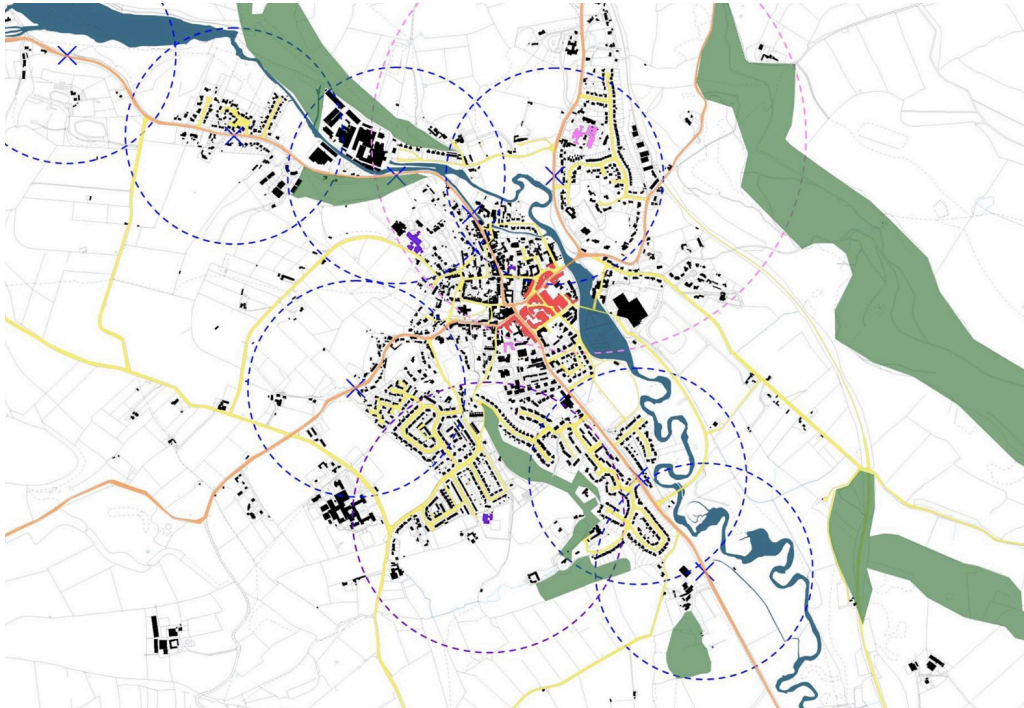

Figure 3. Analysis of potential sites in Bakewell using the BIMBY toolkit.
Continuity in Architecture. 2016.

The second semester project involved working very closely with the Neighbourhood Planning Committee and the Town Council. Through a process of negotiation, and using the BIMBY toolkit (Figure 3), eight sites were selected within the town that could potentially be developed. 'Beautiful In My Back Yard' (BIMBY) is a planning tool that is designed to encourage interaction between the local community and the planning authority in the selection of appropriate sites for potential development. BIMBY looks at such factors as walking distances, accessibility, bus routes, available resources, etc. Each of the sites could potentially contain between 20 and 50 homes.

The cohort of students was then subdivided into small groups, and each was allocated one of the proposed sites. The students were expected to develop contextually driven solutions based upon the earlier ideas and concerns that had been rehearsed in the first semester. They developed an organisational plan for the site, as well as determining the exact type of housing to be established upon it. All of the projects included a variety of house types, thus providing affordable, market price, live-work, and homes for a variation upon communal living. All design solutions included a detailed examination of the exterior space, the relationship between the façade and the public space, and a meticulous investigation of the interior.

The solutions responded to the specific policies developed within the Draft Neighbourhood Plan. This was beneficial to the residents of the town, but also provided a useful and complex situation for the educational priorities of the curriculum. The three policies that the project proposals observed were:

POLICY H1 (Provision of Affordable Housing) recommends "a mix of social rented, shared ownership or a mix of the two be progressed" [9]. One example included four compact starter home benefitting from shared courtyard, outdoor storage and guest house to create an affordable solution. (Figure 4).
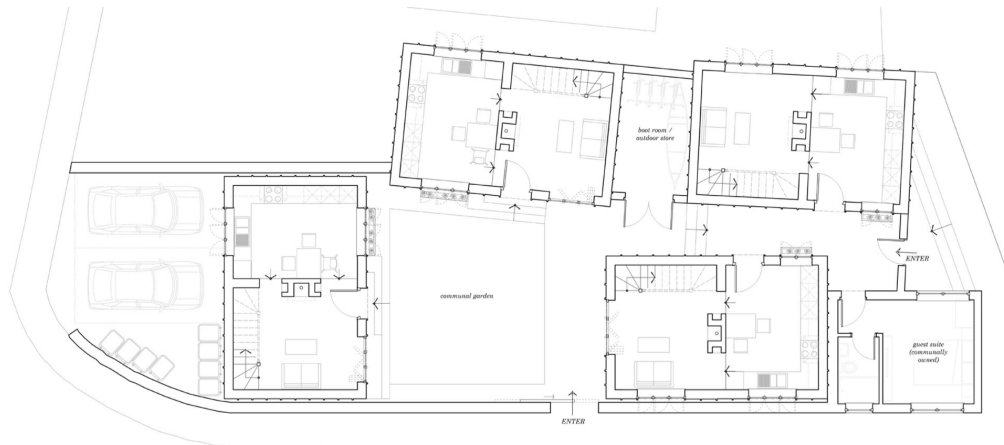

Figure 4. Four affordable houses with shared facilities.
Cooper. Continuity in Architecture. 2016.

Figure 5. Mixed housing with community squares in the woodland, Bakewell.
Parkinson and Tysklind Continuity in Architecture. 2017.

POLICY H2 (Age and Disability Related Considerations) states that developments "must meet the housing needs of the town's ageing population" [10]. This was noted in a number of the student projects including one that created a community of homes that included such aspects as level access bungalows mixed with apartments, and family homes. The social facilities were a series of shared outdoor squares, a café, allotments, a play area and multipurpose community building. (Figure 5).

POLICY H3 (Housing Mix Development) states that "all housing should be of a size in accordance with affordable housing requirements"[11]. This is evidenced in a vacant building site behind the Town Hall, which has been denied planning permission to develop housing a number of times because the proposal was unsympathetically large and involved the demolition of important structures. The student scheme buffered the contentious acoustic conditions of the Town Hall with a series of live-work units, which overlooked the quieter garden to the rear.

The design proposals were exhibited in Bakewell Town Hall. The end of the first semester exhibition proved to be somewhat controversial; there were many positive comments, however there was also obvious objection to any development in the town. Surprisingly one local resident commented, "This is too good for Bakewell". The local press reported upon the exhibition (we would have made the front page of the weekly paper if a naked intruder had not been caught on the same day the exhibition opened). By the time the second exhibition was staged, the local population had accepted the idea that development within the town was going to happen, so it was met with a much more positive reception.

REFLECTIONS

In a recent review of Neighbourhood Planning, Nicholas Boys Smith, the Director of 'Create Streets' quoted a senior planning inspector who expressed his frustration at the process: "Half of them are barely worth writing. They just parrot the local authority's plans"[12]. Boys Smith goes on to ask: "How we can make for more effective plans? Some of the answer lies at the local level. The most powerful and effective neighbourhood plans have a very strong sense of place, of what will get built and where. The two most powerful, yet insufficiently used, tools in the Neighbourhood Planning armoury are allocating sites for development and setting out a clear and predictable Design Code for what that development should be and look like." [13]

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 projects should be viewed as an example of best practice in Neighbourhood Planning and disseminated further on both a local and national level.

The series of projects developed within Continuity in Architecture will lead to the establishment of the Small Settlements Research Unit, this will allow the projects to develop beyond the confines of the academic year and the architectural curriculum. To a certain extent this has already happened, Bollington Town Council commissioned project for traffic calming entitled 'Reclaiming the Road' (2017) which was completed in collaboration with ARCA Architects and based upon the ideas developed by the students in the academic year 2015-16.

Design is not a linear process; it is a cyclical practice that continually involves using informed research to make design decisions that in turn creates the need for further investigation. Design through research, and research through design practices are highly productive vehicles for student progression, and when conducted in an almost live situation can prove to be beneficial for the students and the client. The information that was produced by the students reacted to the live conditions of the Neighbourhood Plan but required academic application to make it impactful. Each output was designed to challenge policy makers and propose a more place specific solution to Neighbourhood Planning.

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11 Bakewell Partnership Neighbourhood Plan Working Group,*Bakewell Neighbourhood Plan.* 2016.

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13 Boys Smith, *Is Neighbourhood Planning flourishing or withering? And how can communities do it better?.* 2016.