

INAUGURAL INTERIOR EDUCATORS CONFERENCE 2011
INTERIOR FUTURES '11
Northumbria University, School of Design, 3 - 4 March 2011

THE '*PRACTICE*' OF INTERIOR EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

The interior courses at the Portsmouth School of Architecture have been developing approaches to teaching and learning which have involved using live projects as a way to engage students with interior design. These projects have become a key part of the courses at both undergraduate and post graduate level of study. The design briefs have encouraged a collaborative approach to design and also ensured that students start to engage with real problems for design projects. The collaboration is happening between undergraduates and Masters students, and across Architecture and Interior Design courses. Real problem solving includes; understanding the clients needs, developing a brief and 'reading' a site, also understanding how to initiate a response to a given context. At Masters level, the students have the possibility to respond to the problem in pragmatic and abstract ways. The 'live' project also has unpredictable challenges and opportunities and as a teaching tool offers possibilities for students to learn about important aspects of communication and also the notion of project management, dealing with a problem and responding to a set of sometimes emerging conditions.

A 'live' project brings certain challenges to a teaching programme, in particular the timing of assessment and the project's schedule. Also ensuring that the Clients expectations of the project are clear from the start. From the outset, there needs to be some flexibility to ensure that the students experience can be reactive, whilst also giving them the excitement of a real project with a range of unpredictable conditions and possibilities .

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Keywords: Interior Education, Studio Culture, Interior/creative Practice, Collaboration

1 CONTEXT OF THE LIVE PROJECT

One of the approaches at Portsmouth to teaching, learning and research is to connect the experience of the student in the design studio to a real or 'live' project. The intention is to provide our students with an experience which is interdisciplinary, allowing them to work within the design studio on a project brief informed by a range of other professional skills. The live design project relates and connects to a range of teaching experiences internationally. In the US Rural Studio, part of Auburn University since 1993, have been working with the community; building homes for the local community. In the UK the AA have worked on a range of live projects, some as installation pieces as part of the end of year exhibition in Bedford square. As students are becoming more interested in the application of skills, this is an aspect of education that is developing its own momentum. There is a Live Projects event at Queens University 25th March 2011

as part of a collaboration with CEBE to discuss the practice of the Live Project within the University context. Many Schools of Architecture have created offices to facilitate the delivery and management of these projects. At London Metropolitan there is the ASD Projects office and at Sheffield University the BDR Bureau of Design and Research.

This approach has been applied to both Undergraduate and the new Masters course in interior design. The School of Architecture opened a Project Office in late 2008 which has facilitated the delivery of many such 'live' projects. It is a chartered architect's practice, but allows our students and staff to work on projects with real clients. Acting as the interface between the staff students and client, facilitating delivery and management of projects. The important issue for any project run within the project office is that it has a strong connection for our students understanding of the practice of both architecture and interior design.

2 THE LIVE PROJECT AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

The role of 'Live Projects' within the Interior Design curriculum throughout the second and third year undergraduate program at the University of Portsmouth is an emerging characteristic of the course. These projects range from product to interior scale and explore the relationship between design education and creative practice, whilst providing an environment for experiential learning through the simulation of a real design situation¹. These projects often encapsulate contentious, local issues dealing with both social and ethical debate. Some of our more recent projects include *'re-imagining the Church'* with Portsmouth Diocese, which examines the changing use of church buildings with diminishing congregations, the *'regeneration of Hulsea Lido'*, which in its day was a focus of local leisure activity and has been greatly affected by its changing urban landscape and lack of funding, and the *'Isle of Wight Zoo: Big Cat Sanctuary'*, which sits inside the walls of a Napoleonic Fort on the coast of Sandown and is constantly challenged by the juxtaposition of 'zoo as education' and 'zoo as entertainment'. In all cases, these projects are collaborations with Architecture Diploma students, the School of Architecture Project Office, and with considerable input from the Client.

Through discussion around the exemplar case study of the Isle of Wight Zoo, a project run as the opening design project for the third year Interior design students and Diploma 2 design project, the 'live project' acts as a device for a collaborative, cross-disciplinary approach to practice whilst enriching the educational experience in a vocational subject. The Interior Design students have concentrated on the regeneration of an existing fortification, which encapsulates the zoo within its boundary whilst the Diploma Studio focussed on the 'Masterplan' at urban scale, including animal enclosures and a new visitor centre, with Diploma students mentoring third years and participating in workshops and design charrettes (intensive 'ideas' days). Through the project, students investigate philosophical approaches to conservation through examining key theoretical texts such as *'On Altering Architecture'* by Fred Scott and case studies such as the Castellvecchio Museum by Carlo Scarpa, as well as a lecture from a historical

¹ Kvan, T. & Yunyan, J. (2005), *Students' learning styles and their correlation with performance in architectural design studio*, Design Studies 26, Elsevier Ltd P. 19-34.

conservation specialist²; the relationship between the fort and its surrounding community as well as its proximity to the sea in an area ripe for regeneration with the zoo at its core.

The project opened with a series of workshops, which explored conceptual processes and their relationship to site, alongside students carrying out research to support their learning. The Isle of Wight Zoo project was not confined to just the usual collaborators, but also included working with Eccleston George, a collaborative Artist's Practice that combines Zoology with interdisciplinary Arts and has direct experience of constructing habitats at the zoo. Within the first workshop, Nigel George, of Eccleston George, alongside artist and basket maker, Tim Johnson, gave a talk about their interest in the construction of natural habitats, particularly birds' nests and insect hives in the wild, followed by *enabling* direct student experience with form-making using willow and plaster, allowing experimentation and 'play' with three dimensional form, as well as engaging students in appropriate investigation through arts practice³. This process of making and having hands-on experience with these materials enabled students to quickly engage with considering animal behaviour, habitats and the role these might take in conceptualising the re-design of a zoo. The second workshop examined 'understanding context' and challenged the concept of site analysis as a kind of 'geography homework', isolated from design thinking, but rather proposed that not only matters of site location, scale and environment needed to be researched but also material quality of environment, sensory and artistic examination of 'place', alongside the development of a cultural narrative to describe the history and cultural context of both fort and zoo.

A site visit followed, where students met with the client and were able to question the intentions of the brief. This meeting enabled students to gain a greater understanding of the Zoo's ethos and to explore the ethical merits of the existence of a zoo. The visit was an opportunity to investigate the building and its context, and to develop a sensory response through a *walking book*⁴. The synthesis of research, site investigation and conceptual experimentation were brought together in a critique in order to consolidate thinking before beginning the design process.

The design process itself began with a charrette, where students worked in groups to discuss design ideas and produce a series of drawings that could become solid proposals. The end of the charrette marked the beginning of an intensive period of design where studio sessions moved from playful to professional and Interior Design students worked alongside Diploma students on development drawings from site through to detail, building up to the final review. The final review was displayed as an exhibition with the Client and Eccleston George invited to participate and comment. The students reviewed one another, giving written feedback and individually plotting their strengths and weaknesses around the specified requirements of the project brief.

² Chalmers, L. & Close, S. (2007) *But is it Interior Design? Considering the intervention of theory in Interior design education*. In: Proceedings of conference Thinking Inside the Box, Interiors Forum Scotland

³ Dwyer, J. (2007), *Across/Between: Art into Design*. In: Proceedings of conference Thinking Inside the Box, Interiors Forum Scotland

⁴ A reflective journal, which records the sensory experience and narrative of a place through drawing, collecting artefacts and photographic record.

Following the final review, a third workshop was held which allowed an investigation of presentation techniques, drawing into CAD generated images and experimenting with artistic materials and techniques alongside a photography and model-making workshop.

Interestingly, the work of the Interior Design student and the diploma students overlapped considerably with interior students suggesting architectural interventions and diploma students considering the existing interior spaces in the fort. The pedagogic approach to cross-disciplinary working enabled exciting crossovers to occur, but was transparent in identifying students strengths based on their educational background⁵.

The outcome of the whole project is to explore and demonstrate the zoo's potential, as a way of scoping for funding, in order to implement a new design scheme to enhance both the experience of the visitor, the Centre as a place of research excellence and an outstanding education facility, providing a platform for students to experience first hand, the intricacies of design development and the relationship to its stakeholders. This will be done through the collaboration of both Interior Design and Diploma students to consolidate a cohesive design from the Clients preferred schemes and to present this in the form of an exhibition at both the School of Architecture and for an event at the Zoo, which will be viewed by the local community, the Local Authority, Press and general public to instigate discussion on the regeneration of Sandown with the Zoo at its core.

3 THE LIVE PROJECT IN THE MASTERS COURSE

The Live Project is also a developing feature of the new Masters course in Interior Design. This course is part of a suite of interconnected Masters in Urban design, Historic Building Conservation and Sustainable design that share units of study and require collaboration of students across all these courses. For our Masters collaborative project Mottisfont Abbey in Romsey was used as a case study.

The brief was to explore the idea of practice through an investigation of a particular site. The cohort for this unit will be formed of interior designers, sustainable architects and historic building conservation students. All three groups will be invited to exhibit their work in Mottisfont Abbey at the end of the teaching year, alongside students in Diploma in Architecture exploring narratives through the landscape.

The Case

Mottisfont Abbey comprises an early 13th century priory, on the banks of the River Test near to the Norman, Winchester to Salisbury Road, converted into a house in Tudor times and then further adopted and extended primarily in the 18th century but also in later centuries. It includes a room painted by the celebrated painter Rex Whistler during the Second World War. It is listed as a Grade I building. The House sits in a designed park and garden. The stables block is listed Grade II, and there are many Grade II structures within the estate.

⁵ Lawson, G and Franz, J and Adkins, B (2005) Rhetoric of landscape architecture and interior design discourses: preparation for cross- disciplinary practice. *IDEA Journal*: pp. 41-49.

Initially students were asked to survey and describe the context. This surveying exercise provided the Sustainable Masters students with a great opportunity to develop their surveying and CAD modelling skills, but mainly to collect the information needed to implement a future environmental study. In Semester 2 the output of this exercise would be used to develop a 3D model for assessing the visual and thermal properties of the building. For Interior Masters students, the surveying exercise provided a chance to develop drawing and surveying skills and to investigate the different histories of Mottisfont. This analysis is part of the 'stripping back' process as defined by Fred Scott in, *'On Altering Architecture'*. The information will be used in semester two to inform and develop design proposals for the site.

The material produced in this unit will form the background to design interventions/proposals and an environmental study in semester 2. It should evidence visual analysis, a bibliography, and reflection on findings across the site. In addition, students will produce an illustrated essay: this document critically examines an aspect of the building or method of practice to investigate in more depth as a visual essay.

The National Trust is currently in the process of reinventing the site of Mottisfont Abbey through building on its heritage. Their vision is:

'Reflection, revelation and pleasure: inspiring experiences of beauty, art and nature on a 1000 year old estate.'

The arts programme aims to increase the profile of Mottisfont in the Test Valley, to contribute to the contemporary arts, and to develop new audiences. The project aims to build on existing works within Mottisfont, the Derek Hill Collection, The Whistler Room, and Maude Russell's contribution to the site. The new development will allow for amateur artists and contemporary practitioners to exhibit on the site. It will rationalise the existing buildings and provide new visitor facilities, studios for artists, and engage with new and diverse partnerships. The new arts programme will provide residencies and site specific commissions, indoor and outdoor exhibitions, installations and events, workshops and seminars, artists networking and CPD, and projects with schools and higher education.

The Project

Based on the aspirations of the National Trust the site of Mottisfont is used for investigations to re-invent the site. To work at an range of scales, to look at the overall arrangement of the estate, or look at the sustainability of the site, either as a whole, or through thermal or lighting analysis of the building. Also, there is a possibility to propose design interventions into the site, temporary exhibitions or more permanent interventions. These could be small scale or large scale reconfigurations of the building.

Students who have worked on Mottisfont will present their work to the group; these readings of the building will form the basis of a site analysis. Through discussion and tutorials they are asked to respond to the given papers and to develop a brief to explore a space or spaces. The chosen site could be a gallery, shop, urban space or room. The intervention could be small, on the top of a light switch, or it could be the design of a gallery, or to reconfigure the site.

This paper, whilst placing the project in both its educational and physical context, has discussed the processes by which design projects integrate Studio teaching principles with practice at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels. This method challenges the life cycle of a 'studio project', and attempts to incorporate a range of teaching methodologies including 'the short project' or 'workshop' whilst transferring knowledge between a wide range of participants. This teaching approach has many challenges, particularly the timing of the project and the goodwill of the Client. The benefits however, are clear for the staff and the students. The relationships with the Client are developing and we intend to build on these connections as the courses develop within the School.

3.1.1.1 REFERENCES

[1] Scott, F. '*On altering Architecture*'. Routledge. 2008. ISBN 0-203-59059-7

3.1.1.2 Web-links

[1] www.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/

[2] www.londonmet.ac.uk/architecture/faculty/asd-projects/

[3] www.bdr.group.shef.ac.uk

[4] Portsmouth Project office

www.port.ac.uk/departments/academic/architecture/projectoffice/



Image: Eccleston George mould making demonstration



Image: Student workshop- working with willow and paper mache moulds



Image: Zoo facade design by Rebecca Skeels

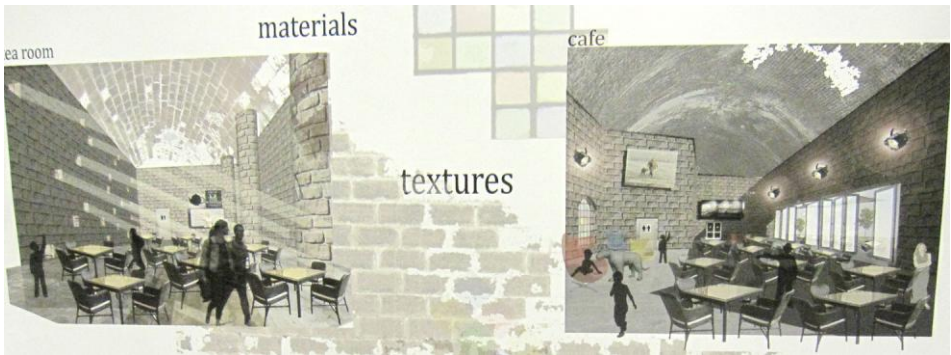


Image: Fort interior design by Karolina Skowronska