

# Undercurrent: swimming away from the design studio

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## Abstract

This paper debates whether to pull away from the tide established by the Design Studio as the conventional form and norm for architectural education. As a means to establish points of divergence, case studies from art and architectural education are explored.

In 1986 Glasgow School of Art established an Environmental Art Department led by David Harding. In 1989 his teaching partner, Sam Ainslie took on the leadership of the new Master of Fine Arts course. The paper describes the influence of these courses on the practice of their graduates such as Simon Starling, Richard Wright and Douglas Gordon. The premise of the undergraduate course was that students would create work in the public domain and negotiate permission for use of the site with the owner. The paper explains why these projects can be viewed as live projects and discusses the relevance to architectural educators of the courses' content and structure.

Through analysis of a series of projects begun in 2008, commissioned by local community clients and designed by students of architecture, the author in collaboration with Colin Priest, has arrived at a definition of what makes a project "live", identified the constituent parts of a live project and devised a methodology to plan and understand learning outside the Design Studio. This information is being shared via an online Live Projects Network. With reference to Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning as "legitimate peripheral participation", the paper will demonstrate how learning derived from live projects can be understood and valued.

The paper also acknowledges the strong pull of the Design Studio and the importance of the educational institution in legitimising a project as "live". Through our definition and analysis of live projects, an expanded range of social, economic, political, cultural and educational endeavour, as exemplified by the work of Harding and Ainslie, can be seen to be connected and relevant when establishing a critical view of contemporary architectural

education. The paper describes the liberated pedagogy made possible by this position.

## Abandon ship! Swimming away from the Design Studio

This paper does not seek to provide either a historical overview of schools of architecture and their pedagogy, or an autobiographical account of experiences of architectural education. However it is important to acknowledge the influence of both on the theory and practice of contemporary architectural educators, as well as the wider profession. Taking contemporary architectural education as the context for this paper and exploring the design studio as the dominant force within it, I seek to question whether we should swim against the tide that it creates.

Why should the design studio surrender its pre-eminence? It is expensive, resource hungry and so much effort is expended defending it within the institution where it normally compares unfavourably economically with other lecture-based disciplines. The teaching, learning and production within the design studio are rarely conceived, perceived or expressed as research by institutions and therefore become de-valued. Its institutional setting places it at least one step away from architectural practice making the task of staying current in a rapidly changing world a considerable challenge. The engrossing nature of design studio activity and its importance (conveyed to students in ways that are both explicit and implicit) within the curriculum can marginalise other core academic subjects such as history and theory, technology and practice. These subjects are occasionally brave enough to assert their connection with design by "integrating" with it and are often drowned in the attempt. This can be seen in the RIBA's validation reports where frequent mention is made of the need to improve the integration of technology into the design studio. While maintaining the central importance of design, the paper will challenge the monopolisation of the design studio by design at the expense of other core subjects.



Fig. 1. OB1 LIVE Lantern Festival, 2013

The design studio also dominates as a physical space where students are expected to experience the majority of their education and also as a symbolic space where students become socialised as architects. It is in this use of the design studio, as a socialising tool, that it is most difficult to define, challenge or change the status quo. Yet it is here that the greatest opportunity for generosity can be sited – inviting students to “belong” to the group that they want to join – becoming an architect. However, this system also provides ample opportunity to exclude students who struggle to conform, normally manifested in a disengagement from the design studio. As long as imbalances in gender, race and class remain within the profession and wider society, the vagaries of this socialising system will continue to create barriers to the widening of participation.

As described above, contemporary architectural education is striving to maintain its institutional, academic and professional relevance; has created unintended pedagogical consequences associated with the dominance of both design as a subject and the design studio as an entity; and is struggling to remove the barriers to a wider participation that the design studio creates. Could any of these issues be addressed if the teaching and learning of architecture occurred outside the architectural design studio?

This paper will focus on two possible points of divergence from the mainstream of the contemporary architectural design studio-based model. The first, live projects, are often viewed as “building” projects happening outside the design studio. The second, art education, is a related discipline that is traditionally studio-based. The paper will look at the influence of the Glasgow School of Art Environmental Art Department on its graduates such as Christine Borland, Douglas Gordon and Martin Boyce (see figure 2). Environmental Art is a discipline which shares outward-looking preoccupations with Architecture such as context and society. The paper demonstrates why these projects can be viewed as live projects and discusses the relevance of this to architectural educators.

Through analysis of a programme of year one live projects (OB1 LIVE) at Oxford Brookes

School of Architecture commissioned by local community clients and designed by students of architecture and interior architecture, the author in collaboration with Colin Priest, has arrived at a definition of what makes a project “live”. We have identified the constituent parts of a live project and devised a methodology to plan and understand learning outside the design studio. This information is being shared via an online Live Projects Network. With reference to Lave and Wenger’s theory of “situated learning” as “legitimate peripheral participation”, the paper will show how learning derived from live projects can be understood and valued.

<b>Environmental Art course at Glasgow School of Art (1985-c.2001)</b>	<b>Masters of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art (1989-c.2001)</b>
Christine Borland (Turner Prize nominee, 1997)	Simon Starling (Turner Prize winner, 2005)
Douglas Gordon (Turner Prize winner, 1996)	Richard Wright (Turner Prize winner, 2009)
Roderick Buchanan (Beck’s Futures Prize winner, 2000)	Toby Paterson (Beck’s Futures Prize winner, 2002)
Jim Lambie (Turner Prize nominee, 2005)	Rosalind Nashashibi (Beck’s Futures Prize winner, 2003)
Martin Boyce (Turner Prize winner, 2011) (Beck’s Futures Prize nominee, 2000)	Alan Currall (Beck’s Futures Prize nominee, 2003)
Nathan Coley (Turner Prize nominee, 2007)	Louise Hopkins
David Shrigley (Beck’s Futures Prize nominee, 2000)	Tom O’Sullivan
Craig Richardson (also MFA)	Joanne Tatham
Ross Sinclair (also MFA)	Julie Roberts
Jonnie Wilkes (also MFA)	Fanni Niemi-Junkola
Claire Barclay (also MFA)	Anne Ooms
Toby Webster	Lucy Byatt
Jacqueline Donachie	Jim Hamlyn
Rachel Mimiec	Peter McCaughey

Fig. 2. Some notable graduates of the Environmental Art and Masters of Fine Art courses at Glasgow School of Art. Names of graduates found in Lowndes (2012). Data on Turner Prize (Tate, 2013). Data on Beck’s Futures (Lowndes, 2012 and Wikipedia, 2013)

### Cast Adrift. Neither here nor there

What are the dangers and rewards for tutors and students who cast adrift from the shelter of the design studio? A radical early example is Walter Gropius’ experiment to connect the Bauhaus with industrialisation and mass production during

a time of hyper-inflation, seen in their 1923 Exhibition. The work on show gained widespread acclaim and remains significant today. At the time it was a mixed financial and artistic success. There was conflict among teachers and students about what was lost in this shift in direction. Local craftspeople felt threatened by the potential competition and the public resented the use of their taxes to fund the institution. The perception that profit motivated the actions of the Bauhaus may have contributed to some of the negative reactions to their bold experiment. From experience of running live projects, I would suggest that the physical product should not be viewed as the primary motivation. The real product is the learning gained by the students.

An oppositional relationship still exists today between those seeking to protect the role of the university to provide a place of free thinking (theory) and those seeking to engage at first hand with the world outside (practice). However, both activities are complimentary and should inform one another. Activities associated with theory and practice are mixed up in any design project. A tutor may be pursuing a piece of research while students are engaged in scholarship by learning about it from their tutor. Original discoveries or innovations may be made in the course of the project by either tutor or student. The practical aspects of design can range from the simple practising of skills to an early application of innovative research. Learning by doing can lead to original discovery by doing. The central activity of architecture is the production of space and as this is essentially within the experiential realm, architects need to learn to connect their imagined spaces to experienced spaces.

One criticism I would like to make of the design studio-only model is of the issues arising from the imposed reality of theoretical design studio-based projects. Such briefs require students to negotiate with their tutors the terms of the reality that they must imagine and work within. This can lead to imbalances of power between tutor and student. The tutor is the arbiter of the legitimacy of the reality that the student imagines. The conflict that this induces in students is often counter-productive to their learning. This can be seen most clearly when teaching year one students, the vast majority of whom are simultaneously negotiating the shift from classroom-based learning to studio-based learning. As novices to this system, they are not afraid to point out its idiosyncrasies to those of us immersed in it. At first questions betray a partial belief that the project is real: "Why did the neighbours not know that we were proposing a cinema next door, and why did they seem so alarmed?" "Will this design get planning permission?" Once it becomes clear that the project is fictional, the questions shift, revealing negative consequences arising from the realisation that this is not real: "If it is not going to be built, why do I need to demonstrate that the

structure will stand up?" "Can't I just assume that disabled people won't want to visit my building?"

We introduced a live project on the first day of first year as an experiment to see if it helped to remove the barriers to learning that the need to negotiate reality provided. An early project in 2008 was to design environmental play structures for Donnington Doorstep Family Centre where the vulnerabilities of both the pre-school children and our first-time designers required us to carefully structure contact with the client and negotiate an appropriate project outcome. Students made prototypes and used these to help them make D.I.Y instruction booklets for parents to make the play devices with their children. This project was followed by a traditional studio project. Having had experience of designing for real people as well as working within the design studio making their prototypes, the usual confusion between imagination and reality ceased to trouble students during the traditional design studio project. The shared endeavour of the initial live project had established a level of trust and mutual understanding between students and tutors that was beneficial to all participants in the design studio. We found that while students are engaged in a live project outside the studio, the design studio remains significant as a place of production, preparation and learning. They are in the studio physically but their imaginations are rooted in an external reality.

In 1968 David Harding became the town artist in the New Town of Glenrothes, involving local people in the making of public art works. In 1978 he developed the "Art in Social Context" course at Dartington College and between 1985 and 2001 he was head of the Environmental Art Department at Glasgow School of Art. Environmental Art was a new specialisation taken by students after year one for the remainder of their four year undergraduate course. Their studios were located outside the School of Art building in the redundant Girl's High School in Scott Street where they had lots of space and sources of inspiration to experiment with interior site-specific work. Harding's teaching partner Sam Ainslie (1997, p.68) recalls a project by Rachel Mimiec in 1991 that responded to the imminent sale of an outdoor auditorium in Kelvingrove Park, expressing the loss of public space and shared experience by pasting photographs of clapping hands on the tiered seating. For this project she would have been asked to research the context, negotiate with the owners and users of the space, identified herself as a student connected with the Glasgow School of Art and agreed to make a work (presumably self-funded) prior to the site's sale. The projects were collaborative, multi-disciplinary and process-driven. Simon Starling explains the influence of this radical approach to learning on his practice: "this idea of the artist just sort of leaving the studio and going and sort of making work in the world in a

conscious way. That sort of made sense to me from a fairly early point" (Irving, 2012)

### **All Hands On Deck. Collaborative ways of working**

Lave and Wenger (1995, p.29) describe their concept of Situated Learning through Legitimate Peripheral Participation as a theory of learning rather than a pedagogical technique. In a well structured live project students acquire legitimacy for their activities outside the institution by their membership of it. In OB1 LIVE and the Environmental Art course, students' identity as learners is kept explicit, keeping them on the periphery of fully legitimate practice, protected by the presence and accountability of the institution. Learning *in situ*, either through live projects or apprenticeship is not enough to ensure that relevant situated learning will occur. (Lave and Wenger, 1995, pp.76-9). However, I would propose that OB1 LIVE and the Environmental Art course both employ live projects and that these projects are structured in a way that encourages situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation.

Working with year one students placed us on the peripheries of recognised live project activity. With low-to-no budgets and inexperienced cohorts, projects and products emerged that were very different in nature from the typical "live build" projects seen in the architectural press. We were forced to question whether our projects were legitimately "live projects". In the absence of an agreed definition of the term "live project", in a paper written by the author with Colin Priest (2012) we describe the process by which we analysed case studies in order to find a definition of a live project. We had experimented with different formats, using them to test different hypotheses: "Are self-initiated projects live?" ("Now Showing", 2011) "Are student-led projects live?" (Tactile model for the blind, 2009). (Anderson and Priest, 2009) We were using live projects to teach conceptual design and had moved beyond the compartmentalised technical, participatory or professional training labels, often applied to live projects. This enabled us to position ourselves within a broad spectrum of live project practice.

We identified six factors common to all live projects and formed a definition explaining their relationship: *"A live project comprises the negotiation of a brief, timescale, budget and product between a client and an [educational] institution."* (Anderson and Priest, 2012)

Some factors were more contentious or difficult to identify than others. It was accepted that a real project and its brief was essential for any live project. It was observed that some would call a project live if this factor alone was present but without the other factors it is impossible to distinguish this from a professional project or

ensure that it is a structured piece of learning. Timescale is an inevitable factor and it can be difficult to make live projects fit within the academic calendar. We found that a broader view of the possibilities inherent in the other factors, particularly brief, product and client enables more imaginative ways to achieve this. Client: we questioned whether it was acceptable for projects to be self-initiated. If the students are effectively the clients, this is a marginal case, closer to a design studio project but if all the other factors are there and it occurs in the real world, we decided that it can still function as a live project. The group of participating students are the client. Often their institution is actually the client. A budget is inevitable but often overlooked, even if operating on a make do and mend basis. The necessity for a product is not contentious but some forms of output tend not to be acknowledged as "live" such as prototypes or ideas generation. Institution: we were slower to think of this but it is the most obvious factor that distinguishes a live project from a professional project in practice.

We saw that even very diverse project types shared characteristics and constraints. We recognised that what differentiated them was where on the spectrum of each characteristic or constraint they sat. For example, the nature of the client relationship could range from a commission to a collaboration to a self-initiated project. For our online resource, the Live Projects Network (Anderson and Priest, 2013) to connect students, clients, tutors and researchers involved in live projects, we identified a series of spectra that can be used by them to find case studies with similar contexts and resources. The identification of these spectra enabled us to develop a flexible methodology to analyse the structure of a live project:

*"A live project comprises the negotiation of a brief, timescale, budget and product between a client and an educational institution. The availability of resources offered by each of these factors creates a spectrum and reveals positions along it that the live project can occupy."* (Anderson and Priest, 2012)

The inclusiveness of the definition and the flexibility of the methodology enable a broad range of projects to be connected as live projects, including those beyond the discipline of architecture. Live projects have the potential to teach any academic core subject or anything else that may occur within a professional project. It is the role of the tutor as agent (Anderson and Priest, in press) to negotiate a structure and focus for the project that ensures students will be able to learn what they need to learn. This could be a very specific academic core subject (Care, Jary and Parnell, 2010) or a much broader range of skills and knowledge as is normally found in a design studio project.



What can we learn by connecting diverse live project types? We can connect live project practitioners and participants, opening up new methodologies, exchanging best practice and expanding dialogue about the role of live projects in contemporary education. It is hoped that the Live Projects Network is one step towards achieving this. In the more specific case of the Environmental Art course, much can be learned because the lapse of time and visibility of its graduates allows us to see what happened next.

### **The Storm. Are the studio and university still relevant?**

The number of artists who have risen to prominence from the Environmental Art Department since it began in 1985 is significant, particularly because they were in many ways peripheral to the artistic establishment (Lowndes, 2012 and Irving, 2012). Harding and Ainslie's radical teaching approach connects them as artists, as must the influence of the contemporary art scene that was struggling to emerge in Glasgow. (Sharratt, 2012). Perhaps inspired by Joseph Beuys who made a series of influential visits to Scotland from 1970 to 1981 and who had c.1974 had established a Free International University, in January 1987 a group of Glasgow writers and artists including Malcolm Dickson, James Kelman and Alasdair Gray started a Free University that lasted for five years. The Flyer for the inaugural event read: "part free university, part late/cheap cafe, unemployed centre, artspace etc. DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE". (Lowndes, 2012, p.94) The nature of the educational institution, its accessibility and its structures were open to question in this predominantly socialist climate where there was a widely-held belief among artists that they had a responsibility to work for their community.

In her book, *Social Sculpture. The Rise of the Glasgow Art Scene*, (2012), Sarah Lowndes describes the determination of Harding and Ainslie's alumni as they chose to stay in Glasgow, the city that had inspired their earliest works. They continued to work collaboratively and took over the running of the artist-run gallery, Transmission. They invited established artists from outside Glasgow such as Lawrence Weiner to collaborate with them. This effectively extended the institutional support that they had found in the art school with which they retained close connections. The decision to stay was not an obvious one in a post-industrial city with almost no art market and very little public funding forthcoming for conceptual art. Their self-sustaining and supporting group is a useful model for the situation faced by many architecture graduates in the current economic climate. This group of artists formed an early identity through undergraduate live projects and remained loyal to itself as a group, their art and

their city, a place that inspired many of their earliest projects. A contemporary response to a similar situation can be found in the University of Northumbria's Graduate Retention And Development (GRAD) programme established to respond to the lack of opportunities for architecture graduates as well as address some of the development needs of the region. (Messer, 2012)

In hostile social, political and economic climates, it can be seen that institutions can provide an important shelter for collective activity that is both creative and educational. The sum becomes greater than its parts and is particularly conducive to collaborative and inter-disciplinary working. These institutions can be established, such as Glasgow School of Art; be self-forming, such as the Free University; or be appropriated, such as the artist-run Transmission Gallery.

### **The Harbour Mouth. Between university and world.**

This paper began by acknowledging the sheer strength of the current created by university design studios as the location for the majority of architectural education. We can of course choose to reject this and seek to establish alternative structures. There is certainly an argument for increasing connections between universities and supporting other institutions along the model of artist-run or not-for-profit organisations such as Transmission. There is great potential for mutual support and joint endeavour here.

This paper however finds value in the potential strength of the existing university institution as a harbour for creativity. With increasing professionalisation of university teaching skills, the intellectual freedom, access to the latest research, the potential for inter-disciplinary collaboration, the accountability and control of quality that contemporary universities can provide, they should be in a very strong position to allow large numbers of students to participate in and access an excellent, intensive and relevant education. This might seem counter-intuitive at a time when funding for university education is being challenged and when opportunities for access to that education are made uncertain by changes to fees. The same inclement economic, social and political forces are also acting on the profession and graduates, leading to calls for a radical shift in working practices. These should be viewed as one system, just as the tide in the harbour ebbs and flows with the sea outside. If we choose to work for change within an existing educational institution, we can harness its strength and stability to transform the existing design studio model into one which harbours outward-looking creative, collaborative and inter-disciplinary opportunities for students, staff and the wider community.

Live projects are one way to address this imperative and are particularly well suited to disciplines concerned with context and society such as architectural education and environmental art. By defining live projects and understanding how to structure them to ensure that significant situated learning can occur within them, we can improve dialogue and share best practice across disciplines and institutions.

Although the work of an architect is concerned with, and is manifested in the world outside the studio, significant parts of the design process are located within the design studio. Therefore the educational design studio as a proxy for the professional design studio remains important for the learning of studio-based disciplines. As the paper shows, live projects are located in both the world outside and the design studio. The presence of live projects alongside design studio projects enables us to be explicit in our methods for exploring an expanded range of imaginative possibilities from the speculative to the evolved. Perhaps we should view educational design studios as public space in a way that is similar to the art gallery as a public space, engaging the wider community in its cultural endeavour. This view shifts the perceived location / position of the design studio as a physical space located within the university to a metaphysical position straddling the institution and the world.

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