

S[q]WOTting Between Academia and Practice

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Introduction – Inception of a Micro-Practice

*'We need more and different types of ways of entering the profession'*¹

When Part II architecture students graduate, they are faced with the following options: a) follow the traditional route towards qualifying as an architect and join a practice; b) continue their studies through another Masters or PhD; c) establish their own practice; d) transfer their skills to another career. The least risky option is to obtain employment in a practice, whilst the alternatives require pre-existing financial stability. With increased tuition fees and debt, opportunities for trying something different are limited.

To seek that 'something different', Matt Warren, Matt Vaughan and I submitted a business proposal to Deutsche Bank's Awards for Creative Enterprises 2013. Our entry won the Award in Creative and Cultural Practice with £10,000 capital funding to found our own practice: SWOT[studio].

SWOT[studio] is a micro-practice. We proposed to work four days a week in well-established practices (APEC Architects, BPN Architects and Glenn Howells Architects), and spend our fifth day developing our own academic and commercial projects. We are experimenting with a hybrid studio model that could potentially be better suited to the next generation of designers.

Symbiotic S[q]WOTing

The exploratory model involves S[q]WOTing within Birmingham City University (BCU). Squatting is usually associated with living in an unoccupied space without paying the owner. S[q]WOTting is working in an unoccupied space without paying rent and related overheads. In return for this space, we share our skills and experience in establishing a creative business with the university's students; it is a symbiotic form of the parasitic squat. It is not only a model that benefits the 'S[q]WOTters' and students; BCU itself can profit from the positive public relations associated with supporting their students beyond graduation and improving the transition into practice.

In order to cultivate engagement with this model, we need to first appropriate a prominent space. The S[q]WOT experiment therefore consists of two parts:

S[q]WOT One // Intervention 2013-2014

SWOT[studio] work with Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD) students from different disciplines to design and fabricate a multi-functional incubation studio that 'squats' within the campus' atrium for optimum visibility and exposure. The project aims to foster a community of innovative and resourceful students who have been exposed to collaborating with different disciplines, and experience with real clients, consultants, materials, costs and risk. This first project is funded by BIAD and BCU's Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT).

S[q]WOT Two // Occupation 2014-2016

SWOT[studio] occupy S[q]WOT at least one day a week, running both academic and commercial projects. In return for space and reduced overheads, they share the thrills and pitfalls of starting a design practice with BCU's students. When not occupied by SWOT[studio], S[q]WOT is used by other graduates, students, staff and visitors. This project seeks to stimulate creative entrepreneurialism within the university. It also offers students the unique opportunity for post-occupation analysis of a space they've designed and fabricated.

*'We don't do any monitoring post-occupation. Success is the front page of a glossy magazine... In education, we're not assessing the project against social impact criteria.'*²

The key objective is to create a network of graduates that have the ability and confidence to establish their own S[q]WOTting design practices, and challenge the traditional route between education and practice; *'to define and even design the profession of tomorrow.'*³

This paper explores the need for live projects, extracts the lessons learnt from S[q]WOT One, and how they will impact upon the approach to S[q]WOT Two.

Emergence of the Millennial Live Project

Architectural design studio has arguably been historically shaped on the competitive model of individualists, echoing *'... Hegelian beliefs that history moves ahead through the work of a few great individuals'*.⁴ This paradigm still exists in some schools, with a focus on *'cultivating the lone genius rather than the enlightened collaborator.'*⁵ The Studio Culture Conference, held at London Metropolitan University in

2012, highlighted the need for change from this competitive model to a more collaborative pedagogical approach with *'strong links to practice and the outside world'*.⁶ This shift from competitive to collaborative reflects the needs of the current generation of learners: the Millennials.

From 2000, the Millennial generation began their university education. This generation of students differs significantly from the Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) and Generation X (born 1965-1981). According to Jonas-Dwyer and Pospisil⁷, Millennials are more confident, optimistic, team-oriented, achievement-oriented and civic-minded. This means they respond better to learning environments that include opportunities for experiential learning, group activities, and community-related learning. These characteristics are becoming more evident in profession, as architects are *'are increasingly embracing models of collaborative practice, a move away from the "virtuoso soloist" or celebrity architect, towards self-styled, loosely collaborative group identities – FAT, Foreign Office Architects, muf, UNStudio amongst them.'*⁸

Live projects are a way of implementing this change towards the collaborative studio model.

Although there has been recent surge in live projects within architectural education, it is not a new concept. Dr James Benedict Brown's research into the history of live projects revealed that they were first recorded at the Birmingham School of Architecture between 1951 and 1962. These projects focused on design for construction, and *'might, therefore, be understood as experiments with hybrid pedagogies that combined what were considered to be the best elements of both a practical apprenticeship and a university education.'*⁹ Brown's research into contemporary live projects revealed a difference from their predecessors: collaboration, *'no collaboration with those clients or users in the brief writing or design process, and the teacher operated not as collaborator equal to the students, but a traditional overseer of the process.'*¹⁰

The benefits of live projects were discussed at a recent screening of *'Archiculture'*, a documentary film on architectural education in the US hosted by RIBA West Midlands, Birmingham School of Architecture and SWOT[studio]. An advantage of this pedagogical approach was that *'live projects give students a taste of making things so they know that there's a resistance; materials, talking to people who aren't architects.'*¹¹ It was also highlighted that *'live projects have to be different from practice projects in at least one quality'*.¹²

This is what we wanted to achieve. We wanted to offer students an experience not usually attainable within their education or practice; to study outside their field and learn to identify opportunities for innovative collaboration, and challenge traditional practice.

S[q]WOT One // Intervention

Although this live project is funded by BCU, it is not led by university staff or assigned to a university department. It is facilitated by SWOT[studio]. We are not qualified or experienced educators, and although we have over twenty years experience in practice between us, we have not led a project like this before or worked within a higher education environment outside of our own education. In summary, this has been as much of a learning experience for us as it has been for the participating students.

Our escapade developed over the following phases:

Phase 01 Engage | September – October 2013

Phase 02 Experiment | November – January 2013

Phase 03 Design & Fabricate | January – June [September] 2014

Phase 01 Engage

With the full support, and excitement, of BIAD's Deanery we embarked on this experiment and shortly discovered the most recurring challenge within a university setting: programming. We had originally intended to launch the project in September 2013, but we soon realised that in order to engage staff and students in an extra-curricular project, you need to allow them time to settle into their course. Several programme revisions followed until we had a start date for the end of November.

During that time we had to attract students from different courses across BIAD to take part in our voluntary, non-assessed project. We decided to target students from second year, so they had an established grasp of their subject, but without the stress associated with their final year. We also wanted the participating students to carry on their involvement through S[q]WOT Two during their third year, to help prepare them for their routes after graduation.

Although the project can be seen as predominantly architectural, it was vital to the project that we engaged students outside of architecture. Our professional work relies on being able to communicate and collaborate with consultants and clients from different backgrounds, with different ways of thinking and methods to approach a design problem. A lot of courses do not provide this opportunity. They are sometimes insular and closed to other departments.¹³ We wanted to instigate a dialogue between these courses to better prepare the students for their working life.

We originally intended to engage students from the school of media, technology and engineering, and

music, as well as BIAD, but inter-faculty communication was unfortunately difficult to achieve. We believe earlier contact and consultation would overcome this issue, particularly now we have a precedent to present.

We initially asked Heads of Schools to nominate students from their second year courses to apply for the project. We eventually found that advertising the project directly to the students via the university's online platform and in person was far more successful than the 'top-down' nominations method. Further analysis into this would be constructive to approaching future projects.

Our goal was to receive 24 applications. 26 students applied ranging between levels 4 and 7, from schools of architecture, fashion design, illustration, interior design, furniture design, jewellery, media and communication, and product design. 22 of these students took part in the first stage of the project

The final objective for this phase was to establish a brief. A principal attribute of live projects is working directly with the client and end users, usually within a community. This also means developing a brief with these stakeholders. Within this project, participating students had to engage with a variety of stakeholders that would be using their design: SWOT[studio], university staff, visitors, students, and themselves. We decided to develop the framework for the brief with BIAD's Deanery for approval beforehand, which the students could then dissect and adapt to their findings during the experiment phase.

Phase 02 Experiment

This phase was used to introduce the students to working with other disciplines and designing flexible spaces, culminating in an exhibition of their exploratory fabricated designs. To prepare them for this, the students took part in weekly lectures, site visits, and design workshops. Due to the emphasis on flexible design, the workshops involved dividing the students into groups to explore the different modes of flexibility as defined by Robert Kronenburg¹⁴: adapt, transform, move and interact.

Each group was given a brief to design a space that could be used for two different functions by two different design disciplines. We frequently changed the groups around to give them experience in developing other peoples' ideas, as they would be expected to in their profession. It also enabled a wider range of dialogue between different disciplines, so they were able to grasp the different needs of others. They presented each other's concepts, developed through a variety of media, and created a more defined brief out of the ideas explored through visiting the site and concept development. (Fig.1.)

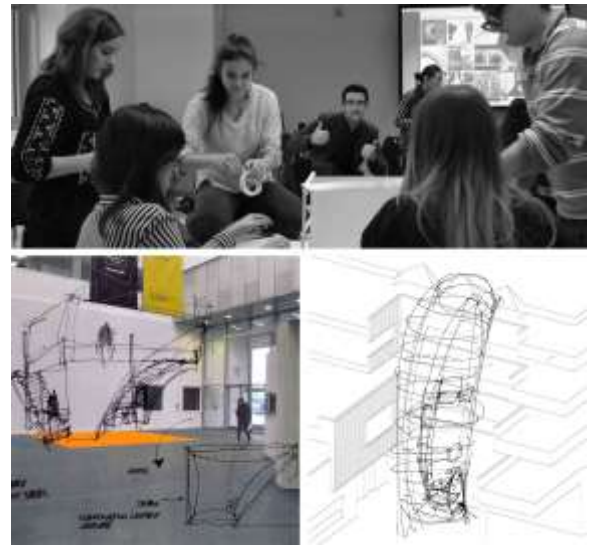


Fig.1. S[q]WOT day one concept development

The outcomes of the first sessions were very promising. Most students were excited to be working with people from other departments. There were a few individuals who lacked the confidence to express their ideas, believing they were under-qualified as it was outside their discipline, and were not able to form a link with their skills. This improved when we rearranged the groups and put the least confident members together. They later became dedicated members of the team. There were other students who struggled in the team environment, particularly in terms of developing a joint idea and sharing ownership. They found it difficult to contribute a sacrificial idea for the sake of collaborative design progress, and unfortunately drifted away from the project.

During these initial sessions, we felt like tutors rather than team members, which is perhaps to be expected when students are getting to grips with unfamiliar activities. We tried to make the process less formal by introducing their briefs and precedents through a S[q]WOT Facebook group. We wanted the students to take ownership over the project and use the online group for sharing ideas between their weekly sessions. Although there were quiet periods, the online communication tool proved to be successful, and some students who later left the project still continued to make contributions online. This was a really positive outcome, revealing different and flexible ways of belonging and participating within a live project.

After six S[q]WOT days, the team had developed their design for each mode of flexibility into a mobile canopy, desk and cinema that they fabricated. They exhibited their designs on their atrium site as S[q]WOT[beta] (Fig.2).



Fig.2. S[q]WOT[beta] exhibition

The fabrication and curation of this exhibition was extremely educational for the whole team. As soon as we entered the workshops, we became team members rather than tutors. This 'trial' phase proved to be invaluable in first-hand experience with a tight budget and programme. We all experienced the headaches of making the team's ideas reality. The overhead canopy was a particular risk, and underwent a variety of prototypes and failures, providing the students with hands-on design problem-solving, rather than just on paper.

By this time a close-knit team had formed, triumphing in the success of the exhibition. The students were particularly elated when BIAD animation students used their project for the Flatpack Film Festival. We were not expecting an opportunity for post-occupation analysis at this stage, so it was rewarding to see the students discuss how they would have done things differently having seen their design in use, and single out issues to bear in mind for the final design.

We had originally intended to select 12 students to proceed with the next phase, and the rest of team to keep contributing to the project via the facebook group. This, however, happened more naturally. Due to timetable clashes and course commitments, the team of 22 gradually reduced to a dedicated core of 7

students for the subsequent phases: one Level 5 Architecture, three Level 5 Interior Design, two Level 6 Interior Design and one Level 5 Product Design.

Phase 03 Design & Fabricate

With the practical issues and creative triumphs of the 'beta' exhibition fresh in their minds, the team developed a design for the final S[q]WOT space. With a smaller team, they were able to work more closely, recognising each other's strengths and dividing tasks accordingly between themselves.

We discovered that the most constructive design tool was the campus building itself. This was BIAD's first year in the new building, designed by Associated Architects. Open plan levels overlook the atrium and main entrance; the S[q]WOT site. The visual links between departments and informal breakout areas aimed to accommodate 'exquisite collisions' between disciplines. We had started the project by booking spaces in advance, but we found that it was much more productive to design in different breakout spaces each week. We were then exposed to the rest of the university and experienced 'exquisite collisions' with other staff and students who wanted to know more about the project. A particularly successful 'collision' was with a structural engineer who happened to be tutoring that day. He offered advice for the team's design, and the students were able to partake in a new type of dialogue.

We maintained our team member roles, developing design ideas with them and acting as technical consultants when necessary. As the university saw us as a consultant providing a product, we took a more involved design role than tutors would be expected to in a traditional project setting. We facilitated the student's ideas and developed the designs in collaboration with them, although it was a difficult balance to achieve and sometimes we had to lead decision-making to ensure we kept to deadlines.

The students, however, presented the final design on their own to their client representatives, members of the BIAD Deanery. The presentation, practised to perfection, was excellently delivered and well received, achieving 'sign off' in time for Easter. The students were jubilant and looked forward to fabrication so S[q]WOT could be completed in time for BIAD's graduation show.

Unfortunately, this phase suffered a significant delay.

At the beginning of the project, Matt Vaughan gave a presentation entitled 'How not to do it'. He described his experience on the Limpopo live project he was involved with during his postgraduate course at the University of Nottingham. There was one significant problem they came across: gaining access to university

funding. We discovered that this is not an isolated issue.

The Deutsche Bank capital and CELT funding covered the costs for first phase materials and our time. BIAD had assigned another fund for the fabrication of the final design, but they were not able to release this until a Service Agreement was in place.

The roles of client and designer have been difficult to define. We are an external Limited company designing with BIAD students. BIAD is the client but SWOT[studio] is also an end-user. Although Matt Warren and I were enrolled as students on Birmingham School of Architecture's 'Beyond Graduation' programme, and CELT had in turn employed us as 'Student Mentors', we were still viewed as an external consultant. As a result, it took from December 2013 until July 2014 to agree a service agreement that did not involve us maintaining Professional Indemnity insurance at a £5m level for six years after our contract termination. The Deanery and finance team had tried their best to help us sooner, but the university's system was not designed to support such projects. Eventually they were able to agree a reduced level of insurance for SWOT[studio]. Hopefully this convoluted process will be easier for future live projects that are not directly managed by the university, and enable other graduate businesses to work with the university.

Due to this delay, we missed the completion deadline for the BIAD graduate show, and most of the students left Birmingham for the summer, some graduating and moving away permanently. They have regrettably missed out on the joy of completing their project, which they briefly felt after the 'beta' exhibition.

At the time of writing, we have just received BIAD's funding and are now gearing up for fabrication during September, inviting the students who live locally to participate. We will keep the other students up to date via the Facebook group, and hope that they will be able to continue to contribute online.

Reflection as a Micro-Practice

We have learnt a significant amount from the process of S[q]WOT One. Programming our S[q]WOT time around our 'day jobs' has been a compelling insight into whether this type of live project is feasible and sustainable for a micro-practice. Whilst it is difficult, it is certainly an exciting challenge. The ideal situation would be that we had enough funding to employ one of us full-time to oversee and analyse the project. It could have possibly alleviated our concern with liability, which had an influence over our approach to working with the students.

We saw the project more as practice-based rather than a university project, and therefore took the lead on some occasions, particularly closer to deadlines. We

also felt a sense of guilt if we overloaded the students with too much responsibility, as they were volunteers on a non-assessed project on top of their own course workload. If we had less liability, and the project counted towards their courses, we would have felt more comfortable with the students taking on more risk, particularly if more post-graduates were involved. It may also have helped previous participants in 'cementing their commitment to the project'.¹⁵

We would have liked to push them to '*find- beg, borrow, or steal – what they want to use in the wider world*'.¹⁶ On the other hand, the 'freedom' of '*assessment criteria – imposed by the school pedagogy or the professional validation requirements*' could hinder '*the project pedagogy*' being '*co-designed with the live project process*'.¹⁷

As we complete S[q]WOT one, we have future opportunities to anticipate. Following our presentation at BCU's Student Engagement Conference in June 2014, we were approached by several educators from different departments who wanted to take part in future projects like this. S[q]WOT has also been selected for the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA) NEU/NOW online festival in September 2014. The S[q]WOT team is looking forward to this, and the completion of the project, to kickstarting the next phase.

S[q]WOT Two and other Opportunities

*'We are in an entrepreneurial profession and that's not taught well at all. The faculty is learning from the students – they're thinking differently.'*¹⁸

In the new academic year SWOT[studio] will be able to continue in part as a commercial practice, sharing our triumphs and gaffes as a young enterprise. There is also potential to work with Birmingham School of Architecture's own live project office, Co.LAB. Now we have more experience, we aim to continue our involvement in live projects, broadening the range of disciplines, and using our contacts to bridge links with other practices and communities.

As the S[q]WOT students start their final year of their BA(Hons), they will be able to witness their design in use as a business incubation unit, design studio, cinema, exhibition and even a bar. They will have experienced their ideas becoming a tangible space that they can continue to learn from. This and their developed design skills and resourcefulness will hopefully influence their own projects and approach to practice. We did not aim for the students to become more 'oven-ready' for practices, but to help them become less risk averse and inspire them to innovate and experiment in business as well as design.

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