

Self-organising networks and decentralised knowledge exchange: How UK Architecture students are 30 years ahead the 'Occupy Movement'

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Introduction

The European Architecture Students Assembly (EASA) is a self-organising network that annually brings together more than 400 students to collaborate in workshops, debates, and lectures. EASA was founded in the name of knowledge and cultural exchange, and in the spirit of learning-by-doing. It is completely independent and entirely studentrun, from the logistics of hosting the event, to tutoring the workshops.

I was active in EASA from 2005 to 2012, as a participant, national contact, tutor, and organiser. This talk will cover the learning experiences offered by the assemblies. I will also touch on the history of EASA and its roots in the UK Winter Schools. I will discuss the reasons why EASA persists today when the Winter Schools withered in the span of 20 years. Finally I'll talk about the lessons of the 2010 assembly in Manchester and how to construct successful decentralised networks.

Early Years

EASA can trace its roots to the 1960s work of Cedric Price, who is credited with stating that "a building is not necessarily the best solution to a spatial problem". Price was a big influence on Brian Anson, a key figure in the UK Winter Schools. Anson, along with Richard Murphy, established the UK Winter Schools as a week-long discussion series involving architecture students from different UK schools.

In 1981, as the popularity of the Winter Schools increased, Murphy and Anson and a group of architecture students and educators from the UK extended an open invitation to students of architecture from around Europe. A one-off summer event was held in Liverpool, the participants discussing potential futures for the city's docks. The event was a success and the following November some of the attendees met in Rotterdam to discuss their experiences. They agreed that the 'Winter School' was worth repeating, and the following year the Netherlands would host a similar event, which became the first EASA.

The early years of the assembly were ad-hoc. Organisers of the first assemblies often state that their hardest job was

to draw 400 students to the event. Without the internet, communication with students at schools across Europe was not as simple as today. However, currently on it's 33rd year, EASA as both an event and a network has proven its longevity.

Lessons in Durability

The reasons are complex as to why the Winter Schools petered out while EASA persists; but I will discuss several of the more important factors that relate to the structure of the network.

Firstly, EASA has no central body. Each country has two National Contacts (NCs), which are selected by the previous National Contacts. The NCs promote EASA within their country, enlist participants, and are responsible for providing their participants with information. Each November, the NCs convene to discuss the network. However, the agenda is never predetermined. The only requirement being to determine the location of the following EASA.

An essential characteristic of the meetings is that all major decisions are reached through consensus. The group never votes. There is no executive power. This means that the nation hosting the next EASA knows they have full support of the entire network. The closest EASA has to a 'leader' are the organisers of each event. However, they are solely responsible for their event and their influence only extends one or maybe two EASAs. In contrast, the Winter Schools were personality driven. Consequently, as the instigators became less involved, the network began to fragment and it became increasingly difficult to host events. As time between events increased less knowledge was transmitted, resulting in the last event being held in 2000.

The difference in leadership structure between EASA and the Winter Schools may have also had a more profound psychological effect on their networks. In his book *Swarmwise*, Rick Falkvinge discusses the need for volunteers to be free to pursue their own ideas and initiatives within an organisation. He states that voluntary organisations require a specifically strong identity - or goal. However, dictatorial or micromanaging bosses will

soon de-motivate those giving their time for free. The non-hierarchical structure of EASA encourages self-actualisation. Volunteers are able to initiate and drive projects, which results in an increased sense of ownership. From my personal observations, this leads not only to a higher quality product but also a greater sense of fulfilment.

A major strength of the EASA network is that it does not depend on any one particular link. For example, if National Contacts of a country are not replaced, then the following year that country will have no participants. They become a 'lost country'. However, 'lost countries' do not affect the network as a whole and the network actively works to restore connections to those countries. For example, the UK was 'lost' between 2000 to 2005 but went on to host EASA in 2010.

Similarly, EASA doesn't depend on a strict set of rules to govern the behaviour of the network. Each country has its own succession policy for NCs and method of selecting participants. This allows tailored strategies that can be locally adapted. For instance, the UK has 47 architecture schools while Lichtenstein has one; therefore, the network requires different methods of operating within each country. There is, however, an EASA Guide that was developed in the 1990s and is occasionally updated. The guide is a document providing advice for organising summer assemblies, defining size, resources, etc. Crucially, it is merely a guide, not a set of rules. Organisers are free to refer to it, or ignore it. This allows each set of new organisers to redefine the event, if they choose. It also ensures that one unsuccessful event has a minimal impact on the future of the network. Along the same lines, the network is apolitical. It has no prescribed agenda. Agenda, therefore, can move and adapt with the times and the will of the group.

The Structure of the Event: The Assemblies

The central purpose of the network is to perpetuate the summer assemblies; the two weeks in which 400 European architecture students are brought together for knowledge and cultural exchange. Through my experiences as lead organiser of the 2010 EASA in Manchester, I will attempt to elucidate the draw of the summer assemblies. Why do 400 architecture students convene for two weeks every summer to collaborate on projects? Why do they volunteer so much of their time to maintain the network, raise funds, and host events?¹ In conclusion, I will discuss what can be taken from the example of EASA and how it can influence the structure of other networks.

Each assembly is a completely unique organism in both its organisation and execution. Everything depends on the current organisers, from the conception and planning

through to the daily activities of the assembly. However, certain consistent elements provide the framework for the assemblies, such as workshops.

The workshops are central to EASA. They are what started it and the key reason people attend. Each participant elects a workshop, which are designed and run by volunteer tutors. The workshops range from building installations, to dance, to entirely theoretical. I originally attended as a workshop participant and then volunteered to tutor three workshops, two of which I will describe. What struck me most about the workshops was the attitude and commitment of the participants. Speculating, this seems to be a result of the feeling of equality generated by the non-hierarchical structure, the international context and perhaps most importantly, the lack of grading or competition.

The EASA workshops are mostly student run. Tutors bring ideas and methods from all corners of the continent (and sometimes beyond) which results in an incredibly varied selection of workshops. Generally they are split between theory and construction, but the content is often in a category unto itself. To name a few, in the 7 years I was involved with EASA there have been workshops on everything from the production of interactive urban exploration websites, feminism in architecture, circus skills, urban performance, and countless pavilion construction workshops. The following examples describe two exceedingly different methods of structuring workshops:

Kraftka: Ireland

In 2008 I tutored a workshop entitled *Kraftka*. Participants designed and built a pavilion inspired by absurdism in ten days. After participants joined the workshop we, the tutors, provided an introduction to absurdity, Franz Kafka, and video production. After this the participants took the lead in producing the design, and constructing the pavilion, including AV components. As tutors we simply provided motivation. Apart from that we were participants too.



Fig. 1. Kraftka under construction

Zerobase: Helsinki

In 2012 I tutored *Zerobase*. As a tutor, I was interested in the architecture students' abilities to employ transdisciplinary knowledge production techniques in the investigation of new office typologies. In the first half of the workshop the participants and I discussed pedagogy, transdisciplinarity, the development of office layouts, and future business trends. In the second half I became an observer. The participants devised exercises, then programmed and led sessions with a cross section of *expert users*, to produce speculations and designs.



Fig. 2. Participants brainstorming during Zerobase

Observations and Conclusions

EASA produces a range of learning outcomes. Design workshops expose participants to exercises and concepts that have developed in other educational backgrounds, which are then discussed and synthesised to produce unexpected results. Construction workshops at the assemblies are often the first experiences many students have of construction, and working with tools and materials. Interacting with students with similar interests

from differing backgrounds builds contextual understanding of professional development and education practice on an international scale.

EASA lives within its own context. An absence of both grading work and competition fosters a genuine environment speculation. This is the most obvious difference to structured higher education.

However, there are elements of it that can feed into higher education. EASA breeds a sense of engagement, inclusion and responsibility. This is partly because EASA can be influenced by every member. All those involved have an input on the logistics and the programme. Each attendee, from lead organiser to participant, will have designated duties during the event, from logistics to cleaning. As personal ownership of EASA as a whole or an individual workshop increases, so does the importance of its success (or failure).

One common factor between all the workshops is that they achieve a high level of engagement with participants. There is the freedom to fail, within a context of personal responsibility and available support. In *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner discusses research that suggests contemporary students are motivated differently to their predecessors. Rather than seeking individual acclaim, they are more interested in being part of great things, and desire mentorship over instruction. My own observations from both tutoring and leading the organisational team align with Wagner's theories. This approach has influenced my work tutoring, in helping students structure the MSA+, and in establishing the Architecture Students Network (ASN) in the UK.

In establishing the ASN, and defining its structure, it was paramount to reduce structural bureaucracy. Another key element was to limit the requirement for personality. It has been demonstrated that networks overly reliant on strong leadership personalities can falter when the initial leaders decrease or cease their involvement. Additionally, strong leadership can make a network's agenda more difficult to adapt and can inhibit individuals' ability to self-actualise within the network.

The Occupy Movement² is a prime example of a decentralised network that lacks a clear definition of its aim. Members of the Occupy Movement share similar motives, however, unlike EASA, there is no guide. A clear set of aims and guidelines which give the organisers of each EASA a solid point of departure. Even if they choose to redefine or disregard the entire guide, there is articulated base for discussion and questioning.

EASA provides many learning experiences for attendees and observers alike, but perhaps the most important is the

simplest and most obvious of all. Each year EASA demonstrates the abilities of students to produce and deliver on self directed work. It is an active learning experience for organisers and an observing learning experience for attendees. As we told participants before applying: You don't go to EASA to do great things, you go to EASA to learn to do great things.

Notes

¹ At EASA Manchester we had a core team of five organisers, which extended to 12 in the months leading up to the assembly. During the event, over 50 volunteers performed daily tasks such as fire watch and event guides. This number doesn't include the workshop tutors, who are all volunteers as well. The participants were also involved with daily duties such as serving meals and cleaning.

² The Occupy movement, which came to prominence with demonstrations in New York and London, employs a leaderless, decentralised network structure, like EASA.

References

Falkvinge, R (2013). *Swarmwise*. North Charleston: Create Space.
Wagner, T (2008). *The Global Achievement Gap*. New York: Basic Books.