The Studio and the Architect, the Post-Studio and the Artist

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Introduction

This paper documents an overview of the activity for a live project undertaken as part of the Birmingham School of Architecture’s Co.LAB initiative. The project contextualizes and informs a philosophical and pedagogic debate that forms the main body of the rest of the paper on the role of the architecture studio, adopting an art perspective to offer an ulterior view on improving student’s awareness of external environments when interrogated within studios.

Mechanics of the collaborative laboratory

Co.LAB (abbreviation for Collaborative Laboratory) is a cross-disciplinary initiative at the School of Architecture using collaborative practices as the principle design methodology. The school coordinates a number of ‘elective’ projects every academic year for students to choose from.

Whilst Co.LAB has developed a diverse portfolio of projects typical of a standard live project type, (both as assessed modules and extra curricular opportunities), the projects remain consistent with the academic’s particular interests and expertise. It provides opportunities to develop research activity using a project as a catalyst to contribute to the research area. The project that forms the basis of this paper is a demonstration of this strategy with scholarly research undertaken during and subsequent to completion of the module, elaborating upon some of the more enriching themes highlighted during this collaboration.

The BAAD Studio

The project was a collaboration between the BA (Hons) Art & Design programme (BAAD) to design a freestanding structure in one of BAAD’s new studio rooms in the School of Art; J.H. Chamberlain’s Grade I listed building in the heart of Birmingham City Centre. The purpose of this new intervention was to enhance the distinction between this course and that of Fine Art, strengthen its visual presence in the building, and improve the working environment for the students using the space.

The project involved an architecture cohort of four 2nd year undergraduate students working alongside three 5th year MArch postgraduate students. Students from the Art & Design programme met with the architecture cohort at key points during the year for formal consultation and presentation sessions.

Defining the exploration

The ‘live project’ component referred to here is relatively self-contained - the design and fabrication of a structure. It was essential to acquire a base level of knowledge how the practice of art & design differs to that of architecture and to facilitate the ‘exchanges’ between both student groups. The programme refers specifically to post-studio practice; a term initially coined by conceptual artist John Baldessari and more often associated with the philosophy of site artists Daniel Buren and Robert Smithson. Writings on the subject helped inform the final design proposal, but more influentially, encouraged both students and staff to reflect on our own architectural studio practice in specific terms to an education setting. The work questions what the studio represents as a concept in its own right and to the discipline of architecture. Does the ambition of productivity as an architectural process alter with a new perspective generated from contemporary art practice? The paper starts with an initial discussion on the relevance and parallels between post-studio practice and the architectural studio. The main body then focuses on one of the main student activities; a comparative study of studio usage.
across both departments mapping the relationship between site, studio and context. Cross-department consultation meetings follow, highlighting the importance of communicative networks. Finally, a summary of the constructed proposal concludes the main points of discussion.

**Post-studio, Site/Non-Sites**

The students carried out their first task to observe and critically reflect on their own studio culture with the comparison of another discipline’s approach. Every architecture student developed their individual investigative techniques ranging from detailed mapping to photographic surveys, in addition to supporting secondary research into the subject of post-studio.

The Art & Design programme distinguishes itself from the more conventional Fine Art programme. Both departments are located within the School of Art, but it is important to highlight the relationship between the two courses and their respective spaces; Fine Art encourages students to establish their individual creative identity. The typical vision of isolated studio space per artist applies here where each student develops their work through personal and intimate investigations literally bounded by the confines of blank white walls. Conversely, Art & Design emphasise interdisciplinary working practices that incorporates design elements where work responds to a defined situation or problem. The work generated is not restricted to the studio, nor is the studio seen as the situation or problem. The work generated is not restricted to the studio, nor is the studio seen as the situation or problem. The work generated is not restricted to the studio, nor is the studio seen as the situation or problem. The work generated is not restricted to the studio, nor is the studio seen as the situation or problem. The work generated is not restricted to the studio, nor is the studio seen as the situation or problem. The work generated is not restricted to the studio, nor is the studio seen as the situation or problem.

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However, artists working under post-studio conditions tend to produce commissions once they travel to the institution (or place) that is to display or curate the work. Artists use the site to inform their thinking, and exploration. As a result, negotiation is an important part of the making. Techniques and a critical awareness of one’s design process are altered with in-situ exploration.

In this respect, what should the purpose of the BAAD studio be? Clearly it is a base for the taught programme where tutored guidance is provided, but independent study is an essential part of Higher Education. The ability for the studio to support students during these times is of great value to develop their practice. Architecture student A’ used a photographic survey to record the balance of voids of a room (empty space) in comparison to the room size, attempting to relate this to student usage in formal/informal exchanges. The architecture studios showed a well-balanced arrangement with very little void space present – the rest being occupied for functional activities. The BAAD studio demonstrated an overbalance of void space in a studio that is comparable in its footprint. Upon discussion this with the Art & Design cohort, they admitted that the scale of the room was overwhelming and this sense of intimidation didn’t encourage them to settle in a suitable work pattern for long periods of time unless specifically required to do so for scheduled activity. The lack of student occupation and visible presence does reduce the sense of ownership during independent study time and results in a lack of spatial identity for the programme. This contradicts Buren’s view on post-studio practice, suggesting that the work intends to be free from the constraints the artists have within their own space. Therefore the balance between creative and spatial identity seem to be independent from one another. Any design contributing to the BAAD studio needed to respond to this perception accordingly.

**Extensions to the studio**

‘The museum and gallery on the one hand and the studio on the other are linked to form the foundation of the same edifice and the same system’ – Daniel Buren.

The system indicate here is the art world; from creation to display and commercialisation. Each of the buildings and spaces within this system follow a recognizable character or typology. The function of the studio is already pre-determined as the place for art production. The professionalisation of the art system requires an infrastructure and support system of technicians, assistants, curators, gallery owners etc. These satellite facilities extend the studio out into the city as a dispersed process of production. Professionalisation has fundamentally shifted the art discipline, forcing those involved to question the role of each satellite in a critical manner. For example, in researching for this paper uncovered a wealth of published books on the subject – aimed to help inform artists, students, and supporters to better understand these new methods of professionalised production.

To make a comparison with the professionalisation of the construction industry is obvious but inevitable. However, the role of the studio in architectural circles remains rooted in understanding studio culture as a behavioural condition. Research are mainly disseminated in established academic conference networks and architecture journals, which often questions the impact of studio culture on optimizing pedagogic strategies and teaching delivery to improve student development - often through collaborative learning. Further research on the subject evaluates student perception, and the pressures on schools of architecture by, mainly, non-disciplinary conditions (e.g. university room bookings). What has emerged from completing this live project is realising how the art
discipline analyses the relationship between studio and its impact on the nature of the work, and not just the students behavior in them. Site specific work often has a different conceptual starting point to studio based practice. In addition to contemplation and reflection, in-situ work requires negotiation and representational devices to refer to real physical conditions so the studio system does not implant this with student allegory.

**Studios nurturing stars?**

*Archiculture,* a documentary film recording B. Arch students at the Pratt Institute, illustrates a typical studio scenario in most architecture schools. Even though the format of the film remains character focused, the work and the critique of the work remain very much in the realm of the architect designer. The film does not attempt to link the two conditions together, but it is clear (with the film director admitting this issue in an interview) that conventional studio culture often isolates design process and discussions of design within a limited circle of influence. Here the confines of the studio have a strong resemblance to Fine Art where thought, creativity and debate are centered on the individual and the physical confines they set themselves in.

Architecture Student B’s study on studio usage focused on the interactions between the people situated in the studio – namely the students and tutors. In both departments, a repetitive pattern emerged with the hierarchy of personnel generated the most influence on that space. Student B’s visuals indicate the interactions emanate from the tutor who holds the attention of the group during a tutorial, or the student body itself during other activities. Both conditions reveal it is a personality that holds sway in the dialogue and development of design. Therefore it is totally reliant on the individual’s constructed version of site rather than the reality.

Robert Smithson’s work shall be referenced to inform the discussion on how studio usage can respect and involve context. Sites/Non-Sites, as a series of exhibitions, is well documented and interrogates the relationship between the artwork, viewer and context. Expanding on this relationship will draw parallels to the connections between the role of the architecture studio and the representational work located in a real environment.

Robert Smithson as an artist, writer and theorist, was renowned for his earthworks and material sculptures that challenged traditional categorization of the medium during the 1960’s. Due to issues of scale and setting, Smithson’s earthworks moved conventional practice away from making formal objects situated in a gallery, instead defining an entirely original notion of landscape. Tradition and modernism were both dealt with and disregarded in equal measure, the manipulation of site and materials removes any notion of formalism or rules, whilst the work still retains a wider conception and representation idea of the sculptural medium.

The art works essentially brought found materials from a designated site into a gallery (non-site). The material would be excavated from the ground, or from an existing man-made structure. Once in the gallery, the ‘matter’ was placed in containers or dissected with mirrors and displayed with a series of maps – indicating the position where the material originated. The maps acted as ‘a signifier and the site that is signified.’ The work involves concepts of reflection, correlating to not just a link between internal and external space, but once in the gallery, suggesting to the viewer to consider the space around the art work as a non-site and instead, focus on the matter in it’s original location. The work is neither made for the gallery, nor is it a site-specific work.

The key to holding this complex relationship are the images (both location photographs and maps) connecting the sites to the non-sites - but more than just representational. All visual work accompanying the artefact projects a real and existing space, condition or ambience. The artefact on display is the site itself. Here, the viewer has no doubt in being forced to consider the environment that is beyond the gallery room.

Could this form of post-studio practice be applied to the architectural studio? And how does discipline define differences in the procedure? The limitation of Smithson’s series is the choice of setting – often rural, uninhabited locations that simplifies the context to mere physical appreciation. Architectural work has to consider social and cultural conditions that affect the site. However, the form and medium of the artefact can be adopted to suit non-physical issues. The main attribute is to enforce the relationship between the work, viewer (student) and context. Due to the scale of projects typically involved in architecture, the work often reverts to representation. Certain design activities allow artefacts (of various mediums) to be brought into the studio because of its relative scale and ability to collect ‘matter’ – whether physical or non-physical. More of these opportunities could encourage students to review context as a reality through the process of making and curating the forces at work in the non-sites. This will require a greater degree in negotiating an understanding of site, and what ‘matter’ can be brought-in to the studio to make sure the view is projected towards the site rather than the student's representation.

**The Remote Workplace**

A series of consultations were completed between the architecture group with the Art & Design cohort. Five sessions were planned - the first two were informal with architecture students improvising when coming
Remote working plays a strong role in the BAAD cohort’s production process. In the fourth consultation, one Art & Design student said, “the spaces required aren’t just tables but also vertical surfaces.” Surface it seems is vital for production to occur. Architecture Student C promptly investigated the difference between the occupation of surfaces between the architecture and BAAD studio. Upon mapping the table ‘usage’ on a typical independent study day, Student C realized “what we surround ourselves with is not limited to the tools that we as students identify as necessary for work by the introduction of personal paraphernalia.” The positioning of the tools and paraphernalia followed a simple pattern; the deeper the table, the more relevant items are closer to the student edge. Other items move behind inaccessible points behind the laptop screen – especially in cluster formations. Turkces & Kahl’s investigation in studio design for the BV Centre in Kansas revealed that ‘the process - not just the product - takes center stage’ based on the way students use tables to generate an increased number of communicative exchanges for a more creative and collaborative learning environment.

Negotiation and networks

The critique on Smithson’s work alludes to an involvement in negotiation. Negotiation prioritises relationships between artists and citizens, shape the non-traditional aspects of our work into a metaphor, pulling out meaning from individual narratives. This skill becomes useful when working with communities as one gathers conversations from various sources. Studios become nodes where general communication demands occur.

In Lane Relyea’s essay Studio Unbound, the dominant resource of the practitioner is the network – one which is part of a system, (different to Buren’s idea of the art system). As artists create, they display, explore, visit, curate, organize events, teach and disseminate. These all become part of a horizontal and reciprocal system that extends ideas beyond both the studio and the gallery. Relyea uses bricolage sculptures as a case for his argument. Positioned as site interventions, they remain open to the public and come into contact with a larger proportion of a community. Relyea declares them to remain independent enough to disassociate from contextualization but mobile so not to commit to one place. Architectural education and other forms of design promote the use of ‘site interventions’ often to disseminate ongoing research or at the end of a creative endeavour. Decentralized activity of and artist or designer is also prevalent. Relyea states such interventions keep continuity between studio and post-studio approaches to repurpose existing content with the aim being to access and link various databases and platforms – a network. Contributing to this network privileges flexibility and mobility over hierarchy and changes the approach of the ‘lone artist.’ Referring back to Buren’s essay, he declares the studio as an artist’s ‘purgatory’ limiting their ability to disseminate their work and understand culture and society simultaneously.

Digital devices encourage the artists (alongside designers/ architects) to form part of this system/network. Robert Smithson never viewed his site works as natural due to the interference of technology that was required to map and shift land matter. Nor did he separate the trucks and machinery required to produce the Sites/Non-sites series. They were equally part of the work itself confirming that it was a result of human activity that brought the material into the galleries. For his series, technology produced and distributed the idea. Today, digital communications and portable devices engage artists and designers to continue new forms of post-studio practice using such devices. The laptop, for example, strips away most requirements of a studio. To the user, a laptop is very much part of Relyea’s network of decentralized cultural activity. Once connected, it provides a platform for researching, sharing and collaboration, in addition to providing the tools to generate new work. The laptop still asks the artist to work alone but is also connected to everyone and everything that is relevant to one’s site exploration.

Between privacy and openness

A resulting condition of such mobile and connected studio usage is enforcing privacy of ideas (as well as space). One BAAD student commented: “we do not want to show our work in progress to colleagues – we’d like workspaces to ensure an element of privacy.” Such comments may be sound closer to Fine Art practice and is representative as to why the BAAD department worked with Co.LAB to help students move away from such conceptions. The protection of ideas is less vulnerable in architectural disciplines as the application towards a specific site changes the resulting outcome of the design.

However, it does raise the feeling of competitiveness between students indicating privatised spaces tend to restrict willingness to share and participate in verbal (or visual) exchanges. This will no doubt restrict student’s isolation from the contextual settings their projects are located in and reinforce a notion that creativity only stems from an individual rather than in situ. There is no recognizable unit teaching in art schools like the architectural system. Competitiveness reduces openness and disregards the social practice of sharing as a strategic element of the design process. With
unhealthy competition, the decentralized activity of creative disciplines cannot exist due to a lack of intensification of a collaborative network and thus, a wider pool of knowledge to work from.

Post-Studio Approaches

The result of the live project was a full scale built structure placed in one of the BAAD studio rooms to be used for their graduating exhibition. The structure will remain as a feature for future teaching activity next academic year. The scale of the structure acts as an individual space without isolating itself from the rest of the large expansive room. Its proportion and placing means it generates five distinct areas; four surrounding the structure and the final area being the structure itself. The division of the large room provides enough intimacy to encourage longer working periods, foster discussions and improve pragmatic issues such as storage and work surfaces. Crucially, the design does not cater to an individual’s specific needs – it does not see itself as a working studio, one where a student might set themselves down to produce work permanently. The design consists of an exposed timber frame supporting additional vertical partitions and a raised floor. All these features are to encourage openness, and shared working without specific focus to a particular medium or approach to artistic creativity.

Vagueness in recognizable function encourages adaptability and inventiveness. It is not a design for one person to work on but for many to hold seminars, group meetings or encourage students to develop artistic work that displays around a complex timber joint rather than a conventional white wall. Further features stimulate a creative practice that does not specify itself where work should be made. The raised floor extend over one edge to act as a laptop bar – the laptop being a functional representation for connectivity, inspiring students to focus on the readings of site and our responses in non-sites.

Admittedly, this paper does not delve fully into the design work produced in either the Art & Design or Architecture studio. Nor is the finished structure an exact embodiment for a new application of post-studio usage. It does however, attempt to address some of the practical issues raised in response to both the studio study and consultation sessions. Traditional (art) studio practice does not prevent communication, but it can affect the process of engaging with others, including in-situ work.

Prof. Robert Mull, Dean at London Met, introduced the Studio Culture Conference in 2012 asking whether competitiveness and the conventional studio system should attempt to resolve the separation between the “academy and the world around it.” To achieve this chasm, educators and practitioners needs to look at the pedagogic and physical attributes of the studio across numerous creative disciplines - not just our own. For it needs to involve a debate over the impact of our mode of ‘production’ and not just how we learn inside it.

Notes

1 The full Co.LAB manifesto is available to view online here: http://birmingham-colab.org/about/
4 Student’s individual names have been removed for clarity.
5 Student consultation meeting - 19th November 2013.
11 Student consultation meeting - 4th March 2014.
12 Extract from Student C’s report for their Co.LAB submission.
16 Ibid p 348.
18 Student consultation meeting - 21st January 2014.