

How to Avoid Being a Design Tourist

Exploring issues of Authenticity, sustainability and Locality in Final Design Thesis

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Abstract

This paper examines strategies evolved to support architecture students in developing sustainable thesis proposals.

While in recent years we have had considerable success in establishing an integrated approach to support sustainable thinking within the undergraduate architecture programme, it has proved much more difficult to replicate the same outcome at graduate level.

Although offering a degree of freedom not present in earlier years, students must undertake and sustain as a self-directed design project, the design of a thoroughly researched building of reasonable complexity and ambitious architectural intention, encapsulating a critical architectural position and maturity of judgment, and marking the development of a personal approach to practice.

This paper explores strategies developed within the current fifth year studio, locating students within a series of European cities with differing environmental social and cultural conditions, demanding the development of an understanding of appropriate sustainable responses while producing proposals which integrate context, programme and technology.

The developing methodology also aims to encourage students to develop their powers of observation, awareness of the local, and although moving from familiar territory to develop an approach allowing them to operate as insiders rather than mere tourists, recognizing the likely peripatetic nature of future practice.

Introduction

This paper explores how the issues of authenticity, sustainability and locality can be addressed and supported within the development of thesis design proposals by final years students of architecture.

As the final design task undertaken by students, and one carried out individually over the course of a n academic year, the thesis is one that both tests their development and attainment, but also offers the opportunity to consider what they might focus on in the future, where their

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interests and passions in the subject lie. More than any other design project it reveals the individual, both to the teaching team but also to the student themselves.

Thesis

What do we mean by thesis? In describing the final design proposal as a thesis project we consider its impact to be wider than solely a design proposal. The thesis should be a position or idea that is to be defended. The thesis results in a design proposal, a vehicle for the exploration and testing of the thesis argument or idea. In this it is crucial that students can both separate the idea or proposition they wish to defend from the more pragmatic issues the design proposal may require them to work through. However ultimately the two will be viewed and examined in relation to each other. Is this an issue of significance and relevance? How has the resulting proposal explored and answered the challenge?

The first challenge for students is to identify a thesis that they feel merits a year long investigation, which would sustain their interest and challenge and extend their existing skills and knowledge. Although offering relative freedom the final year is also where students demonstrate their ability to meet key criteria at the threshold of professional practice and approaching qualification and this can be in opposition to the desire to experiment or to take risks.

However as the thesis at this stage is self initiated and directed, the issue is one of being able to frame a suitable task as an exemplar or demonstration of attainment. This in itself is a difficult proposition as the majority of studio projects to that point have been set; selected, designed and refined by staff to focus the learning episode rather than brief being developed by the student themselves.

The thesis and indeed the final year of study itself is a stepping stone between formal programme of education and the profession (and life long learning demanded of any professional. It also requires the demonstration of skill, understanding and judgement.

“Projects will be more complex, design constraints more severe and set within an intellectual framework which establishes, tests and concludes a hypothesis with regard to the context in which it is made. Projects will incorporate wider contextual issues and address ethical design concerns. Including the needs and the safety of building users, constructors and the community.”¹

Throughout the architectural degree programmes we are seeking to instil progressive independence in student’s approach to their work and increasing self reflection in their appreciation of their own learning – modelled on Schon’s reflective practitioner. We also seek to make students aware of the form of practice they are developing and to question if that is one that they wish to embrace, and to be conscious of where that practice might take them to over time.

“Practitioners are also makers in the more general constructionist sense... They frame problems and shape situations to match their professional understanding and methods, they construct situations suited to the roles they frame, and they shape the very practice worlds in which they live out their professional lives.”²

Focus

Traditionally the choice of thesis subject, and form and location of the design proposal it led to was completely open to be selected by individual students. This often resulted in too open a

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situation with considerable amounts of time spent in choosing a subject, one that was sufficiently differentiated from that of peers, without much anticipation or insight as to the potential within the subject or the possible outcome.

For this very reason in recent years we have introduced a focus to the thesis based around one of a series of European cities as the locus for analysis and subsequent action, cities with differing environmental conditions, which demand the development of an understanding of appropriate sustainable responses while producing proposals which integrate context, programme and technology, proposals which extend the existing repertoire of approaches developed working within the context of Glasgow's urban situation.

The cities chosen are ones that in addition, as a school of architecture, we have some existing affiliation or connection with – through exchange agreements with local institutions or with architectural practices. This offers a local voice in our discussions and potentially an external expert in our final review and critique of project proposals. It also offers us access to sources of information and other archives which otherwise may be restricted in their accessibility. Students are able to opt to work in a particular city from the range on offer in any particular year. Cities recently explored in this way have included Barcelona, Oporto, Lisbon, Venice and Reykjavik.

Method

An initial method or structure was established to allow groups working in different cities to cover equivalent ground and simultaneously reach common thresholds for discussion and review.

Through a series of steps including analytical study, the building of large-scale model, field trip and discussions with local practitioners, the structure aimed to provide a working method, which can be adapted, and customized depending on the conditions encountered. The methodology also aims to encourage students to develop their powers of observation, awareness of the local, and although moving away from familiar territory, to develop an approach that demands that they consider what are the key issues on which they should concentrate, specific to the situation they find themselves in.

After several iterations, the structure has been developed and amended as seen fit, both by the teaching team and the students cohort involved. Indeed the idea was not to have a set methodology but to understand the types of moves or activities that can be undertaken promoting particular outcomes, or at certain points in the development of a proposal or thesis. In this particularly for the students there is an element of trial and error, and while the teaching team may be clear what sequence of steps has been productive in the past, part of the process is for students to become less dependent on staff led strategies and to take responsibility for the design process they undertake. While staff remain involved and are able to recalibrate the process if necessary, their role moves to one closer to design consultants than teachers. The project also acts as a stepping stone between supported and independent learner. In this finding the balance between the new and the familiar is key, working beyond the comfort zone but in an informed and confident manner.

The sequence of activities involved the development of a collective report through group discussion and in anticipation of the field trip to the city. This often resulted in the gathering of information rather than true analysis. Students became aware of this when they began to corroborate their report with the situation “on the ground” and this serves to remind them of the importance of a feedback loop and the necessity to test and amend the working documents as

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required. Having identified this, the city reports have now become an important resource within the wider school, as a briefing tool for subsequent years and as a source for urban design coursework.

For every student a field trip to the city is an integral part of understanding the context they have agreed to work within. This extended visit also involves making connections with staff and students at the local school of architecture and architectural practices. Over the period of the visit initial ideas for thesis subjects are tabled and reviewed in situ, which each student identifying their particular field of enquiry, why this is of interest, how they intend to pursue it and what might the vehicle for developing a piece of architecture as a response.

On returning to the Glasgow studio the development of a large scale model (usually 1:500) of the areas under investigation is produced to focus of discussion and initial schematic moves including a master plan. While the scale model has proved particularly effective in signaling and keeping live many key aspects of the location, the master plan has latterly been omitted as it can prove more a distraction and lead to an unusually concentration of proposals in the one small area, leading to interdependence rather than mutual support within the student team.

Authenticity



Figure 1 Four Thesis Proposals: left to right, Richard Almond, Sailing School Reykjavik, Rory Crawford, Ceramics Studio, Lisbon, Kieran Sheehan, City Observatory, Venice, Lauren Small, Island of the Dead, Reykjavik

“When the practitioner takes seriously the uniqueness of the present situation, how does he make use of the experience he has accumulated in his earlier practice? When he cannot apply familiar categories of theory or technique, how does he bring prior knowledge to bear on the invention of new frames, theories, and strategies of action?”³

In adopting this approach to the final year we have been conscious of its impact on the type of work carried out and the response of students. Rather than the years’ work being shaped by a relatively small and closed group of people, this approach involves outsiders, people with potentially differing agendas, cultural viewpoints and indeed alternative architectural values and methodologies. It also provides an external audience for resulting work. This has resulted in a much more inclusive and open attitude towards what might constitute an appropriate thesis topic, and the extent to which the external factors may shape the final proposal. It has also resulted in projects becoming smaller in scale, often incorporating hybrids of function with more focus on the realization and impact of the proposal.

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For the students the work seems less disengaged with the real, and as a vehicle for self reflection can give the opportunity to address particular areas of interest or perceived areas of vulnerability while still in a supportive learning environment.

Sustaining work within cities and extending relationships with fellow teachers and professionals has also allowed a more objective view of the role of architecture in shaping and responding to place that we consider to be unique, and significant in understanding how we as a school can contribute our own context, and define our own distinctiveness.

Sustainability

The freedom of the thesis also brings with it substantial drawbacks and can provoke considerable anxiety and confusion in students. Students find themselves addressing design parameters of a given project, the project they have construct for themselves. With this they have to be able to diagnose what are the significant challenges within the project – the ones that drive and shape the project and ones that come form the project itself rather than ones that they impose on it.

One of the key questions they must ask in developing a sustainable solution is ‘What is the technical challenge this entails, what is meant my sustainability in this context?’ If this question is asked from a very early stage within the design development then it can be examined and the resulting cues developed through feasibility, scheme and detailed design stages and allowed to shape the proposal.

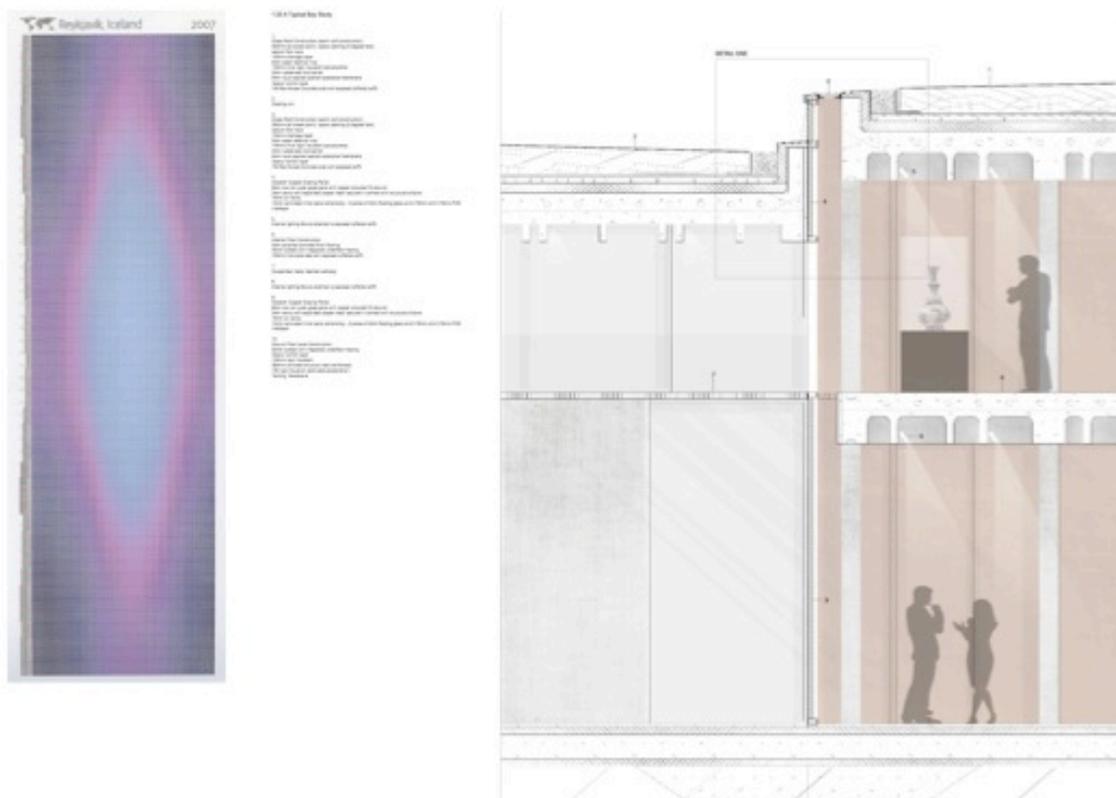


Figure 2 Hannah Constantine, Museum of the Everyday, Reykjavik, daylight profile and detail from Design

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The technology challenge – actually a composite of many very different elements – environmental science, construction, materiality, structures, results in the need for a range of different research questions, but one threshold idea - the need for a low carbon brief. Students need to know how to research, order, evaluate and information to identify and develop the appropriate questions to ask and understand why one solution may be valued over others.

Considering the issue of sustainability beyond a familiar setting offers the opportunity for students and staff to question what we mean by this increasingly worn phrase. For example in considering energy use in Iceland, the availability of low cost geothermal heat and power distorted local practices and attitudes toward energy efficiency. For the students working within this context the issue became not only what should they build and how, but how to change attitudes and effect future behaviours.

A second issue is how can they make their thinking apparent in the architecture of their proposal. In the example illustrated the student chose to focus on the use of natural light within a museum, both as a key thread within their sustainable strategy, but also as a way of working through the specificity of the place. The resulting gallery spaces perform equally through both the abundant lighting of long summer and dark winter days, using both as the provocation for the particular solution.

Such an approach is by its nature site specific, and rather than encouraging generic thinking and responses, requires the student to consider what local knowledge they must acquire.

Locality

The definition of locality is important when working beyond the familiar. Within each of the cities there has required to be the identification of a physical area or quarter in which to concentrate and operate within. In identifying this locality it has been essential to be clear of the reasons for this selection, and to anticipate what stimulus this might provide and what limits it might set.

Within Venice for example, a district linking the Grand Canal at Ste Lucia station to the Architecture School was selected allowing a wide range of possible thesis starting points to be explored from dealing with arrival in the city to establishing how to support existing residents and students, and the wider discussion of the future pressures and opportunities the district faces.

In the following year the point of departure moved from a fixed area to an investigation of the role of the Campo as a generic Venetian urban space with individual students exploring the potential of particular Campo as the generator for a proposal responding to local circumstances.

Conclusions

One of the challenges of the thesis is that of developing and sustaining a line of architectural enquiry over an extended period, that links the intellectual development of the project with a growing architectural sensibility through encountering practice. For the thesis experience to prepare students for the continuously developing demands of practice, they need to be conscious of how apply principles and recognize and respond to the particular. We believe the approach to the development of thesis proposals we have been developing moves towards this. In developing the approach further we wish to ensure that there is a local voice at the final review of the thesis

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proposals. To extend the feedback loop further we would also complete the possibility for self reflection by taking completed final work back into the original context, and allow student the opportunity to measure the impact of their work against its original generators and their success in achieving a synthesis in towards an authentic, sustainable and site specific solution.

References

¹ Royal Institute of British Architects. (2003). *Tomorrow's Architect*. London: RIBA Enterprises. p39.

² Schon, D. (1985). *The Design Studio; Exploration of its Traditions & Potential*. London: RIBA Publications. p43.

³ Schon, D A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. P65