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Sally Stewart
Postgraduate Programme Leader
Mackintosh School of Architecture
Glasgow School Of Art

177 Renfrew Street
Glasgow
G3 6RQ

Tel + 44 141 353 4663
Fax + 44 141 353 4703
Email s.stewart@gsa.ac.uk

Mapping the City: the possibility of developing a rich picture place through experiments with conventional, digital and stolen techniques of mapping.

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Abstract

Mapping the City: the possibility of developing a rich picture place through experiments with conventional, digital and stolen techniques of mapping.

“With the aid of old maps, aerial photographs and experimental derives, one can draw up hitherto lacking maps of influence, maps whose inevitable imprecision at this early stage is no worse than that of the earliest navigational charts. The only difference is that it is no longer a matter of precisely delineating stable continents, but of changing architecture and urbanism”. (Debord)

The paper describes how traditional, web and digital techniques of drawing, modeling and recording can be combined to produce a rich multifaceted picture of place, time, activity and experience.

The paper documents collaborative work undertaken by students of architecture, fine art and design as part of a short elective course aimed at considering the prominence of the city within contemporary creative practice, and what variety of methods could be deployed and appropriated to map, analyse and understand such a place. The course, which introduced a wide range techniques used by artists designers and architects to conceptualise, explore imagine and delineating their surroundings, and promoted the use of the surrounding city as a location for exploration and examination and a provocation for collaboration and discussion and action.

The course also provided a locus for experimentation risk taking and invention, where possible free from the tacit, often artificial boundaries between disciplines and the anxiety of assessment. In particular sorties into the city proposed both finding and locating and getting lost, sometimes together, demanding new strategies to document the experience and communicate findings.

In this we discovered the need to navigate between the digital and the traditional, between drawing by hand, modeling, digitizing and scripting. In sharing our findings and thoughts we also opened new possibilities for searching for information and records of place and sharing findings through Google, Vimeo and other web based sources. Through discriminating between the results we identified new practices and sequencing of activities melding digital and conventional means.

This paper aims to describe the processes that prompted discussion and action, and to show the outcomes of these evolving techniques.

Introduction

“One’s destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking at things.” (Miller)

Mapping the City is a short elective course on offer to postgraduate students across Glasgow School of Art. We work together over a period of 15 weeks, normally through eight two-hour sessions. Students come from a range of disciplines, and the course itself could be considered to sit outside any particular discipline – it is constructed and hosted by the Mackintosh School of Architecture but is not exclusive to architects.

A key factor in the design of the elective course was to identify an area of common ground, relevant and attractive to range of disciplines, in this case the city, as a departure point from which to examine how the city figures on our individual and collaborative practice. The course offers the opportunity to consider ways of seeing, documenting and understanding place, a reasonable point of shared interest, and understand how we are influenced by place, and can in turn influence it. This is achieved through a series of weekly tasks or activities generating a portfolio of work.

Recent cohorts have included architectural students, environmental artists, graphic designers, painters, a graphic novelist, a sound designer and a sculptor giving a wide ranging group of participants, from very varied academic, professional, cultural and social backgrounds.

Originally designed to be a series of activities that could offer a point of common interest and discussion, now in its second year it is moving to something different and I believe more interesting, producing a rich picture of the City we encounter daily. As Katherine Harmon notes “To orientate is to hop back and forth between landscape and time, geography and emotion, knowledge and behavior.” (Harmon)

Structure

A series of activities and tasks are set, which initially were specifically designed to find out what individual interests are, the types of and variety of practices apparent in the student group, range of techniques they are familiar with and use regularly and the boundaries of their practice if known.

The structure for the course is simple with each session following a similar format. An introduction or brief lecture leads to a task can be done there or then or one set as homework for the following session. Each subsequent session then begins with a show and tell of the previous session’s task and a discussion of emerging points.

Students are asked to consider that the work they show each session is in its final form. All that is required is to undertake the work as it comes up and then gather it in a folio for a final submission. The following is offered as guidelines from the outset:

- Think of each piece as a final piece.
- Do it well once, don't hedge your bets or rely on going back to it to refine it.
- Focus on the task in hand and put your whole energy in doing the task at the time.
- Become aware of what you can produce in the given time and take control of the time given.
- The work need not be revisited – you set the goals.
- The discussion of work is just that – it is not an assessment – we all play an equal part on the discussion. Value what your colleagues say.

Having identified what student are interested in, their skill set and level of curiosity, the focus now shifts to one of providing space to explore emerging issues and shared practices – or practices that can be shared or appropriated but have not been up to that point. Students become familiar with the pace of the tasks, the fact that they are varied and stretch them in different directions. As each task has its own focus and context there is no hierarchy to them. Together they build to give the potential of a rich picture. It is up to the student where they take them to as single task or how they conceive of them as a set.

In all students undertook ten tasks, some short and sharp as if warm ups in the sessions themselves, others requiring preparation, contemplation and more sustained engagement. It is clear through feedback that the mix in pace and types of tasks allowed everyone to find the reassurance of some form of practice that was familiar as well as task that they had never encountered before. The mix and the open nature of the discussion – not a critique where ever possible, helped students to embrace the less familiar or unknown. The lack of pressure to revisit and constantly correct work in actual fact encouraged students to be more self-critical. It also appears to allow student to take more risks and be experimental rather than to be reliant of tried and tested methods and solutions. Some of the activities are individual and others require small group working or as pairs. In either situation, each student must make his or her own record of the outcome for the portfolio. As many of the tasks were new to the students, either in form of in the way they were to be undertaken their previous experience or performance was no guarantee of current success.

This session the course ended with a final presentation of each portfolio to the peer group. Students were asked to take control of publishing their portfolio on the wall, to consider if there was an emerging theme within their work, reflecting on what had interested them – not what they had got right or wrong. To do this some students revisited aspects of their work, reordered the sequence, down played some aspects and highlighted others. In effect they took control of how they wished it to be received.

The engaging with the digital

The course does not presuppose the types of media students use in making work, the choice is open depending on techniques present in their existing practice or indeed those they may wish to begin to use. The form of activities undertaken have scope to be interpreted and realized in many different ways, and indeed some student use the opportunity to test new ways of making, documenting and capturing the activities and experiences the course provokes.

Being situated in an art school, programmes are predominantly studio based if not studio led. The digital now forms part of most students working method, whether to research ideas or background information, generate the work itself or to document, publish and disseminate work. It is rare however for student to have no ability to sketch or draw or make by hand as an integral part of their practice. It is interesting therefore to see through an elective course such as Mapping the City, and one drawing students from across the range of postgraduate programmes, how students use digital media and techniques and to what end.

Early on it became apparent that the first point of departure for many students on projects or tasks is the Internet search. Information is readily available but the problem becomes how to sift and evaluate it, how to become conscious of the sifting that has already gone on on your behalf by the algorithm (many students were unaware of this). The source of information and therefore the provenance of that information becomes a key issue. Questioning and interrogating information, opinions and facts became a concern for students particularly where it was data they were coming across for the first time or in the case of Glasgow, a context which they were largely unfamiliar with. Fact checking, seeking corroboration, researching more systematically more perhaps with some skepticism have become more common and visible as the course goes on. . If the information exists on a Google map it must be correct, mustn't it? As the students realise that it is not the tutor's role to correct their work they have taken more responsibility for this themselves and even developed a lack of tolerance for their peers how do not and who compromise in this. The issue is not one of getting something wrong, but rather how to ensure you have confidence on the evidence you build your arguments on. So information becomes triangulated, anomalies are exposed rather than being suppressed, robust methods of working are shared.

Another aspect of digital work, its finish or gloss, was also a cause of discussion. While our eye becomes more accustomed to the clarity and qualities of digitally generated images and drawings we take this quality as an indication of authority and authenticity. As our use of, and reliance on computers and the internet increases, it is easy to forget these are just tools and filters of reality, rather than reality itself. Rather than with the digital, the issue lies with us, and our expectations. In the case of work generated through the elective course, as students became more comfortable

with the lack of an single prescribed type of output and aware that different media were used in quite different ways dependant on the authors core discipline, there was more evidence of trying different forms of output depending on the nature of the task, or as a way of diversifying from their habitual media. This worked in both directions - while one student who has little confidence in his own drawing skills and had been wholly reliant on manipulating images through Photoshop began to enjoy the freedom and the rough but ready nature of his own drawing, while others posted (and therefore published) video and images on the internet for the first time, buoyed by the feedback from complete strangers – a new form and experience of peer review.

An awareness of these issues, and the desire to respond to them emerged through time.

Tasks and provocations

Any attempt to map the city cannot be reliant on one approach alone. The task at hand is too complex, too subtle and too varied. As Roland Barthes notes “This city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orientate yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience...” (Barthes, p36)

The task for the tutor is to imaginatively construct a sequence of activities that in their execution they might bring the student closer to generating their own image of the city. The sequence offered through Mapping the City is not exhaustive, but subject to change, being added to and altered along the way depending on the success or otherwise of each proceeding task. Success being measured in this case by the level of interest generated in the students and the work it provokes. In many instances, students through thoughtful deployment of the digital, produced highly engaging and innovative solutions to the problem set. The following are a selection of the activities undertaken and the responding work.

Route through the city

The first session involves the group undertaking a guided city walk, the starting at the School of Art itself and weaving through the grid from Blythswood area to the downtown ending at the Lighthouse, centre for architecture and design, both starting point and finish being buildings by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. As the walk progresses we rewind Glasgow’s history traced through our surrounding building and public realm, the pavement, the facades and the skyline. Students were asked to make a map of the route or a similar one of their own devising. One student through tracking Google street view discovered it was possible to undertake the route in its entirety purely using the still images this provided, and by combining them as a stop animation producing a film of the walk. The result became the first of a series of Vimeo posts. , (Haddad, J)

Another when retracing the walk became aware of the level of scrutiny by CCTV cameras apparently everywhere. At their response was to produce a map of the cameras to highlight their extent and the level of surveillance going on. However the map itself suggested producing a new route between the starting and end point where the walker disappeared from view, using lanes and alleys to achieve the same result, albeit below the radar.

Derive/ drift

Students were required to undertake a form of drift or derive the sense of which is prompted by a text by Guy Debord, beginning from a given but unfamiliar point in the city. In this form the drift has few but important rules. It is a collaboration where the movement not of the pair of drifters is not arbitrary but based on discussion and agreement. The resulting journey is documented with a single use camera, with each change of direction being logged with one shot, and where no editing is possible. No other devices, digital cameras, phones etc. are allowed thus reducing the potential of constant editing, way finding and revising of image, direction degree of disorientation. In effect a challenge to encounter the city by letting yourself get lost.

One couple discovered that they were unable to follow the route suggested by their surroundings from a starting point south of the river by Ibrox, an area of the city in flux and awaiting regeneration. The visible became the unobtainable as landmarks with their power of suggestion and visual cueing became cut adrift from the original street pattern and grain. Having mapped their journey on a contemporary map they then layered earlier versions revealing the extent of change in the sense of the place and well as the physical fabric.

Sequences and sequencing

Explorations were made into the nature of sequences of drawings, where activities dependant on a strict or defined order could be replicated by illustrating the key actions or points of transition. Working from the graphic cook strips of Len Deighton, initial sequences tested every activities as varied as dancing a salsa to making hot sauce or walking through a well know place. Animation allowed the drawings or photos to come to life, given a pace and timeframe and the potential for looping, re-sequencing and reanimation. This offers one technique to revisit the city to a fragment of it and to revise its scenograph and reshape the experience of moving through it.

Series

The potential for a series of images to provide a description of place was prompted by the wood block Ukiyo-e prints of Hiroshige with One hundred Famous Views of Edo made between 1797-1858 and the Thirty Six Views of Mount Fuji by Hokusai in the seven years form 1826. More than just a succession of images, the two series structured round a single rule or conceit – the former recording and celebrating the diversity of life and activity in a city through images selected for their opportunity to display such characteristics, a type of loose survey, or the later anchored by a single visual constant with an ever changing foreground. Just as Hiroshige has used this opportunity to play with composition and graphic quality, which provoked Van Gogh to repaint one view to better understand its structure (Plum Blossom in Kameido Park, no.30, Spring sequence, One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, 1957, (copied by Vincent Van Gogh as Japonaiserie: Flowering Plum Tree, 1887), so student within a series of twenty five images were asked to define a series which had a particular resonance with them, and compose images in any medium that captured the qualities they were influenced by.

The results ranged from a distinctly non digital series of rubbings exploring the surface quality of Glasgow stonework by someone better acquainted with a brick built city, to a series of images of the Newbery tower, a part of the GSA campus and Glasgow skyline about to disappear, a record of something whose loss is imminent- as a test of where can be seen from, what opportunities this framing device or rule allows the series author to explore. The task allowed an extended or sustained engagement with the subject, the possibility of narrative or suspense and surprise, cutting and editing, a cycle, capable of shuffling or a redux. In presenting and discussing the work, the opportunity arose to consider whether or not reconfigure or re order the series, to re-hang in response to comment and any emerging hierarchy with it. Although one of the most straightforward tasks, the multiple proved one with potential for varied interpretation and purpose.

Narrative v non narrative

The narrative task involved the plotting of mapping of a city or city fragment described at second hand in a text, fact or fiction. Having warmed up though the proceeding challenges students provided many highly imaginative approaches to both the choice of text and the means of mapping. Some borrowed the banal to map the extraordinary such a swat analysis to map Paris as described in Hemmingway's "A Moveable Feast", or a paper sculpture capable of being endlessly reconfigured to follow the waxing and waning of the Macando as described in "One Hundred Years of Solitude" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. One recurring theme the student came up against is that narratives are seldom completely linear, and indeed many of the plots lent themselves to non linear narrative systems commonly found n game play and web design.

Conclusions & Observations

Having originally designed the elective and with it in its third cycle I freely admit that it offers the chance for me to learn as much form the students as they learn from me or each other. If we had to produce a common reflection of the work a coda might be added to the title, hybridizing techniques and ideas.

As the discussion as evolved so has the process with the result that our research cycle had evolved form the original one: Task /show & tell, to include three iterations: Task /show & tell / reflect /represent/ reflect use for own personal folio and practice.

As for the digital, we are limited in its use only to the extent that we imagine how to apply it intelligently and innovatively. If we can remember this then the human and digital need not be in opposition.

Postscript

While in Chania this summer I heard an anecdote that seems an appropriate way to end. I hope Gunnar Parelius doesn't mind me sharing it.

"At a meeting of the Nordic Group in Lund Peter Kjær told me how he finds his way when in Lund (he is an external examiner in Lund). He tries to go in a (slightly) different direction each time and when sufficiently confused he looks up to find the cathedral (visible from most places) and then can head straight to the hotel."

It seems to sum up our ambiguous relationship between allowing we to get lost and need to orient ourselves again.

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