# Case Study: Between Emic and Etic: a Design Pedagogy with Older people.

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**KEYWORDS** studio, pedagogy, narrative, emic, etic, older people

*"To dislike the old is hatred of the self"*
P. Laslett[1]

Design studio pedagogy has traditionally circumscribed the outside world within the brief. Reality comes into play as the context to engage with, which may consider a selection of constraints imposed by urban conditions such as specific regulations and available resources, as well as by behavioural patterns of [fictional] clients and users[2].

Social psychologist Jerome Bruner pointed out the key role of narrative in the construction of knowledge about the world of social interaction. As he stated, *"we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative"* [3]. Diachronic schemas articulate our apprehension of the world. Overlaid into culture -a system of meaning and a narrative itself - narrative embraces not only the "ordinary" and common sense, but also the extraordinary. It is this uncanny element, the breaches of the ordinary which warrants stories' *'tellability'* and triggers new stories [4]. As such, narrative is not just a form of meaningful representation of reality, nor merely the communication of this representation, but also a powerful tool of projection and invention.

In what ways this narrative apprehension of experience can contribute in mediating between the complex reality and the educational context of the architectural design studio? And how it can be articulated in a studio brief to ground a meaningful learning experience?

It is within this background that the architectural design studio Domesti-City, a unit running in 3rd year at the BA/MA in Architecture course at the ESALA, UoE, aimed to explore narrative as a design methodology to engage with the socio-spatial everyday practices of the elderly. Two complementary perspectives interweaved in a shared narrative, which would then ground design interventions in the urban context of local town centres in Edinburgh. One was the etic perspective, that is, the external viewpoint of the students acting as direct observers of the elderly within their everyday environments. The other one, the emic perspective, was the elderly's own perception of their everyday practices.

Drawing on tools borrowed from visual ethnography, interaction design and psychogeography, the unit was articulated in three acts aimed at reinforcing the emic-etic connection by progressively immersing students in the everyday life of the elderly.

Act one is the etic construction of a video portrait of a persona– *"hypothetical archetype of actual user"*[5] , drawing on material collated from direct observation. The video assembles a narrative of actions performed by a composite elderly persona in a typical day in different urban and domestic settings. Beyond description, contrasting sequences and subjectivating shots bring a certain intentionality to the story about the socio-

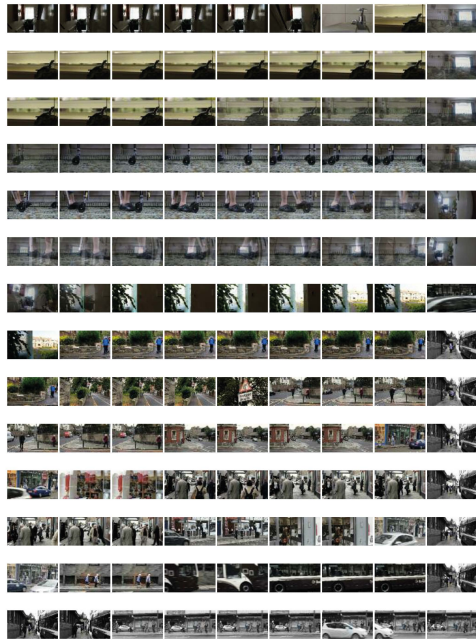spatial situations under investigation by recreating the breach, the odd event that is worth telling[6].



*Figure 1. Still frames from a persona video portrait (T. Shack, N. Mustapha, T. Scott)*

Act two was the design and performance of an interactive session with a group of elderly in the lounge of a sheltered housing complex in Edinburgh. The occasion brings a twofold opportunity for students to actively engage with the emic perspective: by inhabiting one of the elderly's daily routines, the coffee morning and the afternoon tea, and by articulating through discussion a common narrative about urban and domestic futures.

From the translation of key aspects of everyday life of the persona portrayed in the video to a specific urban sector emerged an atlas of socio-spatial situations which served as background for the production of "dioramas" or interactive models. These were conceived as portable tools capable of stimulating and registering the unfolding conversations between students and participants. Designed as playful, game-like artefacts they offered speculative representations of local areas to stimulate reactions in their audience. During the two-hour session, pairs of students and elderly gathered around the dioramas to engage in an exercise of urban re-imagination that unleashed key concerns and gratifications in everyday encounters with urban and domestic spaces.

Act three, back in the studio, the construction of an urban transect reconstructed the plurality of episodic emic–etic encounters into a spatial network – a new narrative - of small interventions in Edinburgh's local town centres. Besides, the tectonic quality of the interactive models helped students to trigger the definition of the architectural proposition.

Two reflections upon this learning experience can be drawn here. Jerome Bruner had claimed that a plurality of little realit(ies) emerge in the everyday, each '*constituted by the different principles and procedures that we use within it*' – '*something like a culture's treasury of tool kits*'[7]. Accordingly, the construction of narratives for the city of the elderly have been essentially mediated by the specific artefacts and tasks defined in the brief: the video of the persona, the diorama enacting the performative encounter and the urban transect. The production of each of these representations situates the students in a precise location to observe, perform and recreate a narrative upon socio-spatial conditions which grounds their architectural design interventions. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the emic/etic narrative engagement with the elderly resulted in a learning experience which, as in best novels, projected students in their future self and encouraged a reflection on their role as designers beyond the specific conditions of later life.
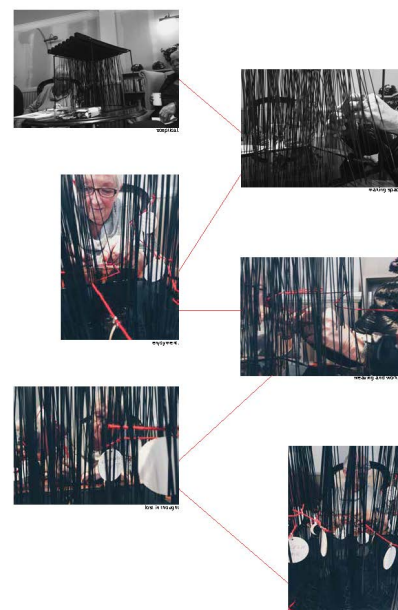


*Figure 2. Interaction with diorama. (H. Gatenby and P. Wright)*

*Figure 3.  Dioramas interaction in sheltered housing lounge.*

## REFERENCES

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[6] Bruner J.*, ibidem*

[7] Bruner J.*, ibidem*