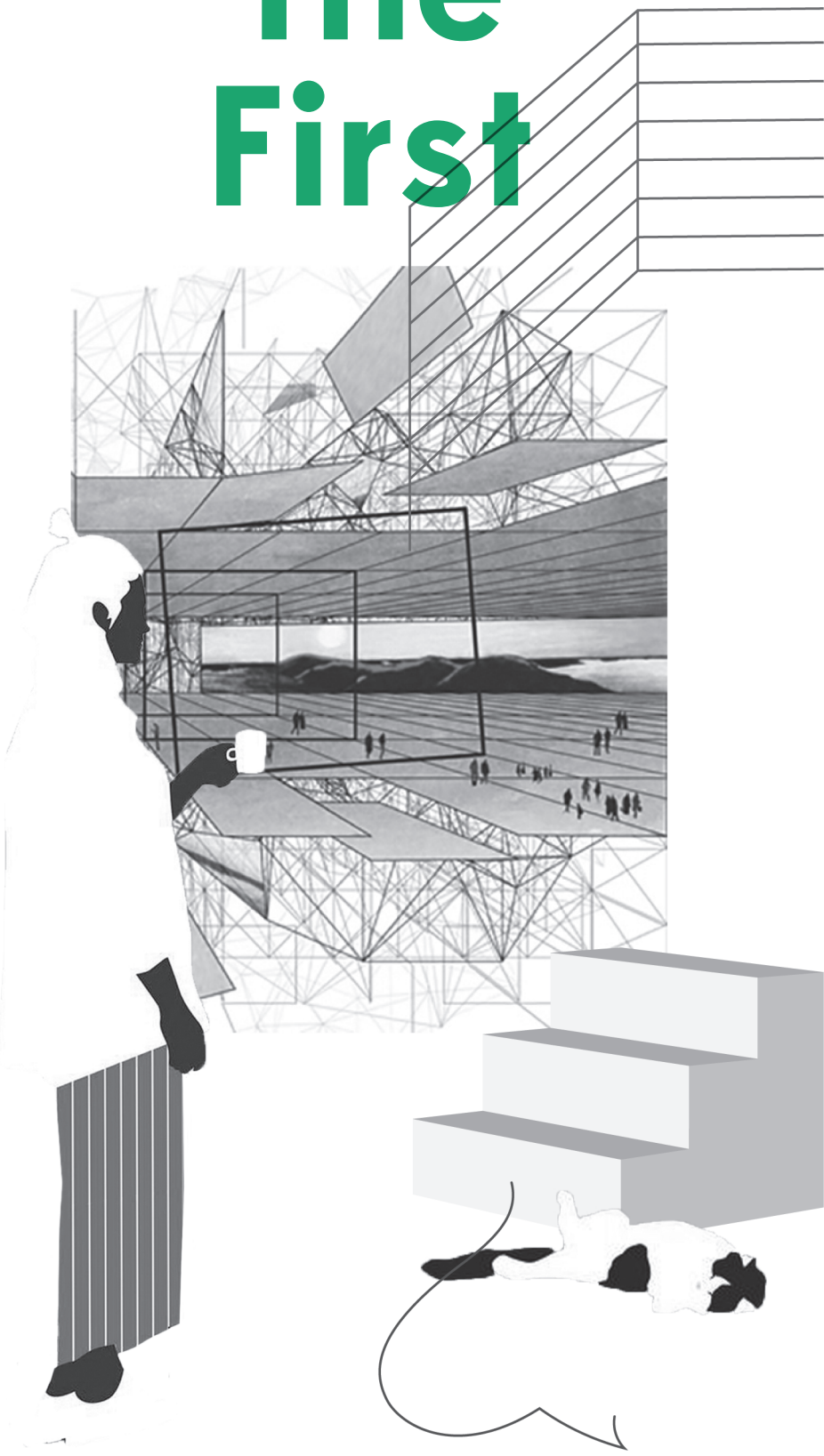
IE:Studio

The First



Introduction

David Littlefield and Shelley McNulty

David Littlefield is a Senior Lecturer at the University of the West of England, Bristol. David has led the BA (Hons) Interior Architecture programme at UWE since its inception in 2012. David is a Trustee Director of Interior Educators.

Shelley McNulty is a Senior Lecturer at the Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University where she teaches on the BA(Hons) Interior Design programme and currently leads the MA Interior Design. Shelley is a Trustee of Interior Educators

Shelley and David share the editor-in-chief role for IE:Studio, and edited this issue. editors@interioreducators.co.uk

A common theme in Higher Education reporting is the increasing number of students receiving First Class degrees. Readers of newspapers will be familiar with stories of "concern about grade inflation" (The Daily Telegraph 17.01.19).[1] HE teaching staff, meanwhile, will also be aware of the demand and expectation from students themselves for such recognition.

The Times recently conducted its own research and reported (27 December 2019) that "if the inflation continues at its present rate, every student in the UK would achieve a First in 38 years' time." In fact, said the newspaper, some institutions would be giving all students the highest grade by 2030.[2]

Numbers of First Class degrees have, indeed, risen dramatically. Figures from the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency show that in the academic year 2006-07 there were 36,630 students in receipt of a First Class degree. By 2017-18 this number had risen to 110,475. Interestingly, over the same time period, the number of Third Class degrees actually decreased (from 23,070 to 17,830).[3]

Such inflation has caused the Financial Times (04.09.19) to ask whether a First Class degree matters at all – indeed, does any classification matter when mixed with other experiences and attributes such as work record, core skills and personal qualities? The FT quotes Jonathan Black, Careers Service director at the University of Oxford, who told the newspaper: "It's about how you pitch it…If you've done other things then that's going to mitigate a 2.2… [but] within five years nobody actually cares."[4]

However – try telling this to an ambitious student in their final year. Attempts to answer the question "what do I need to do to get a first?" are both commonplace and difficult. Certainly the answer "do your best work and forget about marks" cuts little ice with students, who tend to consider such advice to be dismissive and trite. Marking grids and feedback statements will commonly include reference to terms such as "excellent", "sophisticated", "mature" and "ambitious", often against categories including design process, technical resolution and visual communication. In our experience, these sincere and well-intentioned attempts to quantify boundaries and benchmarks are never entirely satisfactory; these terms represent our best efforts to articulate what are meant by particular standards, but can they ever capture what one colleague called "the magic" that makes for First Class work?

Clearly, it is important to be able to express what is meant by First Class; students need to understand how their work is assessed in language that is meaningful. There is, though, always a sense that First Class work speaks for itself, that its qualities are self-evident. It would be unfair to describe such judgements as "dark arts", as processes of assessment (double-marking, moderation, external examination and so on), quite apart from the time and professional judgement brought to bear on such important matters, combine to determine fair and defensible conclusions. But it can be difficult to fully articulate just why one piece of work is deserving of the highest grade band, while another falls just short of it. Moreover, it can be even more difficult to fully express just why two pieces of entirely different work should share the same grading point.

It was for these reasons – popular concern over grade inflation; student demand; and the importance of fairness and transparency – that we invited the interiors community

to share their experiences of assessing for the First in this issue of IE:Studio. However, it is not uncontroversial. More than one member of our community predicted that the call for abstracts would result in very few (if any) submissions. They were, in fact, right. This issue comprises three papers, plus a text by co-editor Shelley McNulty, which is a slimline edition compared with our previous publications.

We are grateful, then, to Nerea Feliz from The University of Texas at Austin and the teams from RMIT and the UK's University of Northumbria who have shared their insight and experience with us. As it happens, nothing in what they say is controversial or in any way contentious. What these papers usefully do is, in fact, identify common themes from three continents. Further, it is interesting to note that theoretical/philosophical underpinning appears to be equally highly value in whichever educational system the student is practicing within. That is, the strength and persuasiveness of the idea is a common feature of First Class work wherever it is found; integrated with meaningful design process, visual clarity, room for experiment and a certain uniqueness, First Class work emerges.

This resonates strongly with us. Isabel Russell, a 2019 Interior Architecture graduate from UWE Bristol (one of David Littlefield's students), was awarded a First Class degree for these very reasons. Her project concerned a spatial reading and interpretation of the Royal West of England Academy, a prestigious art gallery in Bristol whose mid-Victorian building is both august and tired. The site analysis phase of the project, in which students were not required to propose a new intervention but merely to respond to the site as found, saw Isabel develop a fascination for the traces different exhibitions had left behind on the walls of the gallery. This led to a detailed analysis of the holes (of nails, screws, pins) and surrounding contours which were the only remaining evidence of an artwork's presence, developing into an exploration of scale, mapping, overlaying, absence/presence and scrupulous observation.

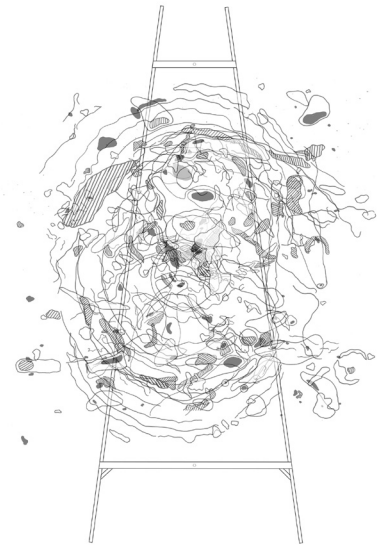


Figure 1: *Isabel Russell_the hole evolution*

This work was produced in November-December 2018, providing the deep understanding of site that enabled the production of a convincing and entirely site-specific intervention later on. However, it was at this early stage that the potential for a First Class project began to emerge. It would be quite wrong to say that Isabel's early work guaranteed a First – but it enabled it. This has some resonance with Roger Kemp's description of the work of RMIT graduate Bethany Ryan, whose work was more "practice" than "project"; this paper also includes Anthony Fryatt's comment that "curiosity" and "risk taking" are also valuable First Class commodities, which further resonates with our own assessment of Isabel's work here in the UK.

The three papers featured here are wonderfully complementary. The paper from RMIT is based on a dialogue between three members of staff, each of whom have led graduate-year design studios. Their reflections about what makes a First are illuminating, and address the manner in which teaching has changed (and even improved) as a result of responding to different pressures over the last decade or so. This paper counterpoints the text by University of Northumbria staff who interview a recent graduate about her own understanding of the status and mechanics of the First. What emerges from the graduate concerned, Polly Amery, is that her design work was strengthened by theoretical links with her dissertation, as well as a sense that her graduating project was the end result of a long process of learning and personal development. The First, for Polly, was recognition of how far she'd come.

Sandwiched between these different perspectives is Nerea Feliz's observations about a range of student work from the University of Texas. In these cases, student design thinking was expressed in text as well as design visualization, opening up the possibility for students to write fiction as well as propose it spatially.

To book end the issue, Shelley McNulty's conversational piece with Interior Architect Barrie Legg, attempts to evaluate the worth of a First-Class degree to industry professionals. A job at the end of a long and expensive degree is the ultimate 'First prize' to many students. Indeed, how many students are in employment 6 months

after graduation is a measurement of course success and financial worth. So, is a First-Class degree purely an academic measure that has no real meaning in the professional studio? Or is it an indication of potential industry success?

This issue of IE:Studio, then, contains a special handful of deep insights from around the world, which is likely to form the beginning of a conversation on this subject rather than any last word. If The Times is correct and one day Firsts are awarded to everyone, then the conversation will become irrelevant; until then, it is important, pertinent and urgent.

Notes & Citations

1. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2019/01/17/highest-number-first-class-degrees-record-almost-one-three-students/

2. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/first-class-degrees-for-all-students-by-2030-klx665hw0

3. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/outcomes

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First-class final project

Dr Roger Kemp, Dr Anthony Fryatt, Phoebe Whitman

Dr Roger Kemp is the Program Manager of the Master of Interior Design, in Interior Design, School of Architecture and Urban Design, Melbourne, Australia.
roger.kemp@rmit.edu.au

Dr Anthony Fryatt is the Program Manager of the Bachelor of Interior Design (Hons), in Interior Design, School of Architecture and Urban Design, Melbourne, Australia.
anthony.fryatt@rmit.edu.au

Phoebe Whitman is the Final Year coordinator of the Bachelor of Interior Design (Hons), in Interior Design, School of Architecture and Urban Design, Melbourne, Australia.
phoebe.whitman@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

The following is a conversation between final year design coordinators Interior Design (Hons) RMIT University Melbourne - overseeing a year-long research focused design proposal. Phoebe Whitman (2018 – 2019), Anthony Fryatt (2015 – 2017) and Roger Kemp (2009 – 2014). The conversation discussed an exemplary project from each of those time periods chosen by the respective coordinator.

Question: What high distinction (first-class) student project from your time as final year coordinator continues to resonate with you? What made this work so good?

Roger Kemp [RK]: A project that stands out for me is Bethany Ryan's project titled 'Filled Space: An Investigation into Air" from 2009 (which is 10 years ago now). The project was attempting to somehow visualise or intensify the perception of air.

Primarily the value of the work for me is in the innovation of the idea of working with an immaterial substance. One which has a significant affect on interior spaces. We continue to privilege the visual description and representation of interiors over the more elusive conditions - things like air and temperature. Bethany's work was positioned as a 'practice' rather than a 'project'. It was presented as a collection of projects rather than a singular design. It had a strong philosophical agenda beyond the well-crafted and consistent iterative experimentation.

Figure 1: *Bethany Ryan - Filled Space 1*

Figure 2: *Bethany Ryan - Filled Space 2*

Phoebe Whitman [PW]: Breeanna Hill's project "Transcending Physicality" (2018) was a project that strongly resonated with me; it was a timely project that took creative risk. Breeanna had begun to develop a practice as she entered into the final year of her studies, which she was able to extend further into a rigorous and in-depth way of working with digital processes and materials. The project, situated in the share house economy, explored how virtuality could facilitate a transformative and dynamic mode of dwelling through the production of a series of virtual phenomena that facilitate connectedness via the dissolution of perceptual boundaries.

Breeanna presented a project that embraced both theory and practice where the panel was able to experience the essential qualities and effects of the proposal. It demonstrated how a major project could be both philosophical and speculative to enrich an expansive design thinking.

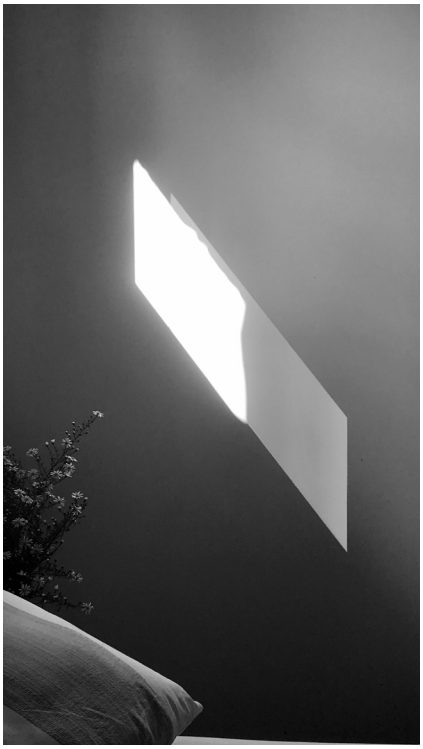

Figure 3: *Breeanna Hill - Light projection*

Figure 4: *Breeanna Hill - Lines of Light*

Figure 5: Breeanna Hill - Ceiling projection

Figure 6: Breeanna Hill - Window light

Breeanna presented a project that embraced both theory and practice where the panel was able to experience the essential qualities and effects of the proposal. It demonstrated how a major project could be both philosophical and speculative to enrich an expansive design thinking.

Anthony Fryatt [AF]: A memorable project would be Laura Casey's "Rearranging Place: an exploration into the relationship between space and place" (2015). It was considered outstanding for its consistent design experimentation, philosophical curiosity, solid theoretical framework and exemplary design outcomes. The work in the form of drawings and autonomous models allowed for an active process of rearranging and place-making, ultimately proposing the encounter with a site could be shifted from the didactic to one of participatory place-making.

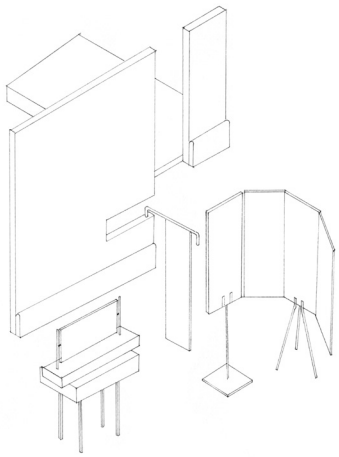

Figure 7: *Laura Casey - Imagined spatial arrangements*

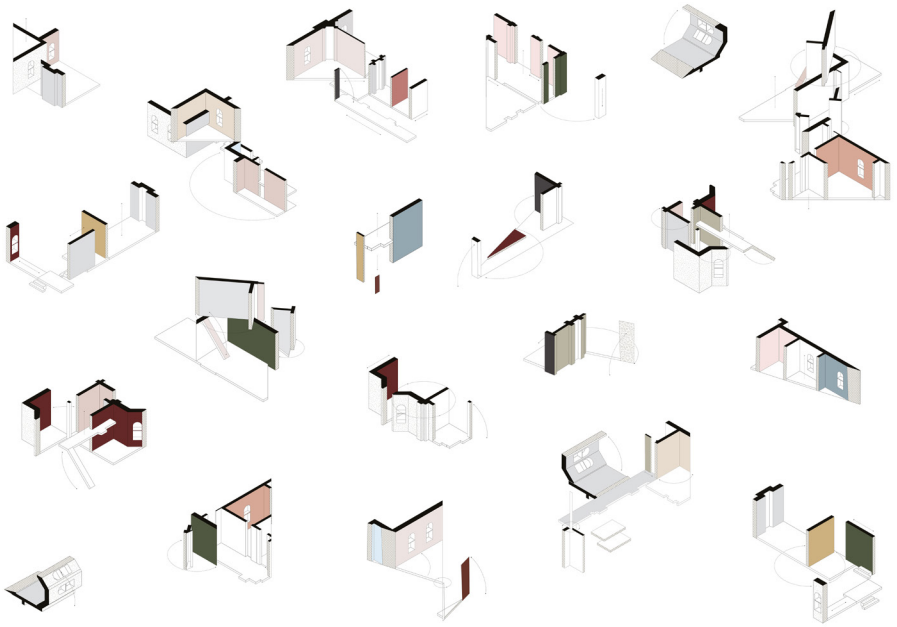

Figure 8: *Laura Casey - Dissected elements assembled*

A telling quality of a 'first-class project' is one where the research trajectory is pursued across the entire year i.e. both the exploratory and major project semesters. Laura's final major project was commendable not just for the refined quality of drawings and artefacts produced, but also the speculative, research-led nature of the brief and a commitment to pursue the early research question into the subsequent major project.

Question: How do we recognise a first-class project we see it?

[RK]: As a proposition (speculative or not) I see a first-class project making a strong contribution to the 'community of ideas' within the group of students, the staff and the culture of the academy at that time. Not in the sense of a PhD which makes a contribution to knowledge or contribution to the field or discipline, but as a timely contribution of ideas that asks us all to think differently. As an artefact, it should carry the aspiration of the ideas, not only as effective representational communication, but be compelling as an expression of the values of the ideas. Timeliness is important in that the work holds currency or value both to the designer and others.

[AF]: To Roger's point, a clear demonstration of curiosity and disciplinary risk-taking through the medium of design would be important. In addition, there would be a rigorous or compelling research question underpinning the design research exploration and subsequent major project. Another key aspect would be student's ability to direct the research project beyond their own individual priorities towards an external or broader cultural/social/political issue. As a given, there would be a convincing use of relevant communication and technologies in the design of the project. Lastly within the program, there is a particular emphasis placed on the presentation, in this respect, we are looking for a compelling visual arrangement of the work and critical verbal presentation of the research agenda and project outcomes.

[PW]: As a coordinator, one of the most exciting aspects of the final year project is observing how students can develop the beginning of a practice and see value in addressing a relevant issue or innovating an existing program. The work that stands out are the projects which take on a multiplicity of things, such as theory, materiality, contextual issues to build complexity, where the result isn't conclusive but allows for an opening up to the potential of something new, something emergent.

Question: Do you think this has changed over the years? Have our expectations shifted?

[PW]: I don't think this has changed on a fundamental level. However, there seem to be

more permeable complexities, forces, matters at the forefront; the socio-political, environmental issues are omnipresent. Due to technologies and the post-internet age we live and operate in, interior design needs to take on more, address more, be more effective and thus there is an intensive and extensive need to innovate and produce interiors which address a multiplicity of things. The pressure in education is also greater due to these circumstances, and in a sense, students expect more from their education. This is what makes the final year self-directed project so relevant, as it reveals the flow of thinking and collective mindfulness of a generation of designers.

[AF]: Fundamentally no, I think our underlying understanding of what constitutes a great research project is essentially the same. I do think the ideas around interior design and interiority have evolved, in staff, students and the discipline. To help with understanding expectations students have a library of precedent major projects to browse; one effect of this is that students have progressively built upon ideas, there are at times lineages of an idea, modes of practice, types of projects etc. that staff and students are conscious of. I would say all of these things help to move the disciplinary culture along.

[RK]: No, I don't think the expectations have changed, however, a project from 10 years ago is 10 years old and speaks to that time. Communication technologies have changed over that period of time - and therefore we are seeing much more sophisticated visualisations and material artefacts through digital fabrication. There was probably a time when some of these advancements influenced our assessment of a project, but this is tempered as we become more familiar with these tools.

Question: Do you think our teaching is getting better?

[PW]: I do think our teaching has developed. The generation of students coming through the program now seems younger and more strategic in that they have forces that are affecting what they want to achieve from their education that perhaps we did not face when we were students, in the same intensity. On a fundamental level teaching has to do more now, it has to be not just relevant, applicable, sensitive, but also socio-political and culturally sensitive in ways that affect the way one teaches, and a student learns. I find that these forces add layers of complexity and mean we need to be agile. I see this through the way my colleagues operate, as more of us finish PhDs and have developed practices which expand disciplinary thinking and boundaries. This folds back into our teaching approaches and the kind of content we teach, which has to keep changing and evolving. Teaching can't be repetitive as this is static and as things move so quickly around us now and access to things is immediate, one always needs to keep adapting, which I think produces a greater quality of education.

[AF]: It is a different teaching context to 10 years ago, there are more students, certainly more external pressures on students and staff alike. This has demanded change and improvements in teaching. For instance, there is increased recognition of diversity in cultures and learning styles. We have worked hard to articulate our expectations, to transition students into an independent way of learning, to communicate better what is being asked of them and offer possible ways to approach the year. We have also become more conscious of introducing certain learning expectations, such as criticality or research strategies, earlier in the program. This way students are more prepared coming into a challenging self-directed final year.

[RK]: Yes, I think our teaching is better; in that the structure for classes and the resources are more scaffolded. We provide more comprehensive resources and support for students. The more important question might be whether they are learning better. I suspect the increasing number of students in our final year has changed the dynamic to some degree. Teaching to larger cohorts requires greater levels of organisation and more comprehensive communication systems to ensure all the staff and students are coordinated. Given the more comprehensive resources provided to the students and an increased level of education of staff, completing or having completed a PhD, I would suggest there is a higher level of academic quality.

"Best": Inside Utopia

Nerea Feliz

Nerea Feliz is an Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin, USA.
nereafeliz@utexas.edu, www.nereafeliz.com

Abstract

The following paper describes one of the highly regarded projects from a seminar which invited students to intervene inside a conceptual site: Archizoom's No-Stop City.[1] The evaluation of the best student work valued conceptual rigor and a critical engagement with disciplinary discourse, as much as technical competence, such as skilled spatial manipulation, visual proficiency and exceptional craft.

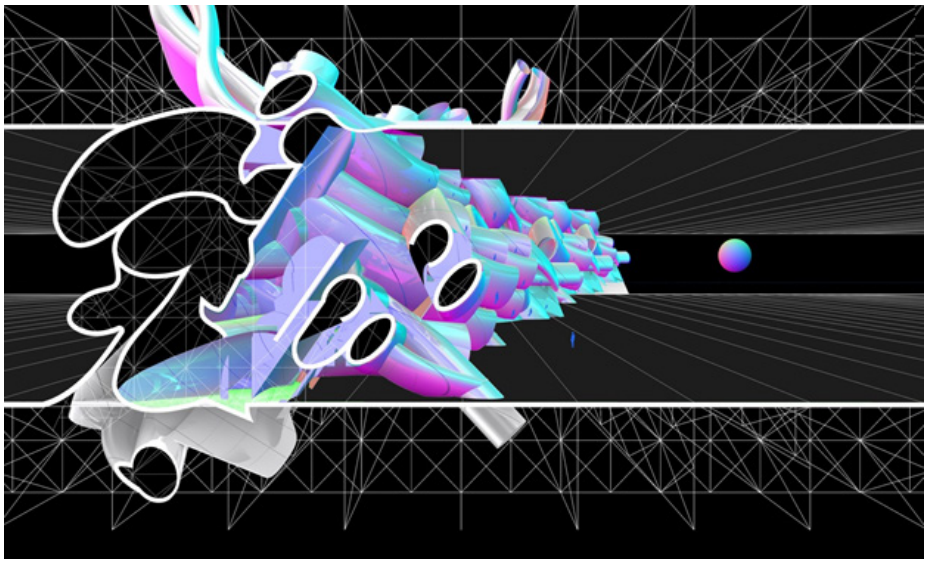

Figure 1: *Drawing by student Richard Gagle. Drawing Title: Strange Provocateur*

Beyond a project's formal inventiveness, technical achievement, exceptional craft and aesthetic rigor, the best student work understands design's broader societal implications, how design reflects social and cultural structures and, at the same time, how design inevitably contributes to the production of new social and cultural orders. In the words of Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley: "Humans have always been radically reshaped by the designs they produce".[2]

"Inside Utopia"- the title of an Interior Design seminar taught in the Spring 2019 at The University of Texas at Austin - utilised the dystopian background of Archizoom's No-Stop City as a frame for discussion. The course was open to graduate students from Interior Design and Architecture backgrounds. The class was attended by eleven students; three MID students and eight from the MArch. Archizoom's infinite interior was used as a conceptual site of intervention. No-Stop City portrayed the future of the capitalist metropolis as an endless supermarket, an infinite urban interior. The dystopian project was not an alternative to reality but an amplification of existing conditions, an endless multiplication of a standard 15' x 15' supermarket grid of columns that they referred to as a "quantitative utopia"[3] - an inescapable isotropic field. Utopia has often been used by designers as a vehicle to confront the status quo. From a pedagogic perspective, utopia serves a primary goal of design education; it is a provocation to engage in critical consideration of the present, question our rapidly changing environment and to engage with a somewhat unpredictable future. Projects in this course were measured against these factors.

Via readings, lectures and in-class discussions, during the first half of the semester, students were introduced to a selection of seminal experimental projects from the last decades that challenge conventional notions of interiority. Weekly reading discussions revolved around the ideas behind these utopian projects. In-class conversations focused on how the authors of these unbuilt projects had addressed, through design, some of the major disciplinary preoccupations of our time. Special emphasis was placed on analyzing the way these ideas were presented via drawing and writing. Students reflected on the author's writing style and tone, from the unpretentious, poetic and nostalgic tone of Ugo la Pietra, to the casual, yet critical irony of Banham's A Home is not a House, Archizoom's politically charged writings in the form of verbose manifestos and the captivating fictional narrative of Koolhaas' Exodus among others. Simultaneously, students scrutinized visual media choices, graphic register and technique for each of these projects and its role in the delivery of information.

The second half of the semester students developed their final assignment; they were asked to critically react to the conceptual framework of No-Stop City in order to construct an "augmented" No-Stop City narrative of their own with a corresponding new drawing of Archizoom's canonical section perspective. Writing and drawing were treated as generative design tools and instrument of individual investigation and experimentation. The final submission included two complementary outcomes: a brief text component and a drawing. Projects judged to be of First Class standard developed ideas simultaneously on these two fronts. The evaluation of the work took into consideration how students were able to transfer and apply the lessons learned during the first half of the semester to their active consideration of No-Stop city.

Most students exhibited a certain reluctance to critically engage with the precedent, given its high stand within disciplinary discourse. However, the best projects, such as architecture student Richard Gagle's Strange Provocateur, overcame these design inhibitions, were unapologetic and demonstrated a clear conceptual understanding of No-Stop City. Inspired by the unsettling use of mirrors from Dan Graham's Alteration to a suburban house (one of the unbuilt projects that we learned from at the beginning of the semester) Strange Provocateur radically interrupts No-Stop City's infinite homogeneity with a mirrored surface. Spatially, Richard's proposal reacts to the horizontal nature of No-Stop City which prevents its inhabitants from grasping its real nature. Unable to ever see the totality of the space from afar, or from above, No-Stop City dwellers are only partially aware of their reality; they are always immersed within.

According to Richard's text: "A ripple has appeared in Archizoom's quantitative utopia which grows vertically and breaks through the infinite ceiling...The polished surface holds a mirror to the conditions of No-Stop City". This engaging fictional narrative is described as fact in the present tense in an homage to Koolhaas' Exodus. Richard explains how Strange Provocateur's warping mirror surface multiplies the spatial conditions of No-Stop City "magnifying the sense of sameness across this interior world of seemingly infinite opportunity, making this consumerist dystopia seem even bleaker". His play on bending reflections, enabled by dexterous geometrical manipulation and material representation, re-frames and distorts that which is familiar onto that which is strange - seeking to provoke alienation and, subsequently, behavioral change by forcing recognition in the observer.

Besides its conceptual grounding, Richard's drawing technique is refined and portrays the mastering of several software tools. His use of colour contributes to increasing the desired estrangement of the observer - both the lonely figure in the image and us, the actual observers of the drawing. Overall, his project successfully synthesizes theory and design skillfully fusing visualization and argumentation in the design process.

Other exceptional projects in the class included Alexandra Sandlin's (MID) Beyond the Heavens, Robert Anderson's No-Stop Energy (MArch), Megan Baker's (MArch)

Natural No-Stop and Marek Harrison's (MArch) No-Stop System. Like Gagle's, these projects combined theoretical understanding with technical finesse. These students managed to arrive at an original and convincing spatial narrative, that emerged from the ideas discussed during the semester through precedent study, and that was eloquently manifested both through discourse and drawing.

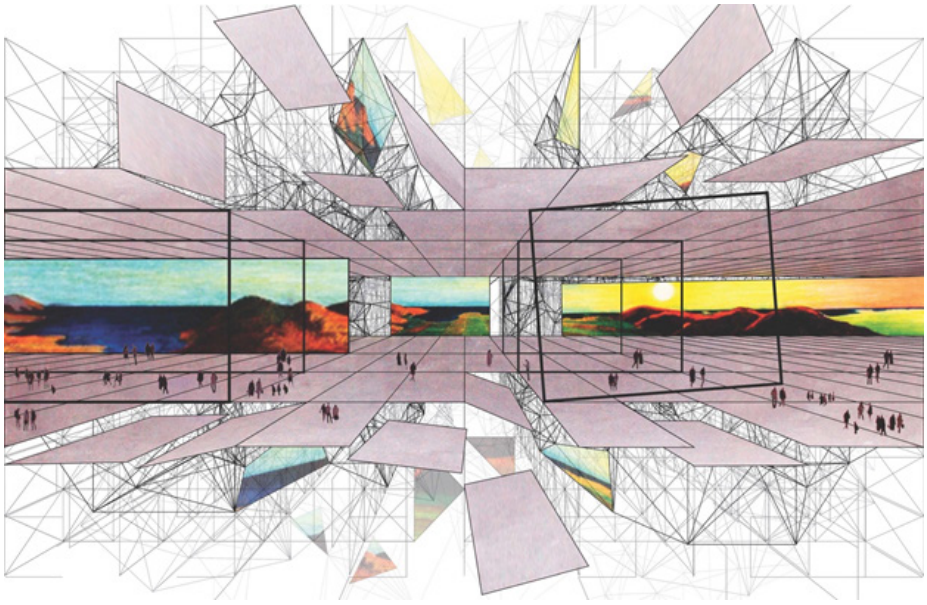

Figure 2: *Marek Harrison : No-Stop System*

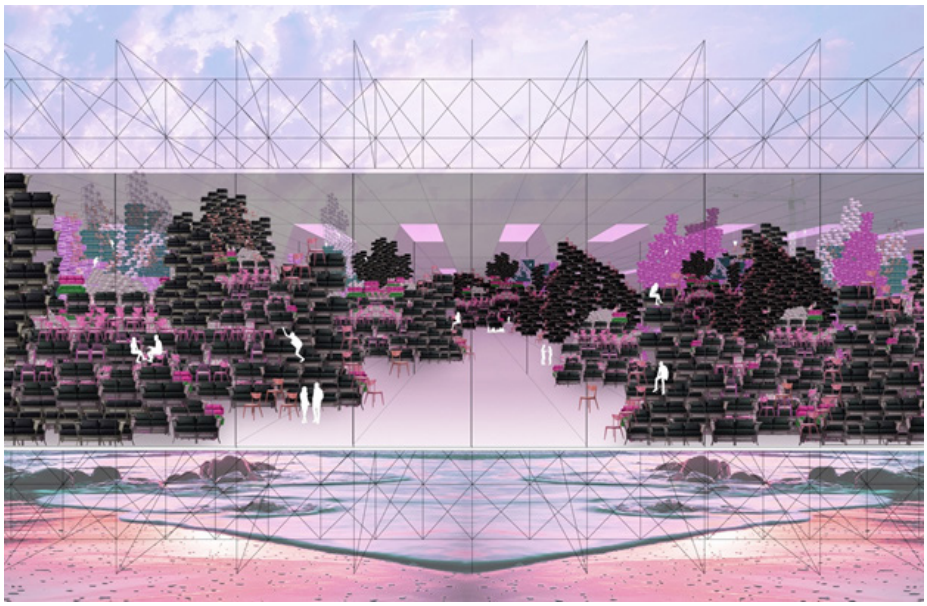

Figure 3: *Alexandra Sandlin: "Beyond the Heavens"*

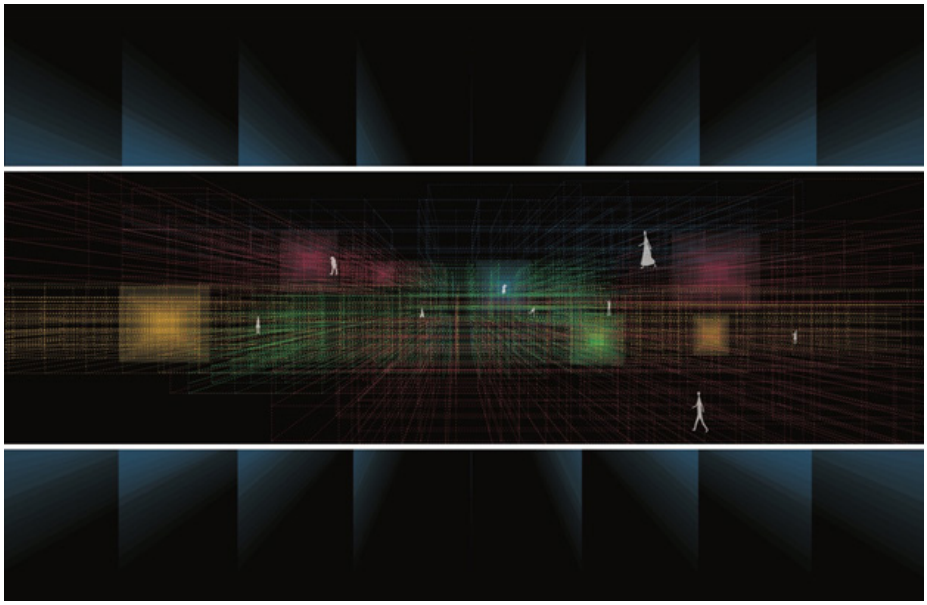

Figure 4: *Robert Anderson: "No-Stop Energy"*

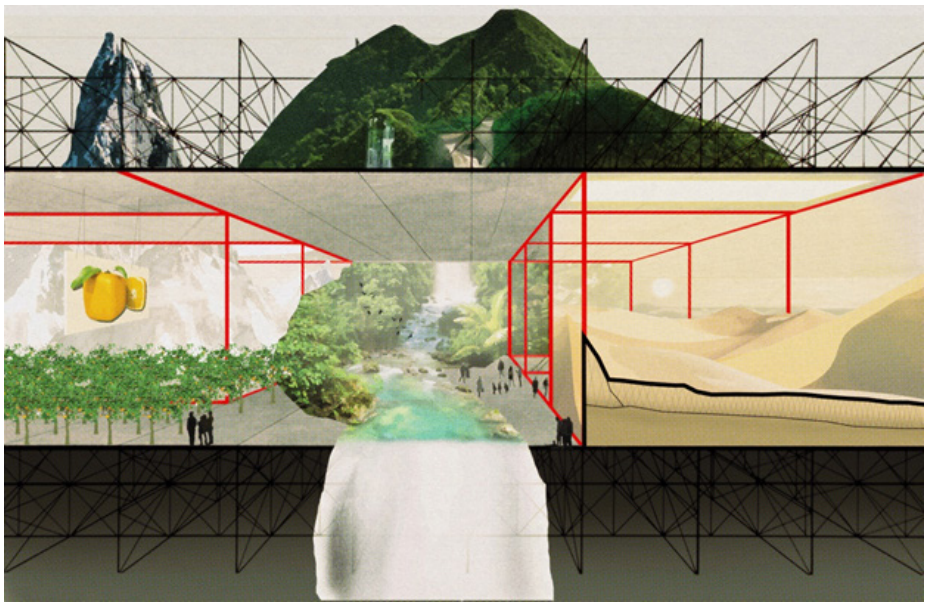

Figure 5: *Megan Baker: "Natural No-Stop"*

Notes & Citations

1. http://www.museonovecento.it/collezioni/no-stop-city/
2. Beatriz Colomina & Mark Wigley. Are we human? (Zurich: Lars Muller, 2018). 9.
3. Andrea Branzi, No-Stop City, Archizoom Associati" (Paris: HYX, Librarie de L'Architecture de la ville, 2006), 179.

The Potter's Hearth: achieving a First

Polly Amery, Andrea Couture and Paul Ring

Polly Amery is a graduate of BA(Hons) Interior Architecture, Northumbria University.

Andrea Couture is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader of BA(Hons) Interior Architecture, Northumbria University.
andrea.couture@northumbria.ac.uk

Paul Ring is Associate Professor and Head of Subject: Architecture, Northumbria University.
paul.ring@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

The pinnacle of achievement for students remains the First-class degree, a marque of excellence and knowledge that professes to guarantee future success. The academic community quantifies and qualifies the First, as measure of authority, rigour and subject-specific maturity. But what of the student's perception; do they know why their work is First Class? Do students expect excellent grades, as we are increasingly led to believe? This transcribed discussion between the tutor and the graduate explores some of these ideas, including the graduate's appreciation of their achievement, the value they placed on learning and attainment alongside an insight into their evaluation of the First-class distinction.

Figure 1: *Front elevation*

Figure 2: *Longitudinal section*

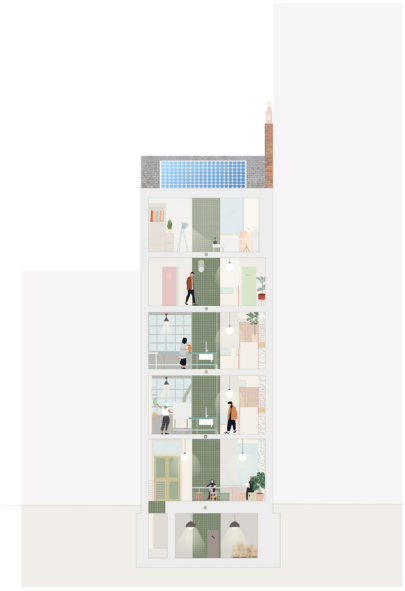

Figure 3: *Short section*

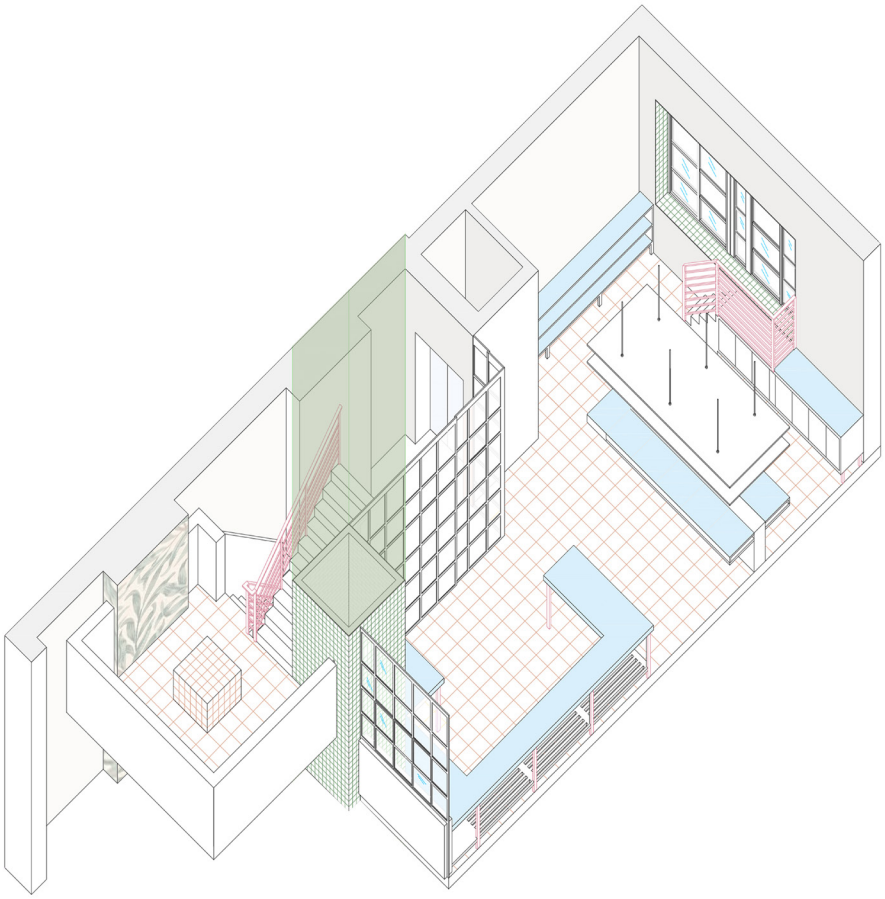

Figure 4: *Axonometric (detail); ceramic studio with central kiln hearth*

The student: Polly Amery

Polly graduated in 2019 with a First Class Honours Degree in Interior Architecture from Northumbria University. Her design project won the National Trust Heritage Adaptation Prize 2019. Further, she won the Gagarin Studio Prize for Creative Writing 2019 for her dissertation "The Space Between", a phenomenological examination of thresholds and spatial territory.

The project: The Potter's Hearth

A creative hub for Newcastle's ceramic artists and enthusiasts, the Potter's Hearth exploits the site's heritage and language through creating specialist studio, exhibition, retail space and a café. Spaces are anchored by a central kiln and flu which provides passive heat and stitches the scheme together on its vertical axis, offset by a collage of tilework inspired by Morris' Golden Lily wallpaper.

The project was assessed to be highly sophisticated, challenging ideas around the subject with a mature and comprehensive ability to apply critical concepts with control.

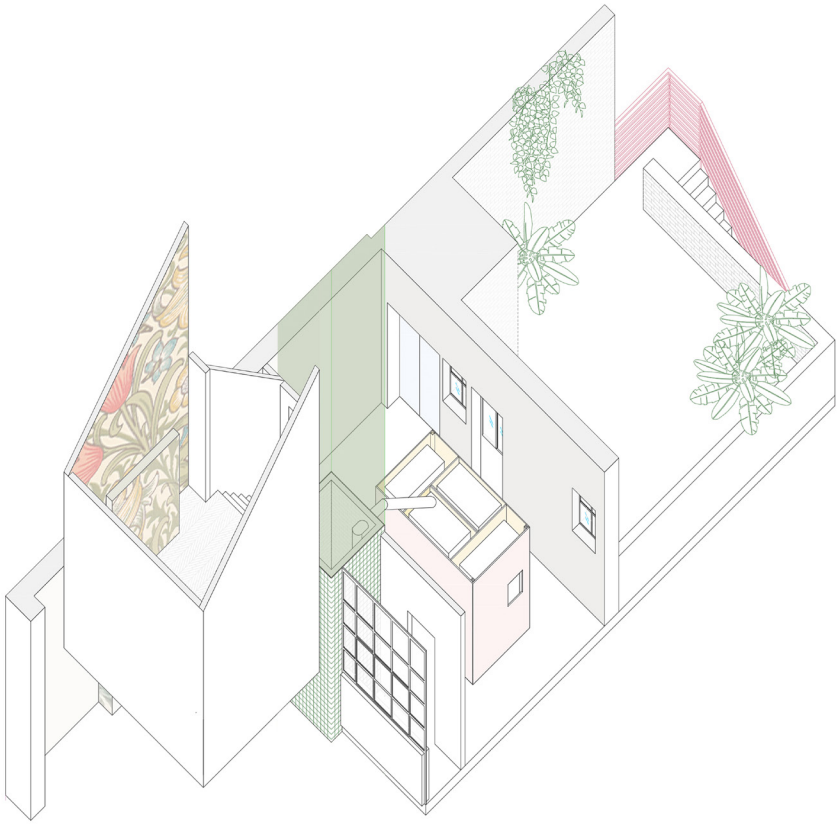

Figure 5: *Axonometric (detail); ceramic studio with central kiln hearth*

Question: Was getting a First an aim of yours?

No. I've always had average grades and I wasn't expecting anything different. It was never an important goal – I would just do the best I could. I was overjoyed, but I would have been satisfied with a 2:1.

Question: Is your classification a measure of something beyond a grade?

Something that I thought about often was the notion that a 2:1 signifies a more well-rounded character; someone with a healthy work/life balance who can contribute to a healthy work environment in employment. Perhaps I latched onto this as I was used to achieving this grade in my earlier years. I also think a First is a recognition of my commitment. However, the work I put in wasn't the actions of a balanced individual; I didn't see my friends, I worked long hours and I felt out of sync with the world for the last few months on my degree.

Question: So it was a challenge at the time despite not being an aim; it clearly means a lot to you, now on reflection?

I see it as an acknowledgement of my understanding and knowledge… that I've worked hard enough. It's recognition of how far I have come; from flunking my A-levels and feeling I would never go back into education, to completing a degree at First Class in a subject I am passionate about.

Question: That passion is evident in the work; did you consider that you were producing a body of work or was it just a response to an assignment?

It wasn't until final year that I really felt I had the maturity to "develop a body of work" to explore my interests and the ideas I was having. For example, when I began my theory

paper on the phenomenology of thresholds it was a separate module in my mind on reflection, the sophisticated tensions between thresholds in my project are far more developed.

Question: So external factors influenced your work, your thinking and the work's authority?

Yes, but not just in University. My engagement with external activity was a vital part in achieving a First. Understanding the subject beyond the University was an important factor in my subject knowledge and allowed me to fully invest in succeeding. I gained a lot of knowledge from outside of University; from taking part in European Architecture Student Assembly to networking at events. I have learned from hearing as many different opinions as possible.

Question: Forming opinion and challenging perceived wisdom are ways of evidencing your critical thinking. Are all students equipped for this?

Challenging received wisdom can be tricky, constructively, when you are only gaining that wisdom from the small circle of sources. It can be hard to identify what is subjective and what is objective within feedback. With a broad range of sources to learn from and listen to, you can form a more established opinion and truly understand what is important to you.

Question: To conclude, why do you think your project is First Class?

There is a considered rationale behind every design decision. It is the most successful design project I did at University and the one I took the most ownership of, aided with the mindset, "I'm going to finish with the best work I have ever produced". Every design decision was underpinned by theory, was true to the project's ethos and was relevant to the context.

Figure 6: *From entrance into the ground floor café. Public staircase wraps around the Potters Hearth*

Figure 7: *Looking into the first floors studio space; visitors can view the pottery process.*

Figure 8: *A restful interlude amidst the encouraged wildlife of the third floors south facing roof garden.*

Figure 9: *Peering alongside the Potter's Hearth into the fourth floors split-level private residence*

The Industry and The First

Shelley McNulty and Barrie Legg

Shelley McNulty is a Senior Lecturer at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University and the Programme Leader for MA Interior Design. s.mcnulty@mmu.ac.uk

Barrie Legg is a Partner and Interior Architect at Johnson Naylor, London. barrie.legg@johnsonnaylor.co.uk

Abstract

In debating the focus of this Issue, an industry perspective is much needed because, ultimately, this is what academics prepare students for; to work and succeed in design and architectural praxis across the globe. It's important to reflect upon what the First-Class award means to industry professionals because, as often debated in the pages of IE:Studio, the various pressures of Higher Education can sometimes skew pedagogies away from the task in hand, or the identity of an Institution and dynamic of the teaching staff may overbear the ethos of the Interiors course itself. This conversational piece with Interior Architect Barrie Legg*, asks if the award of 'First Class' is purely an academic pre-occupation, and if it's really relevant to the industry?

Barrie Legg is perhaps one of the unsung heroes of the Interior Architecture and Interior Design world… he has certainly breathed life into many a graduate career, my own included. Barrie gave me my first proper job as a Junior Designer at Conran Design Group in June 2000. I'd graduated the summer before with a 2:1 from Edinburgh College of Art, and had come to London in search of a job. I'd successfully freelanced at a large US branding company but really wanted a secure job. If I'm honest, I was apprehensive about that possibility. I didn't have a First and I hadn't graduated from a London college. I'd studied at a traditional painting art college where humanities underpinned studio and our engagement with industry was minimal. A friend-of-a-friend suggested I get in touch with Barrie.

When the time came for my interview, Barrie was running late. Later, I came to realise (and accept) that Barrie is always running late. That's not because he's especially tardy or disorganised, but because he's either putting together a pitch, or briefing a design team, or managing a client, or (significantly for me) helping a junior designer who needs some expert guidance. Going into my interview, I didn't know any of this about Barrie but I did know something was different when, 10 minutes in, he didn't want to see my naïve technical drawings or freelance mood boards; he was more interested in my college sketch books which didn't contain any design drawings but, instead, endless messy prints that were an homage to my pop art idol, Robert Rauschenberg, and were a huge influence on how I saw the world at that time. We spent 45 minutes discussing them until Barrie's PA reminded him, he was running late for his next appointment. I started at Conran the following month.

For me, Barrie's patience and intellectual view of the world helped build that bridge between education and industry. His wisdom helped me realise it didn't matter that I didn't have a First-Class degree but my attitude, enquiring mind and commitment to learning were paramount. When I can, I introduce all my students to Barrie, either in a crit or at his studio; he's even ended up employing several of them, now patiently coaching them through the start of their careers.

This text is structured around a series of questions and is a much-edited version of a two-hour conversation. As often happens when friends meet, we meander around the edges of several issues, some of which deserve more space than we have room for.

Question: Is a First-Class degree purely an academic measure?

Barrie Legg [BL]: In my view, a First-Class degree is only ever a guide to be read in the context of the college/course. If I see a student who has a First from Manchester or somewhere else, then I'm conditioning my view to that particular institution and what I know of the course and previous students. I know as an External Examiner, I'm asked about parity of standards across institutions but some institutions have different criteria or ethos for what they like in a First-Class student, so as an employer we become a little conditioned to which institutions generate what kind of students. For me, I'm much more interested in meeting a student and talking to them. That's why I go to the shows every year. You get a feel for how the course is run and its ambition because, as teaching staff change, so does the profile and the identity of the course.

Question: Does a First-Class degree reflect the qualities necessary for success in industry?

[BL]: Not necessarily but it's an early signal in the context of the institution. I think the volume of work in a final project, and its depth and ambition is an indicator of potential success in the professional studio. If you remember Emli who we employed a few years ago, oh how she's grown! The visuals of her final project were a beautiful mass of clouds and whimsical atmospheres, and even though she wasn't technically proficient, she spoke with poise and intelligence. I could tell she'd worked her socks off for her degree – and now she loves doing Stage 3 tender packages! And she likes to be really organised and know what she's doing.

[SMcN]: I remember those traits as key characteristics when I taught Emli. And I would argue that's the "academic-ness" of being at university and a First-Class quality, juggling numerous deadlines, having the intelligence and resourcefulness to step up, ask questions and meet deadlines.

[BL]: I think you are right. In terms of qualities necessary for success in the industry I would say, from my perspective, tutors are now so very young, and with the onset of social media and ever-developing technology, they are looking at the profession in a new way and passing that onto their students. So, when I interview graduates, I have to remind myself of that and I need to stop thinking about my own educational experience and expectations of the skills of graduates.

Question: What role do you think industry could play in supporting students into their first job, helping them to see beyond degree classifications?

[BL]: The industry has a responsibility to share their experience and knowledge in order to allow students an understanding of practical constraints. I would encourage all practitioners to lecture, crit and make a conscious effort to see Graduate Shows up and down the country, or come to the Interior Educators Show. I would also say it's important for professionals and companies to see the unique qualities of individual graduates and allow them to grow into the company, rather than having a mould that needs to be filled.

For students, some experience of the industry is beneficial but not necessarily a year out; any kind of 'internship', 'professional practice', 'a holiday job' would be so useful. Just to put what we do in a context. Our profession isn't about sitting in a corner and 'having an idea' - it is responsive to exterior conditions, and therefore any knowledge of that outside world can really help contextualise how teaching at University manifests in the 'real world'.

Question: In short, do you prefer to employ First Class students?

[BL]: No. You always send me First Class students though…. [lots of laughter] Personally, I like to know that they are thinking outside of the curriculum. Sketch books, showing the 'workings-out', are clues to their way of thinking. Process. Showing how they think beyond the 'ticking the box'. Inquisitiveness is everything.

Question: What do you look for in a graduate employee?

[BL]: Attitude more than anything. Attitude, willingness, a commitment to long-term learning. The portfolio is just the start of the conversation. A team player. Professionalism. Listening as well as speaking.

* Barrie Legg is a Partner and Interior Architect at Johnson Naylor. After graduating from the RCA in the 1970's, his career has spanned over 50 years and he has been the quiet back bone of many leading Design studio's such as Din Associates, HMKM, DEGW, Conran Design Group, to name a few. Aside from these roles, Barrie has taught on several UK Interiors courses and External Examined in Universities across the country. He has employed and mentored hundreds of graduates.

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