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Some Things should be Universal 24/7: Cultures of care in design education

Keywords: Design Education, Care, Community, Purpose

The baby and the bathwater

Australian higher education sectors are confronting the external forces and challenges from Federal Government. Australian Qualification Frameworks, accrediting bodies and moderation processes ensure that institutions and programs are delivering the appropriate sets of knowledge skills to students. However tertiary education environments continue to be in flux as digital technologies expand with state of the art infrastructure, buttressed by globalised networks and flexible curriculums. The further we rocket into a 24/7 digitized realm are we forsaking some core and enduring principles that students need to make positive and constructive future impact and is the hyper-networked self-perpetuating culture separate from core practice and values? Consequently design academics prepare themselves for the salvo of uncertainties that can be at odds with the core business of hands on creative practices.

Interior architecture educational discourse has conventionally centred on the aspects of pedagogy, methodology and theoretical approaches that identify strengths and weaknesses in developing new educative frameworks (Visher & Poldma, 2003), but not on other practices that inform meaningful lifelong guidelines for future professional practice. This paper presents an almost analogue approach to design education by initiating a greater emphasis on a custodian exemplar in an effort that students fuel their sense of purpose, production and accountability and sequentially build a culture of heightened meaning and worth into their practice through projects that directly engage students with social, cultural and community issues. It positions the value of a culture of 'care', a culture of attentive action, as essential and fundamental in a design educational paradigm. The care in this sense can't be 'taught' or 'learnt' but is subtly embedded, experienced and absorbed to those receptive – all of which takes time.

The etymological explanation of care as a noun from the 1580's English is '...to take in hand, do' (Online Etymology Dictionary 2015). Its derivative, careful, is to 'apply attention', and caretake is 'to seize'. This discussion of care as a precedent for a design education is not about taking the moral high ground in provoking students to care about others, care about their work and taking care in what they do and how they do it, but rather, in reinforcing a culture of care as a lucid position for an interior architecture program and by association its staff and students, as a basic underlying tenet for design and life beyond an educational setting.

Expecting students to take care in what they do and how they do it in design education seems a fundamental precept if not a naïve one, but it is either lost or inaccurate when academics continue to hear the irritating phrase '*all I want to do is pass*'. While it indicates a somewhat small but prevailing student attitude it also suggests forsaken aspirational and assiduous ideals for a passage to graduation. These seven words were resonant and significant enough to warrant a shifting paradigm by embedding the fundamental premise of care in multiple readings and contexts to redefine the philosophical and pedagogical culture of an interior architecture program. Through educational practice we have found that engagement with care can be stimulated through engagement with students' community. From anecdotal evidence of student evaluations and community feedback, these projects generate a meaningful engagement where consequential results are not measured in grades but perceptible empathetic shifts. "*If you actually go there and talk to the people, any preconceived ideas you may have had just go right out the window*". (Anonymous student evaluation comment, 2010).

Position

The notion of care is distinct from ethics or ethical practice since it is less politicized and more adaptive, responsive and accessible, not only for students, but for all cultures and demographics. Care also differs from current architectural debate around a design ethics for practice as discussed by Spector (2001) who considers the Vitruvian position of virtues and values, to that of Taylor & Levine (2011) who present a twofold ethical approach to practice. One is a philosophical moral inquiry and the other as a personal proposition that human beings are 'distinctly moral creatures' (Taylor & Levine, 2011, p. 15) argue that 'architecture and design entail

introspective and self-formative practices which are... inherently ethical in character. Similarly, Harries (1997) presents a discussion in his text, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, wherein he contends the purpose of architecture is the 'interpretation of a way of life' and valid for the times.

There is little doubt that value, integrity and ethics is a philosophical premise which underpins the basis of professional practice, however the notion of care is not actioning a moral position but situating relationships for designers between the environment, between communities and individuals and within oneself. 'Design is affected and in some cases largely determined by the shifting social political and economic circumstances in which practitioners find themselves. The philosophical dimensions of practice are better understood by exposing them'. (Taylor & Levine, 2011, p. 15) Wartofsky (1993) argues the same point in connection with the practice of art and its social economic and other settings. The assertion here is that a designer is the facilitator in seizing opportunities and undertaking larger issues other than of addressing a studio design brief in order to establish a position of accountability while applying their expertise within the intimate relationships between people and place. This notion accords with Taylor & Levine of the need to 'address contemporary anxieties' (2011, p. 15) including diminishing natural resources, global warming, environmental degradation and social inequities and that to which Fiona Hall considered in her recent Venice Biennale exhibition of torment titled 'Wrong Way Time' and the catalyst for this paper. In consideration of Hall's anguish, perhaps with the impact of hyper-networks we might steadily be moving in the wrong direction or at least losing focus on more substantial issues related to the lived physical human condition.

Interior design was founded in the domestic realm and arguably, it has been regarded as a frivolous if not a gratuitous profession. From early representations of 17th century Dutch bourgeois interiors, art work depicted everyday domesticity, femininity and comfort and by extension the notion of place making Interior design was associated with the notion of care, nurture and homemaking and within these settings it modulated how people behaved in space and where individuals, family, society and culture are understood. As such the impetus on establishing a position of care is historically fundamental to the discipline.

It is argued that through carefully selected community projects this care relationship can be developed to enrich students on both a professional and personal level. Where students are able to engage with community projects and service learning, often involving localised issues and at times an 'unsexy' brief, students' innate desire to commit to improving people's living or working conditions is developed. This, in turn, increases social capital or builds capacity within the student cohort and local community, consequently demonstrating the process of design for social sustainability.

The 24/7

The global connectedness theme of the 2015 ACUADS conference is as much about time as it is about reason. There is a certain deliberate slowness in working with people through reflective, iterative and complex process of designing which localises issues and could possibly be deemed as almost anti 24/7 global. Care likewise can't be implemented within a continually compressed timeframe but is a cognitive process that is learnt not taught.

One might question the purpose of 24/7 connectivity which is arguably gratuitous in cyber-fields as it serves to paradoxically disconnect from the real and personal. The very term 'virtual reality' has little to do with its precise definition of inherent virtue or indeed, reality but serves to obfuscate the actual than communicate it. As a simulation virtual reality is a very poor real world analogue. Real settings that modulate human interaction where diurnal and seasonal variants allow a closer knitting of people, time and place, better situate a more grounded connectedness. This is critical to the practice of interior architecture and indeed any discipline where design is for and about people.

'Humans are creatures simultaneously both directed towards the environment and impacted upon by it' (Taylor & Levine, 2011, p. 109). The schizophrenic condition has parallels with contemporary attitudes to design + education in that it needs to provide sustenance (in this case shelter + knowledge) and function (technical sophistication + performance which in another reading could be associated with entertainment). It could be argued that virtual realms including social media which through portable devices are instantaneously accessible have infiltrated education as

multiple allied distractions. The multiplicity of media offerings only serves to partially engage students and one could argue that these are a form of divergence if not avoidance from core concerns. However, design and by this association, education parallels with Perez-Gomez's (2006) attitude in that it should lead to 'an understanding of one's place in the world'. This indeed could be read as either virtual or actual.

Developments

The Interior Architecture program at the University of South Australia was relocated to its new City West campus in 1998. The Campus is located in Hindley Street, a post-industrial section of the city which was home to nightclubs, restaurants and adult entrainment venues but in view of most people in South Australia a part of the city that was decidedly on the wrong side of the tracks. The development of a new university campus was seen as a catalyst for the regeneration of this seedier side of the city. In this time, successive generations of students have studied and graduated from the program with scant regard for the place or community in which they study. The campus was merely a functional location; a place for study, the precinct: a place to park the car. Student engagement with their surroundings was minimal by day and at night they visited the precincts hotels or nightclubs.

The promised regeneration of the West End precinct of Adelaide driven by a large new population of staff and students, until recently, remained but a hope. The reputation of the area was slipping further behind with local businesses referring to it as a 'wild west warzone' (Littlely, 2010, p.1 & 8). The lack of care or pride in this precinct was evident and incidences of anti-social behaviours and violence were increasing. Hindley Street had developed the reputation as a no go zone, a place that no reasonable person could care for and that perhaps should be bulldozed and built again. Hindley Street's reputation was so disfavoured that the University in its planning, turned its back on the street (which was the natural access point) favouring North Terrace a seemingly more acceptable location for a (rarely used) entry point. Yet an examination of the pictorial history of the street shows it as a proud civic place, a place for war veterans to parade and a place decorated for royal visits. In the following century the pride and care for this part of the city was gone.

In 2012 the Interior Architecture program made a conscious decision to frame its pedagogy and program culture around the notion of care. One specific manifestation of this was for students to develop a greater sense of their role in community. A series of projects were identified to develop a sense of care for the community in which they study. This paradigm shift empowered graduates to participate in shaping the future of their city based upon the core principal that interior design practice is fundamentally centred on designing for the human experience of the built environment in both private and public settings.

Projects were initiated as a strategic partnership with the Adelaide West End Association (AWEA) whose mission was to advocate for the positive redevelopment of the precinct. The AWEA's objective was to generate ideas for neglected spaces within the precinct to draw attention to opportunities for reconsidering both the existing building stock and public realm within the west end. (Adelaide West End Association, 2013, p. 3)

One project examined a series of laneway sites running north/south off Hindley Street 'mainstreet' precinct. At the time there was considerable interest in the success of the redevelopment of Melbourne's laneways by both state and local government and an emerging agenda to activate city streets to facilitate a more economically and culturally vibrant city and to develop pedestrian linkages through the city. It was hoped this could be replicated in Adelaide's west end. (Adelaide City Council, 2011, pp. 26-27) The initial assignments in the final year studio tasked students to undertake detailed physical analysis of the site wherein they uncovered historic layers and narratives of occupation of the precinct. Students undertook searches of archival material including original drawings, photographs, historical newspaper reportage supplemented by anecdotal evidence from family. Through this work students uncovered new information which deepened their understanding, engagement and mostly appreciation with the west end.

Prosaic family anecdotes connected students with the rich cultural history of the precinct. Since settlement this part of Adelaide has been the commercial and social setting for successive groups of immigrants and the importance of Hindley Street to new Australian immigrants resonated with many students' families. This process

unearthed a part of their history that had been either sublimated or neglected. The stories were noteworthy in their stark contrast to the precincts subversive and notorious history in the state and contradicted often inflammatory reports of it by contemporary media, and the lifetime of the current student cohort. These familial recollections were important catalysts for action and interpretation of the laneways and have formed the basis of consistent localised west end projects. The central outcome for students was the poignancy in these projects and their personal association instilled a genuine interest and care for the context in which they study and the personal meaning it held. This connection to the sites through personal histories developed a passion, focus and attention to a grounded resolution of the projects that has not been evident in more hypothetical studio projects.

The subsequent designed interventions to the laneways attracted significant attention from local government and has led to projects reimagining other 'unloved' sections of the west end. Notably projects focussing on Gray Street a decidedly forgotten but significant linkage between public transportation and Adelaide's new public hospital to the north west of the Hindley Street district has led to ongoing South Australian Government sponsored projects examining the pedestrian flow and quality of the public realm in this area. Similarly a project on Topham Mall (Adelaide City Council 2015 p. 29 -37) - another profoundly neglected space - has also been the catalyst for interventions by Adelaide City Council's place making group and is emerging as a significantly more hospitable space as a result.

In bringing a care-centric approach to the foreground in studio teaching as a key motivator for designed interventions in the city, interior architecture students have demonstrated that their creative practice has a capacity to influence the future of city. These student projects acted as catalysts to action, knowing these are the places where they and the broader community will affect, occupy and inhabit.

Counterpoint

This nuanced learning experience delivers an inherent value when dealing with communities, local and state politics, and different social-economic conditions. In undertaking real projects and presented with confronting and contrary issues and conditions, students engagement and outcomes were significantly more grounded,

credible and authentic rather than solutions driven by aesthetics, hypotheticals and modes of representation. These custodian exemplars aim to fuel students' sense of purpose, production and accountability.

In aiming to instil care as a core tenet, it is as an exemplified model either at a personal / attitudinal level but more holistically through an educative paradigm where the project is not about developing and delivering a brief but serves a greater purpose with longer term effects on communities and/or institutes capacity building. The right genre project must be identified and additional criteria addressed which includes the preparedness of every stakeholder, the participatory schema and that expectations are realistic and balanced (Read, 2014, p. 243). There are many areas where community and academic partners may differ in their emphasis on goals, values priorities and perspectives (Israel et al, 1998, p. 243). Other factors impacting on the accomplishment of these projects as identified by Smith include passion – where 'goodwill and enthusiasm by all participants increases success' immersive engagement, resilience and empathy. 'The lessons learnt through experience are profound and have informed future attitudes, processes, and work practices'. (Smith, 2014, p. 2012)

From anecdotal information, the Art Architecture and Design School's alumni who worked on community projects through their program of study, continue to engage with socially sustainable issues, working pro-bono, building substance within their own practice and bringing their voice to the profession through speaker events, industry and back into education as tutors.

In referencing Donald Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner 'through reflection in-action and reflection on-action we are able to learn from ourselves and from others, and these insights will inform future action' as cited in (cited in Smith, 2014 pp. 200-211) The quantification of the culture of care is problematic as there is no definitive model and as such no conclusive evidence of its success or otherwise. The local and global economy, in which design operates, adequately provides the platform to build a culture of care and an admissible means within the discipline to transfer it. Conceivably slowness is, in this context, the tempered counterpoint to the hyper-active 24/7.

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