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Airplace: interdisciplinary approaches to regeneration and social sustainability.

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AIRPLACE: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO REGENERATION & SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents *Airplace*; a collaboration between academics across various fields – Photography, Fine Arts and Architecture – and the Portland Inn Project - a national portfolio organisation that works with community of young residents in Hanley (Stoke-on-Trent) - to design and build a learning pop-up space as part of their summer programme, the Portland Thinkbelt led by the artistic directors Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies¹. Stoke-on-Trent has been identified as a region of severe deprivation, ranking 13th in the 2019 Indices of Deprivation study released by the Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government. This project is part of a wider strategy of regeneration of the area through arts practices and experiential learning strategies that proposes reimagining the architect Cedric Price's project The Potteries Thinkbelt. (1964, S.o.T). The Potteries Thinkbelt proposed an innovative university model for the regeneration of the local Pottery industries and infrastructure, then significantly in decline. In this proposition the railway line would support a mobile educational provision based on temporary structures, with the carriages becoming classrooms. *Airplace* is a contemporary iteration of some of these key concepts. In this paper we contextualise the workshop in relation to Price's visionary thinking and consider the impact of the project on local regeneration strategies and policies supporting place-making and social sustainability.

Airplace incorporates innovative placemaking strategies and co-created modes of self-representation; integrating experiences of cultures and collective memories into urban public spaces². As part of the methodology developed in the project, codesign emerged as one of the key strategies of work; co design being defined as 'the creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process'³.

One of the main objectives of this project is to contribute to a sustainable regeneration of the neighbourhood. Sustainable urban regeneration requires the involvement of local communities in the decision making and design processes in order to empower communities and develop a sense of placemaking and ownership⁴. The innovation of this practice-based research project lies within the development of interdisciplinary architecture and cultural production methodologies that address complex questions of regeneration and social sustainability by applying experimental techniques of interdisciplinary arts practices.

1: Portland Inn Project context and connections

In 2022 we were invited to engage participants of the Portland Thinkbelt Summer program in a place-making and identity workshop. The focus was on placemaking to foster a sense of community “ownership” of their street through the co-creative design and building of a pneumatic structure in collaboration with the Portland Inn Project. As cited on their website, “the Portland Inn Project CIC is a creative arts project for a community in Stoke On Trent with an aim to achieve community cohesion, economic, social and cultural development by involving the community in development of a pioneering community space, cultural hub and social enterprise.”

In the first (Doing/Making) stage, the participants engaged with the physical challenge of creating the large surface area of the inflatable through joining together pieces of opaque plastic donated from local industry. This process involved teamwork and an element of feeling into the unknown. Once created, the structure was inflated using a simple pedestal fan. The transformation of the inert materials into a physical structure that could house them really caught the imagination of the participants, who “took ownership” of its interior immediately. The interior of the inflatable structure then became our photo-studio, and each participant considered poses that they felt represented themselves in front of the camera. They then selected the image they felt best captured their identity, and used it as the basis for a further layer of customisation. This section of the project enabled participants to employ movement, stylisation and drawn and text-based elements to perform aspects of their identities, leading to a co-created ownership of their image.

Finally, we re-deployed the inflatable structure as an impromptu site of exhibition, displaying the participants’ images on the sides and “ceiling” of the pop-up. The Portland Inn Project facilitators hosted them in experiencing the space as a gallery, enacting a “private view” in the personas of The Curators; introducing another layer of performative identity. We worked with the community on this project through the lens of experiential learning; where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. ‘Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience’⁵. Kolb developed a cycle of experiential learning that has four stages: *Concrete experience, Reflecting Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation*. These stages were an important aspect of scaffolding learning for the youth workshop participants in the project.



Figure 1. Airplace workshop image generation and pop-up space construction by Becky Nunes

2 - The role of HE in regeneration & social sustainability

One of the key elements of this project is its contextualization within the Higher Education Framework. It is essential that HE institutions engage with the regions where they are located. Students and academics can offer insightful perspectives, models and strategies for regeneration and can catalyze communities to become more involved in these areas. The civic movement and the Civic University network, led by Sheffield Hallam University supports that universities across the UK need to develop and embed civic aspirations at an institutional level, particularly through developing and publishing civic university agreements.

In terms of the work that we developed during this project it is essential from our perspective that the development of novel strategies are the product of co-creation with communities. The emerging

consensus among scholars, professionals and policymakers is that there is a need to find ways to give voice to local communities. Higher education institutions can contribute to the development of these models and strategies, testing and establishing innovative frameworks that have the potential to involve more diverse participants.

Our departure point for *Airplace* was the following question; how do we make regeneration and social sustainability strategies inclusive for more people? When communities take the initiative to lead the design of certain areas through self-directed processes generating interventions in public spaces that have a ‘lasting effect on people – they are public goods whose impact reaches more than simply those who live or work there and therefore support social sustainability’⁶.

3- The Thinkbelt; an educational model for regeneration

In a daring and brave moment Cedric Price established models for civic engagement that still represent an exciting approach that could be adopted in architectural pedagogy. For example, at Staffordshire University, the annual Cedric Price Day, which was first established at the closing proceedings of the EURAU conference, continues to explore ideas such as the Fun Palace and Potteries Thinkbelt, as models for a radical and activist approach to civic architecture. Price published his proposal The Potteries Thinkbelt on issue 2 of June 1966 of *New Society*. Essentially, the Potteries Thinkbelt proposes an innovative civic university model linked to local industries. The railway line would support a mobile educational provision based on temporary structures, with the coaches becoming classrooms. The students will be integrated within the urban areas contributing to the existing communities.

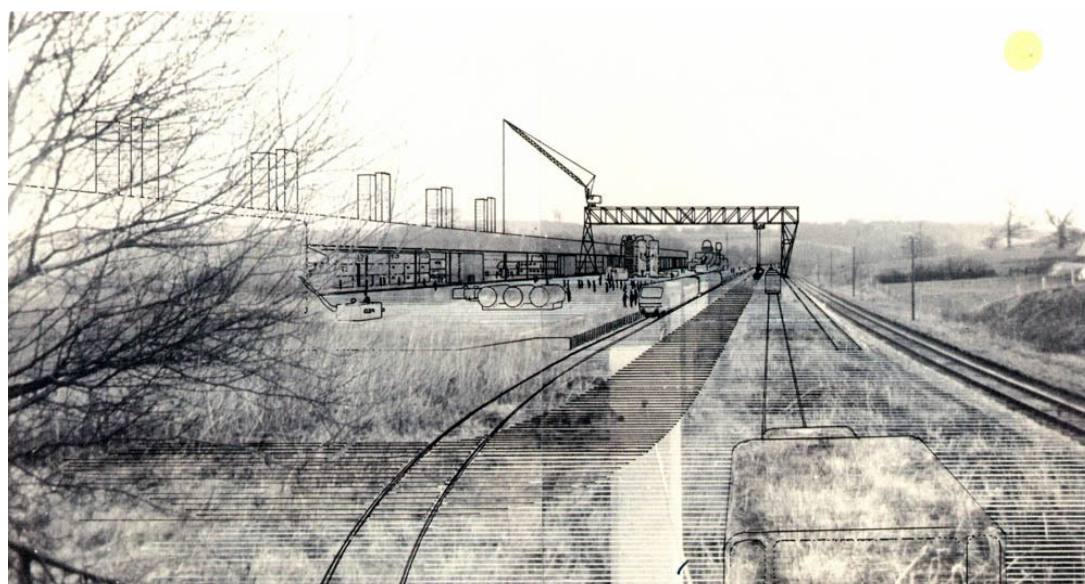


Figure 2. The Potteries Thinkbelt. Cedric Price. Canadian Centre for Architecture.

3.1 The Potteries Thinkbelt and the Portland Thinkbelt

One of the key references for the project, in terms of the type of intervention that we wanted the Community to develop in their area, was the project Potteries Thinkbelt by the architect Cedric Price. Cedric Price established models for civic engagement that still represent an exciting approach.

Price proposed to create an educational network in North Staffordshire which would replace the pottery industry. It would integrate that infrastructure and industry in decay and transform it into a university.

That was a mobile university across the whole region that would create networks of students and citizens. The students would be integrated within the city. What was also innovative about his proposal was not only the way in which it was going to be formalised, but also the creation of an educational model for the region.

His proposal presented train coaches that would become classrooms, and a network of pop-up learning spaces that would just appear and disappear when they were needed. He published this proposal on the 2nd of June of 1966 in the Journal News Society. It was essentially an innovative civic university model linked to the local industries. ‘When the next round of university building starts, perhaps we should treat education less as a polite cathedral-town amenity. We print here an architectural project for a 20,000 student campus in north Staffordshire which is built around a road and rail network, emphasises temporary housing and ties students with the community.’⁷

In the Potteries Thinkbelt, Price also brings into the table questions such as regeneration and sustainability. Already in the 1960s he was discussing and proposing a circular economy model where the structures could be disassembled and reused. Price was able to link sustainability, the higher education sector and local communities, having as an outcome a plan for the regeneration of a post-industrial area that 62 years later in 2023 is still addressing regional and global issues.

This is the reason why for us the Thinkbelt was a clear reference for this project; not only because we were creating one of those pop- up learning spaces that will serve the community in Hanley (Stoke-on-Trent), but also because it celebrates those sustainable ideas; the ways in which this temporary space that can be assembled & disassembled by the community can bring an empowering educational dimension to the regeneration of the area.

3.2 Rhizomatic networks

The Portland Inn project has pioneered the implementation of what their artistic directors have defined as ‘street level learning’. Previously to the project of the Potteries Thinkbelt, Cedric Price collaborated with the theatre director Joan Littlewood and the cybernetician Gordon Pask in the project of the Fun Palace. The Fun Palace was defined by Joan Littlewood as the ‘university of the streets’⁸. The Fun Palace was instrumental in Price’s approach to architecture, and the Potteries Thinkbelt also contains elements of this University of the streets. When Price designs the Potteries Thinkbelt he proposes to break the hierarchical university structure and replace it by a rhizomatic network. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define the concept of Rhizome in opposition to the tree hierarchical structure ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This structure is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes and orders’.⁹

In the Potteries Thinkbelt, the exchange of knowledge is shared with the city, having a wider impact. In many ways the rail network is the materialisation of the rhizomatic structure. This is replicated in the Portland Inn Project (PiP) where there is a framework where everyone learns from each other, as highlighted by the young people that participate every year in the programme. The educational programme of the PiP is based on experiential learning and codesing, which by nature are non-hierarchical - rhizomatic - methods for learning. This idea of sharing knowledge horizontally, at the same level is one of the common characteristics of Price’s project and the Portland Thinkbelt.

4 - Visual citizenship

The second key element of the Airspace project was a project of photographic representation for the workshop participants. Any photographic representation of communities as an aspect of socially-engaged or participatory projects carries with it a heavy load of ethical considerations. For some context we can look at Steve McQueens' year-long project of representation, *Year 3*, (2020) which has in some quarters been hailed as “unassailable in its emotional immediacy and grandeur”¹⁰. McQueen spent a year coordinating photographers from Tate Britain to photograph more than 75,000 children from London's primary schools: a process that involved McQueen and his team visiting approximately 80 schools per week for an entire year. Every day for 20 weeks, 600 schoolchildren were brought to Tate Britain to view the project, while the institution estimates that, in total, around 17 million people would have encountered the billboards before they were eventually pasted over. This is undeniably a massive “reach” for the project, which aimed to capture and reflect the diversity of our contemporary classrooms. However, Harry Thorne, writer for Frieze Magazine, described the outcome as “large-scale participatory spectacle”,¹¹ which, while undeniably celebrating diversity and universality, also packages the sitters and the audience into a static binary without offering any real possibilities for participation, problematization or politicisation of either group via the process of making or viewing of the work. Thorne points out in his critique of the project that “The risk is that we will end up with projects that do not help communities, but use communities for acclaim, only to discard them once more. Involvement does not equate to engagement. Participation is not praxis.”¹²

If we look for alternatives to this author-subject model of photographic representation, a powerful example of participation as praxis can be seen operating in the ongoing Photo-Futures/Collingwood Project, led by RMIT lecturer Kelly Hussey-Smith. Hussey-Smith, in collaboration with colleagues from RMIT, has conceived of a “co-creation” between community groups, students, alumni and faculty, existing outside the boundaries of the institution. A key aspect of the project has been a physical space in which to house the Research Lab in the suburb of Collingwood, Melbourne. This space houses a vertically integrated group of BA Photography students, along with an alumni residency and community partnerships and projects. Community partners are viewed as co-teachers, and much time and care is taken to develop these working relationships, supported by faculty through readings, discussions and lectures which focus on collaboration, ethics and representation. In this way the curriculum can be viewed as the incorporation of photography and pedagogy in relation to community-led social change. Co-created outputs to date include modules developed for delivery into the local school, the use of lens-based imaging to highlight the misrepresentation of the African-Australian community, local social histories and the visual support of work created by the new migrant and refugee communities. These are rich and complex social relationships being co-created in the laboratory of the citizenry of photography.

Erica Balsom states that “to be invisible is also to be cast out of the body politic, into the precariousness of ungrivable life.”¹³ So the claiming of global citizenry depends to some extent on visibility; and it is this notion that Azoulay addresses in her *Visual Contract of Photography*¹⁴. In this work, Azoulay addresses some of the historical concerns raised by Sontag and others in their critique of photography as a tool of representation. These critiques have focused on the propensity of the fixed image to perpetuate or reinscribe stereotypes and traumas on the subjects within the frame. Azoulay calls on the viewer of the traumatic image to act in response to their witnessing, and points out that the image content can move far beyond the original intentions of either author or subject.

In thinking through the photographic element of this collaboration, it was therefore really important to create an ethical framework that would provide a platform for visibility, while avoiding the re-

inscription of tropes and stereotypes that might override the agency of each subject. The framework for the photographic component of an urban place-making project such as *Airplace* has three distinct stages:

Stage One: Reading Pictures

In this stage a visual politics workshop is facilitated with the participants before the pop-up structure is built. During this workshop, participants tease out the problematic aspects inherent in photographic representation through reflecting on their own lived experiences, as well as by looking at other practitioners and projects.

Stage Two: Constructing Selfies: There follows an identity-design session, where participants imagine their own constructed visual reality. These sessions inform the portrait photography in relation to poses, wardrobe and any other visual clues to this constructed self.

Stage Three: Seeing Ourselves: This stage involves the practical making, selecting and editing of the participant portraits, with their full involvement in every stage of the process.

Airplace as part of the Portland Inn Project Summer Workshops was the pilot iteration of this process, and we did not have the opportunity to deliver the full three-stage representation framework, or to incorporate the final portraits fully into the actual material used for the pop-up space. However, this is something we are developing in terms of technical and conceptual integration towards the next iteration.

CONCLUSION

The key imperatives that unite our practices as researchers are those of place-making and social sustainability. As we attempt to navigate the many challenges inherent in our contemporary milieu, a globally-informed approach to pedagogies practice and problem-solving is essential. *Airplace* has constituted a model of participatory codesign led by a Higher Education institution that can continue to be developed, and can have an impact on the regeneration of the region of Stoke-on-Trent. This project has also allowed us to define the role of educators within codesign strategies, as transmission of knowledge is at the essence of the process. Another key element of the success of the model that we have tested is the collaboration between different stakeholders; academics, professionals and the community. Interdisciplinarity has become an essential part of the project, as it has allowed us to find a common ground and it has made the project more accessible to all the community participants; departing from specialist knowledge, to incorporate different areas of expertise. As academics and practitioners, we wish to share these practical and conceptual tools to engender positive relational exchanges, and to have productive dialogue with others engaged in relational practices.

NOTES

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