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SETTING UP THE UPSETTER: a vertical studio for architecture.

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Abstract: Contemporary education systems tend to subdivide learning groups into horizontal slices of similar age or similar levels of experience or skill. Architectural education programmes in most western countries generally follow this pattern and work in a horizontally stratified manner. Similarly, architecture and design practices tend to ossify in patterns around specialisations in work processes. To maintain all the qualities required of creative practice there is a need to shake up these patterns, to destabilize the obvious in order to constantly reinvigorate practice. As design educators and practitioners, we have long recognised a need for what we have called upsetter projects. In 2017 a Vertical Studio experiment involving final year BAS and first year MARCP students was initiated to try and shake things up and generate a stronger peer learning/peer assessment culture. The first half of the paper describes and analyses that original Vertical Studio and discusses the insights gained. The second half makes use of a matrix derived from that analysis and proposes two upsetter projects each using a different method of generation. The paper concludes that there is potential for further use of these methods in the development of upsetter projects designed to enrich both pedagogy and practice.

Keywords: Design studio; pedagogy; practice; invigoration.

1. Introduction

Contemporary education systems tend to subdivide learning groups into horizontal slices of similar age or similar levels of experience or skill. Architectural education programmes in most western countries generally follow this pattern. Similarly, architecture and design practices tend to ossify in patterns around specialisations in work processes. To maintain all the qualities required of creative practice there is a need to shake up these patterns, to destabilize the obvious in order to constantly reinvigorate practice. There are two areas where disturbance might be applied to upset the quotidian: structure and content. First the conventional work groupings or strata might be dissolved and personnel re distributed into new groupings. Second the content for any project might be selected from the fringes of the discipline or involve mixing of disciplines or highly focused specialization - content that is different in scale or scope from that which is normally engaged in the design studio. As design educators and practitioners we recognised the need for what we have called upsetter projects. The discussion that follows records our first attempts to respond to this need.

In 2017 the Architecture programme at Unitec Institute of Technology experimented with a three-week vertical studio to test the possibilities of the format. It should be noted that the vertical studio is, internationally, a common component of architecture school programmes and it was a regular component of the Unitec programme until the introduction of the three-year undergraduate (BAS) plus two-year masters (MARCP) format in 2008. This 2017 vertical studio experiment was initiated to energize the normal pattern of Design Studio learning. It brought together the final year of the undergraduate BAS programme and the first year of the Master of Architecture (MARCP) to try and generate a stronger peer learning/peer assessment culture. Tutors were freed from the existing timetable to organize work schedules around the sympathetic availability of students. The vertical studio provided a choice of six projects with differing agendas ranging from monuments to the America's Cup to a collective farm for senior citizens. At the end, assessment of the work was shared with the student participants. What was evident from our initial reflection on the value of the project was that there were multiple factors that might be recalibrated. As this process of reflection progressed, focussed by the writing of this paper, we identified some of these factors and came to realise the enormous potential of what we were grappling with. This paper then is the beginning of a larger (and longer) body of research. First, we will describe and analyse that original vertical studio and discuss the insights gained from this analysis. The second half of the paper makes use of a matrix derived from the analysis and proposes two methods for the design of upsetter projects that have the potential to enrich both pedagogy and practice.

2. Vertical Studio 2017

2.1 Aims and objectives

The first drive for this three-week vertical studio project was to add an inspiration boost to the otherwise structured and demanding architectural curriculum. By proposing a series of short and technologically uncomplicated projects the intention was to leave more space for creativity to be expressed. The envisaged benefits of mixing Year 3 BAS and First Year MARCP students were to generate an increase in the social and academic interchange between the year groups, to give students a wide choice of projects proposed by unfamiliar tutors and to give students a voice in the evaluation process. The intention was to shake things up!

2.2 The projects

Tutors were given full freedom in their projects proposals in terms of scope, scale and typology as long as the outcomes could be evaluated after a period of three weeks. The six proposed projects' briefs were advertised online prior to the start of the studio experiment. Students chose their preferred project via an online signup sheet. Four of these projects offered individual work and two group work. The *collective farm?* project was led by Visiting Professor Alberto Foyo from the GSAAP Columbia University. All other projects were led by existing Unitec Architecture staff members.

A collective farm?, was based on the scenario that 100 elders, who had been inexplicably expelled from their local nursing home, needed a new place to live that included all the modern comfort and conveniences and enough space to grow their own food – a collective farm. The students in *Fact from Fiction* had to use the literary descriptions of the main character in Keri Hulme's novel *The Bone People* to produce a hand-drawn six-level tower.

Away from the imaginary worlds of these 2 projects mentioned above, *Devonport Parklets* proposed to repurpose Devonport's shopfronts parking spaces offering more space and amenities for pedestrians using the San Francisco Parklets Manual. A *Bird Hide Observation Post* invited students to explore a real site at the Te Henga (Bethells) wetlands. The *Westhaven Landmark* project asked for an appropriate architectural marker to designate the start of 2021 America's Cup. *Unitec Students' Exhibition* was part of the NZIA Festival of Architecture 2017 and required students to curate, design and fabricate all the elements of an installation displayed at Warren & Mahoney Laneway space in Wynyard quarter during festival week.

2.3 The Process

Each project group worked with their tutors in separate spaces but the proximity of these spaces allowed everyone to follow or at least to gain a sneak peek at all ongoing projects. *A collective farm?* and *Festival of Architecture* students worked as groups. The *collective farm?* project employed large scale charcoal hand drawings and models using timber and cardboard but also more malleable materials such as clay and sand. Students were invited to work at their own rhythm – independently from allocated design studio times. Their "room" was available every day of the week and was an evolving exhibition of the project as every drawing found a place on the walls and the models dominated the floor space at all times. Their tutor, Visiting Professor Alberto Foyo, was free of other teaching duties and was always available within their workspace. The apparent lack of structure during the three weeks of this project allowed for a freedom of expression and a blur of usual boundaries. Students were daringly drawing on top of tutors' sketches, adding thick charcoal texture to each other drawings and getting their hands dirty together on the same large-scale model - a true collective process.

The *Festival of Architecture* installation project was a lot more structured. The students worked in small groups to each develop an initial concept. The intention was to select the best concept for development. However, lack of any one dominant scheme forced a revised strategy where the group worked collectively to edit the presented concepts into one cohesive scheme. In the second week the students divided into sub-groups to manage specific aspects of production. Each of these sub-groups had a dedicated student coordinator. All work and communication was coordinated by an overall manager. In the final week students concentrated on making a prototype and a booklet to illustrate the process and the work in progress. After an additional 3 weeks of intensive work, the result was a very well received public installation that illustrated the "hands-on" approach of the Unitec Architecture programme .

The other four projects, *Fact from Fiction, Westhaven Landmark, Bird Hide and Devonport Parklets* followed more common design studio formats. They worked within Design Studio spaces and time-tables, were run by existing studio staff and were what might be described as more conventional Design Studio projects.

2.4 Assessment

One of the most interesting aspects of the vertical studio experiment was the assessment strategy. Many commentators like Helen Webster (2007) have observed the asymmetrical power structure present within the conventional design studio critique format. Our intent, as designers of this vertical studio, was to re-calibrate this power relationship. The six projects were paired-up based on those with equal numbers of students and type of assignment (individual or group work). On the final presentation

day, the students were briefed by the tutors of the project they were about to assess. They were given grading forms with short descriptions of marking criteria such as design resolution, communication and craft and anonymously evaluated the projects of the paired group. The students took the task very seriously and discussed their evaluations in smaller groups as they moved about the work. Because there was no verbal presentation for the individual projects, the student assessors were required to understand the work on the strength of the drawings and/or models alone and consequently gained a new appreciation of the importance of graphic communication. Tutors marked the projects of their own groups. The final grade was calculated using the average grade given by students and the tutors. In the case of the group projects, *a collective farm?* and *Festival of Architecture* students also evaluated their own team members which was counted as part of the student component of the grade. These two group projects used expanded presentations. The *collective farm?* provided verbal feedback and comments to the Festival group as they needed to keep developing their project for final installation during the Festival. The *collective farm?* project was presented in a seminar format. Visiting Professor Alberto Foyo opened with a short lecture followed by the students presenting particular aspects of the project. Critique was invited from the audience. What followed was a spirited and contested discussion on the merits and implications of the project for society at large and for architectural pedagogy.

2.5. Findings

It appeared that there wasn't a visible difference in the quality or complexity of work produced in the individual projects (*Bird Hide, Westhaven Landmark, Fact from Fiction and Devonport Parklets*). The projects were very similar to the range of media and quality produced within any studio and did not clearly show better marks for more experienced students. However, they did produce a mixing of the normally segregated year groups and they did give students a choice of a wider range of staff and a role in the assessment process. The group projects were more successful in achieving these objectives although operating under two different organisational structures. *A collective farm?* was driven by the vision and political stance of the Visiting Professor. The *Festival of Architecture* installation was organised in a manner designed to be inclusive. The outcome, a coherent exhibition of student work, was seen as the perfect vehicle to explore a collaborative design and making process. Both of these projects achieved richer versions of the mixing agenda through the intensity of their work processes.

The experience was demanding for both staff and students in terms of coordination (sign-up sheets, information that needed to be shared on various online platforms, students grading forms, team evaluation forms, grading spreadsheets). Importantly, the experiment was enjoyed by both students and staff and in that sense was successful from a learning point of view. Students were engaged and curious, responsible and fair in their grading (they were more severe assessors than tutors in most cases!) and generally produced a large amount of work in relation to the duration of the project. Tutors had the opportunity to connect and reconnect with students and to adopt different teaching approaches to those used in the usual level-oriented design studios.

As a disciplined method of reflection, the authors embarked on a plotting of the project to better understand the dynamics at play. During this process an underlying suspicion developed that there was much more potential in this cluster of ideas than we had originally imagined. The break-down of the two components into their elements and options and the detailed examination and analysis of all these pieces substantiated that suspicion. This process provoked an excited curiosity. We started to recognize the multitude of possibilities that unfolded from this fine-grained examination of this project. Further reading initially directed this curiosity towards an examination of the nature and role of the question.

3. The Question

3.1 Syntax of a question analogy

The essence of an effective architectural design studio brief, regardless of programme, year level or practice setting, can be found in the act of articulating an appropriate question. These briefs need to encourage reflection, creativity and critical thinking to be applied to a formal response, usually a building. In the academy/university, projects gain in complexity as study progresses and cover increasingly more challenging scenarios which evolve in parallel with the overall programme curriculum shaping the students' ability to *design*.

In order to provoke creative architectural responses, it is essential that the brief itself be carefully crafted. In other words, the formulation of a question has a direct impact on its response. A polar question has only two possible responses: yes or no. These expected responses are already embedded in the question and therefore limit the choice to the two alternatives. A rhetorical question, on the other hand, either does not expect an answer at all, or has the answer embedded in the question or can be used to emphasize a point. WH-questions, also known as content questions (that commonly start with who, what, why, when, where or how) call for specific answers. Harvard linguistics professor Maria Polinsky (2013) claims that there are three different strategies of asking content questions and explains how one of them particularly

> …tells us something extremely important about the nature of those content WH-words, which is that they indicate focus. Focus is something that the sentence is about, the new information.

These focused questions facilitate the assimilation of new information which in turn stimulates the need for asking more WH or content questions. This process broadens knowledge and drives open-mindedness and, in this way, provides space for creativity to manifest. We suspect that a deeper study of the linguistic structure of the question could provide further insight for project design - but that is a whole other paper!

Author Padgett Powell teaches fiction writing at the University of Florida and can be considered a question expert. Indeed, in his 2010 publication *The Interrogative Mood: a novel?* every sentence is a question; one-hundred-and-sixty-four pages of questions. Padgett Powell himself, in an interview with the Guardian in 2011, remarked "these questions involve overt non sequiturs, and to do them right you need a certain equipoise of mind." The effect on the reader is exceptionally engaging as one is not able to resist the temptation of seeking answers, even to the most absurd questions.

In the same way that questions and their syntax have an evident effect on the answer, or probably more importantly, on the seeking of *an* answer, the structure of a brief gives direction to the architectural response. It is therefore fundamental to consider the form as much as the content in the conception of the brief. As part of his course syllabus on fiction writing at the University of Florida, Powell (2010, PS 3) proposes some guidelines on what writing should do:

> 1.Be alive, 2. Be surprising, 3. Obey tenets of economy, verve, etc., 4. Amount to something (usually in terms of having "something at stake"), 5. Pay off (i.e. resolve) Any three of the five is worth spoiling paper for. It should be remembered also that: 6. Brave wild failure is applauded. And that: 7. You should be less comfortable if you're pretty sure

of what you are writing about. And that: 8. You should ignore, at all times, all sense of authorial narrative obligations, and certainly your own perceptions and ideas.

As writing is conventionally the means to communicate the brief, these guidelines might be more relevant than one might initially think. What is a brief if not a written, fictional scenario aimed at inspiring the reader to respond? As this paper explores the idea of introducing disturbance of the usual pattern for the enrichment and reinvigoration of both pedagogy and practice, it is necessary to also explore the way in which a brief can be structured in order to achieve the full potential of this kind of upsetter project.

3.2 Equipoise of two forces and the making of the upsetter brief

In order to make the shift from a conventional brief to an upsetter brief, it is necessary to dissect the typical brief, analyse its elements, test which elements that can be rearranged or supressed and identify areas that can be injected with a disruptive influence. The analytical process recorded in the development of the upsetter matrix reveals two distinct but interdependent components: content and structure. These can be seen as complementary forces whose dynamic relationship informs the brief. Content is the activating force of the project. It can be initiated by an idea, a particular interest or a topical need that motivates the brief and includes the subject, discipline, delivery method and type of assessment. Structure is the restraining force and typically focuses on pragmatic aspects. Duration of the assignment and timetable, individual or group work, physical location of the project and staff facilitation are some of the elements of structure. Dissecting each element of content and structure, we are able to identify the disruptive factors that could shape an upsetter brief. The matrix that records and identifies the hierarchy of component, element and options is shown as Table 1; THE UPSETTER MATRIX.

THE UPSETTER MATRIX

		STRUCTURE					
		SA (YEAR)	**SB (GROUPING)**	**SC (DURATION)**	**SD (LOCATION)**	**SE (FACILITATORS)**	**SF (BRIEF DELIVERY)**
CONVENTIONAL	0	one year only	individual / group	defined (allocated design	design studio	design studio tutors	written
UPSETTER POSSIBILITIES	1	all years together	defined number of students per group	condensed (ex. 24h)	elsewhere on campus	design studio tutors of other years	verbal only
	2	y1+y2	student choice: individual or group	undefined	in architecture office	mixed desing studio tutors	different medium (painting, song, etc)
	3	y1+y3	all students as one group		studio unrelated location (ex. sports hall, museum community centre, etc.)	"outsiders" not design studio tutors	
	4	y1+y4	student choice: free groups of different sizes			design studio tutors + "outsiders"	
	5	y1+y2+y3					
	6	y1+y2+y4					
	7	y1+y3+y4					
	8	y2+y3					
	9	y2+y4					
	10	y2+y3+y4					
	11	y3+4					
		CONTENT					
		CA (SUBJECT / THEME)	**CB (DISCIPLINES)**	**CC (DELIVERY)**	**CD (ASSESSMENT)**		
CONVENTIONAL	0	initiated by course coordinator / lead tutor	architecture	models, drawings, posters, slideshows	by staff		
UPSETTER POSSIBILITIES	1	multiple initiators (design studio tutors)	non-architecture or design	written only (essay)	by students only		
	2	initiated by students	liberal arts	verbal only (story telling)	by staff and students		
	3	initiated by "outsiders"	scientific disciplines	abstracted (cake, dance, song)	no assessment		
	4		crafts	built only (scale 1:1)	self evaluation		
	5				by "outsiders"		
	6				students evaluating staff		

4. Testing a system: Generating an upsetter brief

The research enquiry continued by testing configurations of the element options by using two different strategies. Both strategies required assigning letter/number codes to the element options so they could be easily identified. Then we, first, took the originating criteria for the Vertical Studio 2017:

    1. Mixing work/studio year groups

    2. Stimulating inventiveness by exposing students to new work patterns, environments and people.

We selected those structure element options and content element options from the upsetter Matrix that we thought best met those criteria and then intentionally assembled a project. We have called that version the Intentional Project.

    The second strategy involved assembling the options using an online webtool; Random Thing Picker. Aleatory (chance) techniques are well known in writing and the arts in general as a strategy to generate the unexpected. The Surrealist game *Cadavre Exquis* where a new drawing is made without prior knowledge of the existing drawing which is folded from view and John Cage's *Music of Changes* from 1951 where he selected the tempo, duration and dynamics of the piece using an ancient Chinese book, the I Ching are two examples. We have called our version the Random Project.

4.1 Intentional Project

SA4 Combines Y1 and Y4 as the two groups with the greatest space between their learning levels in the school and arguably the most difficult to mix.

SB4 Students would be given free choice of group size and composition with the proviso that each group must contain equal numbers of each year group.

SC1 Twenty-four-hour studio to intensify the mixing.

SD3 Located off campus at a facility that could provide accommodation. **SE1** Staffed by studio staff from other years so that benefits of vertical mixing are extended into the staff group and strengthen the mixing intentions of choices above.

SF2 Brief would be delivered in a medium (video) without reference to architectural conventions with the intention to dissolve the difference in architectural education experience between the two groups.

~~CA1 Theme would need to be outside the discipline area so that differences in skills would not impede performance. This could be described as a level playing field.~~

CA2 Theme or subject area would need to be initiated and negotiated by the student group as this would theoretically produce a shared area of enquiry.

~~CB1 Discipline again would be outside of architecture but usefully involving design.~~

CB7 Discipline would need to be initiated and negotiated by the student group as this would theoretically produce a shared area of enquiry.

~~CC3 Media of presentation equally outside of architectural convention. Video.~~

CC7 Media of presentation would need to be initiated and negotiated by the student group as this would theoretically produce a shared area of enquiry.

CD4 Assessment schema would be developed by the student group at the beginning of the project and performed that group.

4.1.1 Observations

What became clear in this process was that decisions can be made both externally and internally. These could be described as first order (external) and second order (internal) decisions. All projects need to be initiated and decisions need to be made to set up the project conditions. These initiating decisions are a meta-category that ranges from totally controlled, where all the capabilities for decisions are defined by external decision maker, to where the external decision maker abdicates all /most decisions to the performers. Initially, the authors attempted to provide content elements (CA-CD) they thought would best facilitate the project intent of mixing skill levels to facilitate learning. However, after much discussion about the validity and efficacy of that method to achieve the objectives, the authors decided that mixing was best achieved by passing responsibility for that content to the learners. Those changes of position are plotted by the strike out in the text above.

This sort of discussion is, ideally, part of the design process for every Design Studio project. There will be different decisions taken depending on the particular requirements, in this case, for the objective of mixing. What sort of mixing is the intended outcome? There is a grain, a fineness, a particularity that is introduced by the identification of elements and element options that is a valuable product of having a matrix.

4.2 Random Project

The brief presented below uses the second method of a random collection of elements of structure (S) and content (C). Those elements are generated by an online webtool: Random Thing Picker (https://andrew.hedges.name/experiments/random/pickone.html)

SA11 Combines students from Y3 andY4
SB3   Students operate as one group
SC1   Condensed time frame
SD1   Project work space is located elsewhere on campus
SE3   Project is facilitated by "outsiders": not design studio tutors (non-architects, wider community stakeholders)

SF1   Brief is delivered verbally only.
CA3   Subject or theme of the project is initiated by "outsiders"
CB2   Discipline is located within the liberal arts)
CC4   Project delivery is built only
CD4   Assessment method is self-evaluation)

Following those randomly picked items, an upsetter brief has been generated – to be delivered verbally only (SF1):
"A group of 3rd and 4th year students (SA11) has been invited to participate in a project initiated by XX, lecturer in the Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts (Contemporary Dance) at Unitec Institute of Technology (CA3). XX proposes to the group to imagine and build objects of various sizes (CC4) to be used as props for contemporary dance students in preparation for their end of year public performance. The dancers will integrate those objects into their choreographies with the aim to convey interpretations of various urban physical environments (CB2). The objects will likely be very abstract on their own and only allow to read those spatial qualities when used in the context of the dance

performance. Although each student will produce a single object, the group must work collaboratively to create a coherent collection (SB3). The core tutors of this project will be the contemporary dance students and their tutors, the usual design studio tutors' role will be of observers and resources (SE3).

This will be a full-time 3-day long project (SC1) held at the Dance Studios and Architecture School Workshop at Unitec (SD1). The objects must be made entirely of waste materials collected on campus and assembled with tools available at the workshop following a zero-waste approach.

At the beginning of the first day, both dance and architecture students will create a self-evaluation criteria form to be filled by each architecture student at completion of the project (CD4). This grade will determine the overall grade for this project. What questions do you have?..."

Inspired by Powell's Interrogative Mood mentioned earlier, it would be interesting to witness the difference in understanding or interpreting the brief depending on how it is communicated. What if the generated brief proposed above was conveyed in the form of questions only? Below is an attempt at this approach:

"How can an object be used in the context of a contemporary dance choreography in order to convey interpretations of various urban environments? What form could such object take? How can collaborative work between all students help to create a cohesive collection of individually created objects? How can design studio tutors retreat to the role of witnesses and resources and leave space for dance students and their tutors to give feedback on the design progress? How can we help you to understand this brief?..."

4.2.1 Observations

This randomized approach of creating an upsetter brief, although artificial in its generating process, seems to deliver a comprehensive scenario. It provides a creative challenge for the person who assembles the random element options and creates an element of surprise for the project designer that is not present in conventional or intentional brief design. Interestingly, by abdicating responsibility for the choice of the options, the focus for the project designer becomes the art of the assembly or the tectonics of the project. We can also imagine that this technique might have a liberating effect on the project as leaving a substantial share to chance could partially relieve the designer/s of a sense of responsibility for the success of the project. This loosening of control has the potential to allow the project more flexibility and hence more expansive outcomes.

5. Conclusion

We set out to write this paper in order to provide a disciplined platform for reflection on the vertical studio project we had just completed. To bring some rigour to this reflection, we established a frame work that we thought would allow us to usefully dissect that project. While this framework was originally designed for analysis, it became very clear, very quickly, that it might be equally be a useful tool for the design of projects. The paper describes that original project and then explores the fundamental issue of the question and how it has been applied in the creative writing practice of Padgett Powell. The original Vertical Studio, as the name implies, was predicated on the intent to mix strata (year groups) within the school programme and to provide a disturbance to the normal patterns. As we proceeded with our analysis, it was the idea of disturbance that became the dominant focus of interest - hence the paper title. The guidelines that Powell (2010, PS 3) lists in the appendix of his book on what Writing should be became our provocation.

The original project and the subsequent analysis generated a framework that we have called the upsetter matrix. We used this matrix to produce two test projects; the first drew upon the knowledge of an experienced design educator to make the selections. The second was generated by Powell's provocation and utilised the random thing picker to select element options. The use of chance in the design of this second project provided an added layer of potential upset.

The process of project generation tested the matrix. It became clear that the framework could not specifically contain all the possibilities because there were simply too many. (Potentially this issue could be engaged through computational methods). For this experiment, there needed to be a practical categorisation of possibilities that could then be translated into the specifics of a brief. This was only the first draft of the matrix and subsequent development may produce a more finely crafted tool. Conversely, subsequent development may indicate that its usefulness resides in its crudity. One thing that the matrix does provide is the ability to have an overview of all components when you are in the process of project design. To lay out all the pieces and assemble them anew is a valuable approach. To assemble them using a structured method of random choice adds another opportunity to move the selection beyond the conventional…to upset or disturb the conventional. We intend to test both the matrix and projects generated by it in the Design Studio programme in 2019.

The upsetter brief proposed in this paper is not presented as a replacement of the conventional brief and does not in any way lessen its value. Rather it complements it in order to offer students or practitioners a wide array of contexts to respond to. Both convention and exception are essential in the shaping and enhancing of design abilities. The upsetter can be seen as a planned practice of non-conformism which in itself can only be an enriching experience.

If the intention of the architecture programme is to encourage creativity, critical thinking and reflection, to be applied to an architectural response to enhance the students' ability to design then it is obligatory for us as designers of the briefs to engage in parallel processes. The work we do as co-learners in the studio (in the academy and practice) needs to model those processes.

Acknowledgements

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