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From Post-Nineties Neglect To Contemporary Community Social Hub: Embedding The Curriculum In The Community

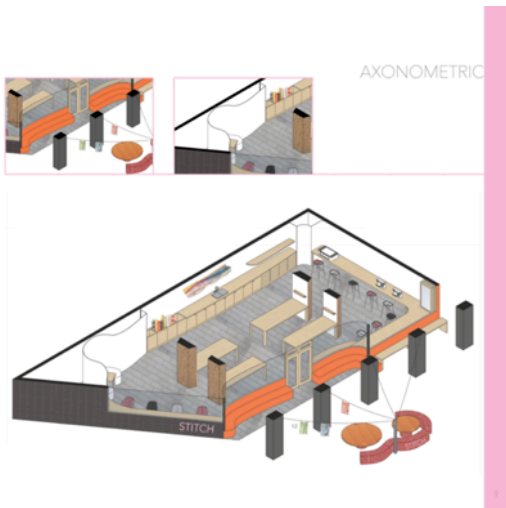
November 04, 2016

By Samantha Donnelly

'The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.' William James

One of the complexities of writing a studio project course outline is how to network highly creative thinking with ethical values, practical skill, political agency and a clear analysis of the site and intended function. . . and to pitch this to an audience of young, idealistic, tech savvy students who are, by second year, hell bent on “doing a real project”. These students want to have an impact on their immediate world. But this course aspired to show that their creativity could have a more broad impact. As educators, we rant about “student engagement” with the curriculum, without thinking about how to show students ways to engage communities and future stake holders with a big part of their future success as designers – selling ideas.

Design Practice 3: Translate, one of eight semester studios in the Honours degree course of Interior Architecture at UNSW, is a studio project specifically aimed at working through retail design. The overarching concept of “translate” is a way of bringing the students into a more theoretical understanding of design as an exchange or a shifting of objects, people and ideas. Translation provides a way of looking more critically at that moment of exchange, which creates a threshold in itself, a way of modelling space.



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Instead of a traditional studio course, where students design a traditional shop space in a logical retail zone, this course challenged the students to design with three very different notions of exchange - object, service and idea - on a site which was an impressive retail disaster. The site was a vacant shop in the Italian Forum Leichhardt, a commercial/residential complex modelled on a traditional Italian piazza, in Sydney’s Inner West. It had thrived in the late 1990’s, but has become a ghost town with a deserted landscape of empty restaurants and cafes (chairs and set tables still inside) and a misplaced fountain with a statue of Dante. This is a site steeped in political, cultural and social turmoil which has for many years distressed the community of Leichhardt.

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In only 12 weeks, students had designed a flagship store for Lego Architecture (object), a Maker

Space for Leichhardt Community (service) and a TEDx Talks space for the Inner West (idea). The underlying emphasis was that retail did not necessarily entail consumerism of objects. The value of service and thinking was explored spatially by students who were particularly interested in spaces of collaboration and retail as an event. The Lego Architecture Flagship store included areas for experimentation, testing out built forms, working with a specific restricted, more adult range of the beloved product in a space that was clearly geared for exhibitions. The maker space provided a good connection to the library service, and encouraged the community to meet and learn new technologies by making in a workshop environment. The TEDx Talks space was an extension of the existing TEDx talks event already held at the Opera House, bringing important discussions into a community network where it could have a different kind of impact. Each of these projects extended from the interior to the Piazza – negotiating the threshold between inside and outside, personal and community space.

Forum management embraced the studio from the outset. Empty retail spaces were made available to the students and an exhibition space provided for the end of semester exhibition. The site became an instant social event for the community.

During the first site visit, with 100 students mapping and analysing the Forum, we were approached by several passers-by who were thrilled to see life and activity and words like “resuscitation,” “hope” and “when can we see your ideas built?” confirmed that this project had become more than just another studio exploration. Forum residents, the Actors Centre Australia (ACA), a dramatic arts training facility located on the piazza level, were actively involved in studio work, encouraging students to design a transformable furniture element for the TEDx option. At this point, the project started to become “real.” Students embraced this challenge in various ways; transformable seating, landscape elements, sculptural shelters to fully operational refreshment counters and “rooms” which opened or closed according to need. Surprisingly, the exhibition did not attract the attention of local media or local government members, but conversations between the local community and the local library space has begun something powerful. With future studios to produce the transformable

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furniture element, the thinking work of this studio will become physical and the community will be able to evidence that this site is not a lost cause, but is a place for future community thinking thanks to a bunch of smart, enthusiastic students.

Samantha Donnelly is an Associate Lecturer in Interior Architecture at the University of New South Wales. She has spent many years spanning the multiple divides between tertiary education, architectural practice, painting, drawing and being a mother. She is currently researching the link between attention and the perception of space using William James' Principles of Psychology, in terms of how to translate this into course content for future studios.

 Samantha Donnelly

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