

Connecting Disciplines and Tracing an Educated Imagination: Biennale of Sydney Pavilions Design Summer Studio

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Multi-Disciplinary, Art, Architecture, Philosophy, Creativity, Imagination, Pavilion

ABSTRACT

In January 2010 the Architecture Program of the Faculty of the Built Environment at the UNSW hosted a design summer studio: 'Biennale of Sydney Pavilions' open to approximately thirty Masters students of architecture and fine arts. The studio took place twice a week for four weeks with a total of 48 hours. The purpose of this studio was to give the students the opportunity of designing a pavilion for the 17th Biennale of Sydney visitors, already affected by the display of many artworks in the Biennale, with specific spaces limited to contemplation, thinking and meditation. The pavilion, intended as the point of interaction between art, architecture and the natural beauty of the Sydney Harbour, would offer to Biennale visitors a moment for pause and reflection. The aim of the studio was to cultivate in the students an 'educated design imagination' through the integration of multiple disciplines in order to approach the design in a holistic way. Accordingly, the disciplinary background of the four lecturers/tutors involved in this studio included Art, Architecture and Philosophical Aesthetics. The paper traces the vital role of these respective disciplines taught in the design studio and attempts to gauge to what extent the

students will benefit from this multidisciplinary exposure. The term 'educated imagination' is borrowed from the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye's book *The Educated Imagination*, (1963)¹, where he distinguishes the way the sciences and the arts construct imagination from opposite ends. Frye suggests that science begins with the world as it is and from a rational and intellectual approach science turns to imagination. On the other hand, "art begins with the world we construct, not with the world we see. It starts with the imagination, and then works towards ordinary experience".²

INTRODUCTION

In 1973, the engineer Franco Belgiorno-Nettis created the Biennale of Sydney as an international exhibition of arts modeled on the Venice Biennale of Arts. Belgiorno-Nettis had the vision of breaking the isolation of Australia introducing a cultural event open to experimental and innovative art expressions, which would link Australia to the rest of the contemporary art world. When asked how a civil engineer ideated and financially supported an event of contemporary art, he answered:

As an engineer with a keen interest in science, I have always seen a clear link between science and art. They may appear on opposite sides of the fence, but they are very much a continuum. One of the world's greatest inspirations is Leonardo, a man of unlimited versatility. He was a great scientist and a great artist. Leonardo is at the apex of human endeavour and represents the best of human genius, art and design, engineering and construction. I like to believe that the Biennale of Sydney, like every Biennale in the world, links all these elements, introducing innovative technology and communication, as well as new ways of seeing the world³

Since these beginnings, the Biennale has successfully staged exhibitions of international significance, not least of which was the 1979 exhibition when Aboriginal art was included as contemporary (rather than ethnographic) art, marking a world first in this practice. Drawing on these various threads of connections within Australia and especially with art from other continents, the new artistic director David Elliot entitled the 17th Sydney Biennale: *The Beauty of Distance, Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*.

I. BACKGROUND TO THE BIENNALE OF SYDNEY

PAVILIONS

Following Belgiorno-Netti's idea of the Sydney Biennale which was inspired by the Venice Biennale, students had needed to reflect on the architectural form of the Padiglioni (Pavilions) at the Giardini (Gardens) in

Venice as the architectural precedent to analyze and use for their design of the Sydney Biennale Pavilions. In Venice's examples, each country and its cultural values and ideals have been represented through the architecture of the pavilion which, arguably, blurs the boundary between Art and Architecture. In relation to this students were therefore asked to consider whether the architecture is used as a container of art or the architectural form, the container itself, to be interpreted as art? Students were also asked to find other more recent examples of Pavilions, which can be associated with either of these ideas.

Additionally, students were asked to consider the significance of the Biennale's title 'The beauty of distance.' As distance can refer to a physical length measured in space or as a period of time, students had needed to engage the design of the pavilions by questioning the idea of timelessness versus ephemeral constructions (permanent or temporary architectural spaces?). The Venice pavilions, frozen in space (within the boundary of the Giardini) and time (still contemporary from the date of their realization), instil a sense of timelessness to complement the art. Examples within the Giardini of the Biennale in Venice (which in 2009 celebrated its 53rd Biennale) include Carlo Scarpa's 1954 Venezuela Pavilion, Alvar Aalto's 1955 Finnish Pavilion as well as Sverre Fehn's 1962 Nordic Countries Pavilion. As part of this, students were asked to think that the aim of Sydney Biennale Pavilions for them should be to focus not on the decoration of an urban space, but instead on the critical reflection of the pavilion as an instrumental space where art and architecture can make real changes within public spaces.

II. DETAILED BRIEF FOR THE SYDNEY BIENNALE

PAVILION SUMMER DESIGN STUDIO

A. The Project

The students' task was to carefully design a small 'beautiful' pavilion on one of the two selected sites for the 17th Biennale of Sydney venues (Royal Botanical Gardens close to the Opera House and Cockatoo Island) to celebrate Australian art, architecture and the natural beauty of Sydney Harbour. As the Biennale Director David Elliott pointed out in one of his interviews, "We can learn from the Aboriginal view of the world which is not based on consumerism or possession but on altruism and empathy"⁴, this project does not include the consumerism attitude of buying Biennale gadgets and does not include services like information desk, coffee shop, bar, restaurant or washrooms. It is assumed that these services are already included inside the Biennale venues.

For the student, the purpose of this pavilion was for them to create an alternative space limited to contemplation, thinking and meditation. The prescribed aim for each student had therefore been to creatively imagine an architectural space where national and international visitors already affected by the display of many artworks from the Biennale venues, would therefore be invited and encouraged to slow down their movements and meditate. Hence, students therefore were asked to consider, how a carefully designed architecture space might serve, as it were, to freeze time and create a special ambiance.

B. Insights from Art and Philosophy⁵:

Students were also asked to consider the following:

What are the aesthetic values of the Australian artwork (painting, sculpture, film/video) they have chosen to display?

What are the aesthetic values of the architecture space they wish to create?

What are the emotions they want the people to experience while moving through your pavilion or sitting/lay down in contemplation and appreciation of art, architecture and the surrounding landscape?

Is the aesthetic value based on formal harmonies of part and part, or parts and whole? Is aesthetic a choice of proportions and materials, of matching of form and content? Does aesthetic include a holistic approach? or what else might they consider when the task is to design an alternative pavilion? What is the meaning of aesthetics? How do they influence architecture?

III. DESIGN STUDIO OBJECTIVES

Students were asked to have:

- an ability to discern that the design of architectural spaces and volumes relate to the existing geographical and historical context, are based on a thorough understanding of architecture precedents and are influenced by ideas from other disciplines in particular from Art and Philosophy
- an ability to work creatively within and across disciplines, with each student learning from the insights of the other
- an ability to utilize research and analysis of diverse sources in an operative manner interpreting them through graphic as well as 3D model representation

- an ability to articulate a strategic and rigorous architectural position from its conceptual stage to a developed design with a careful attention to the choice of materials
- an awareness that architectural design is a synthesis of the multiplicity of factors that relate to and are included into the final design
- an ability to communicate a resolved design using a variety of methods as provided by Bernard Tschumi's "Operative Drawing".

Additionally, students were expected to show evidence of a basic aesthetic appreciation and dimension of architecture. For this, they were all required to show a gradual but increasing understanding of how the philosophical aesthetics learning experience can help them to define better what architecture is and how defining it can enhance their imaginative and creative faculties for making architectural works rather than mere buildings. In this regard, students were expected to reveal in both their written and presentational work evidence of a dimension of what makes an architecturally appropriate work for a Biennale pavilion.

IV. OUR REFLECTIONS OF THE DESIGN STUDIO AFTER THE COURSE ENDED

It can be generally accepted that architecture is a more structured discipline than either Art or Philosophy. In this sense, the brief respected a more conventional architectural process of structured sequences of stages, that is, from in-depth research, historical or geographical aspects, to an analysis of historical precedents before committing to any conceptual end result or preliminary schematic design. Yet, the disciplines of Art and

Philosophy were applied to the structuring of this course to enhance the more scientific and structured approach related to study architectural design specifics. In doing this, our endeavour as lecturers/tutors in architecture, art and philosophy, was to assess how and why the more rational/scientific approach of architectural design needs to be supported by other ways of addressing architectural design. By establishing different sets of teams - architect-architect, and architect-artist in the course we would therefore examine Northrop Frye's assumption that disciplines differently confront specific details of imagination, creativity and emotion—and in this regard we would examine the extent to which disciplinary attributes would inform a theoretical exchange, connection and integration between Art, Architecture and Philosophy within the summer design studio.

Based on our notion that the conceptual stage of an architectural design process is often considered the most important, difficult and 'challenging' for students to frame/define/imagine/create, we therefore attempted to implement a system that would impose the importance of Concept to generate the schematic design and developed design. This system was set out with site analysis, study of historical precedent, formulating and defining the concept of the design, schematic presentation and class discussion, developed final design and presentation which would require a careful detailed sectional perspective at the scale 1:20 to show the relation between horizontal and vertical surfaces, their relation with the natural light and the choice of material.

Yet instead of following a more conventional way of prescribing for the students a mimetic approach of emulating existing designs, we elected to place greater

focus on a more interpretative way of learning from architectural historical precedent examples which could lead to a greater imaginative forming of their concepts for their projects.

For us, this would necessitate bringing in the disciplines of Art and Philosophy in order to stimulate a more interpretative process over a mimetic one. In order to do this, we brought Philosophy in to stimulate and encourage a wider approach to making architecture since we felt in a sense that the application of philosophical ideas taken from Philosophy would invite deeper meditation particularly in forming conceptual as well as testing what gives power to the unification of ideas necessary to create better works of architecture. In addition to Philosophy, we also attempted to expose students to a more art historical approach in order to ground students in their awareness of the art historical context in which their design may especially address their choice of site and installation of works within their pavilions.

Moreover, in teaching this Course, we found that there was a particular problematic which especially surrounded the converging concept, namely “The Act of Realisation” by the student of the potential full materialization of their individual project which we deemed as being necessary prior to their final representation stage of their work. In fact, as part of the design objectives, we expected students to define an imaginative narrative for their pavilions related to the place and to a particular event which they imagined would take place inside the pavilion. Borrowing from the discipline of film and from the architect and theoretician Bernard Tschumi’s⁶ method of the ‘transcript’, we asked the students to translate their narrative for the events/activities and their relation with

the spaces into a storyboard. This was expressed through a series of interpretative vignettes-drawings “between the ‘architectural stage’ and the ‘script’ of activities which occur within it”.⁷

Although, the use of the storyboard within an architectural design studio is not new, what is new is the way in which students were asked to apply it with consideration to the other disciplines of Art and Philosophy. For example, we found that most of the students who already had an existing understanding of narrative, storyboarding the elements of their design strategy was an effective process for them within the set framework. In fact, they were able to imaginatively represent several forms of information simultaneously through a visual superimposition of activity and movement within an architectural space. In general the conceptual stage was communicated with intensity both at an abstract and representational level.

A successful example of ‘imaginative narrative’ from one of the students (B), revealed a good exposure to the diverse disciplines involved in the studio. The student experimented in his pavilion design with the adaptability of heritage buildings and with philosophical concepts of memorialisation and public art; bringing together history, geographical history, art and society successfully adapting the imaginative conceptual stage to a more developed design stage.

Further considerations will point out how some students were not able to move forward from the conceptual / preliminary design stage to a schematic / developed design stage. In fact, while a certain pair of students’ research at the early stage of their learning/planning for their design was strong (D and J), unfortunately it would result overall

in an underdeveloped design by the end of the Course. We found that this was because, although the visualisation of their project was reasonably adequate, their Realisation of their entire design was weak. In relation to what we mean by Realisation: Realisation relates to an extremely clear vision of how the project should look in its essence as a model and as a work in addition to how it is imagined it will look and fit within the space in which it is intended to be in. Therefore, the Realisation of a design means an overall clear understanding of how and why the design as an entity in its entirety alters the physical context in which it is placed. The Realisation of an architectural work therefore directly relates to the awareness within the student, of the overall meaning and significance of what they are creating for society historically, culturally and architecturally. 'Realisational' thinking therefore is the final stage of visualisation of the concept of the full work within the chosen site for the work. Consequently, their final design lacked the fullness of a successful design.

We also found that another pair of students (J and K), had also revealed a certain deficiency in terms of the 'visualisation' and overall 'Realisation' of their project. We would conclude from this that this had been because although we felt that their site analyses and historical precedents analysis were adequate, these students were not quite able to make a leap from their analysis into their first conceptual idea adopting a metaphorical interpretation for their design. In relation to this, it seemed to us that there are two points here to state. First, to examine the extent to which students used their research and analyses to define their concept; and second, how their translation of the embryonic stage of a conceptual idea would remain as a literal connection for them. Thus, the literal visual

connection results in a more one-dimensional design, while by contrast, the metaphorical approach would be open to a more educated and imaginative approach. Moreover, with regard to another student's design project (V), while a strong initial visualisation had appeared to ensue overall in her work, the overall final presentation of the design pavilion had been weak due to the fact that it had again lacked a strong Realisation of the final work, which needed to be produced. (See above for a definition of Realisation.)

Upon reflection, although the Course on the whole was successful, we had also found to our disappointment, that the stages which had concerned the students' need to visualise and 'Realise' their concepts were often deficient. As such, in future teaching practice we are proposing to fill this void in the students' understanding in regard to what we understand is necessary for designing and producing excellent architectural works by teaching students how to actively Realise their design works much better before their final presentation stage. As such, we will be proposing in our future endeavours to fill in the missing link in this chain of understanding and creativity within the uneducated imagination of the students.

Overall, it must be pointed out that we found that students which followed the multi-disciplinary approach through Philosophy and Art History in tandem with the architectural process related to designing a pavilion for art were better equipped to deal with the specific criteria that we had prescribed for the Course as their final presentation were of a superior architectural dimension.

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NOTES

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- ¹ Frye, Northrop, 1963. *The Educated Imagination*, The Massey Lectures – Second Series Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Toronto CBC PUBLICATIONS.
- ² Frye, 1963. *The Educated Imagination*, p. 6.
- ³ Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, 1973. *The Biennale of Sydney*. Published in the 2000 Biennale of Sydney catalogue.
- ⁴ See the web site www.Biennaleofsydney.com
- ⁵ Texts used for the philosophical aspects of the Course included Hume, D., "Of the Standard of Taste" in E. Miller (ed.) *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, Indianapolis: Liberty, 1965, Scruton, R., *Aesthetics of Architecture*, 1979.
- ⁶ Tschumi Bernard, 1981. *The Manhattan Transcripts: Theoretical Projects*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- ⁷ Tschumi Bernard, 2001. "Operative Drawing" in Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley eds. *The Activist Drawing. Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England.

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