

# CHEAD

council for higher education in art and design

## **CHEAD PROVOCATION PAPER A CONTEXT FOR NEW SPACES IN ART & DESIGN**

### **A NEW CONTEXT**

Art & Design is moving in new directions with greater hybridity. The most creative contemporary practitioners no longer confine themselves solely to the tools and processes traditionally associated with their discipline. The work of Hella Jongerius for example fuses innovative manufacturing processes with traditional craft; Marc Newson incorporates rapid prototyping within traditional design processes and Hussein Chalayan works freely across disciplines creating diverse conceptual outputs. In 2008, the Museum of Modern Art New York exhibition, 'Design and the Elastic Mind', explored this further by focusing on the ability of creatives to 'grasp momentous advances' in nano-technology, science and human behavior through translating those advances into functional human centered designed objects and systems. Simultaneously we are seeing the growing culture of design do-it-yourself (DIY), where self-authorship in design has emerged and where design is participatory as a social communal event with like-minded individuals in the counter culture of design.

### **NAVIGATORS**

The creative practitioner now engages in a whole new world of participatory engagement, becoming navigators, *'designers find themselves at the centre of an extraordinary wave of cross-pollination'* (Antonelli and Aldersey-Williams 2008, p.24) dealing with open ended customized solutions, where the user in effect takes a more participatory role. Sociological shifts to participatory practice in utilizing social media has also enabled learners to become multimodal, strategically working across distributed knowledge economies where learning by default is a social process. We can see this in the work of the 'makers lab' (<http://www.od10beta.info/dmy-maker-lab/>) highlighting an open design process of engagement.

Student as 'navigator' is something that educators are struggling to deal with and respond to, often bounded by the curricula we inherited. Art & Design is now a pluralistic practice and students are increasingly comfortable working within public environments due to the changing nature of their practice and their communication tools. However, as educators we are struggling to respond to this within our learning and teaching environments and be more open to the idea of the social, the lived experience. As Wenger considers

*... what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? What if we assumed that learning is as much part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at it? (Wenger 1998, p.3)*

### **INTER-DISCIPLINARY TO MULTI-DISCIPLINARY**

In the last decade, Art & Design education has also seen a move to more inter-disciplinary activity set within cognate disciplines; fashion combining with textiles; product with three dimensional design. However, we are now working at a much more integrated cross-disciplinary active way using their abilities to become highly skilled interpreters, dealing with complex problems. In Design and Elastic Mind, Antonelli refers to designers as 'intermediaries' or 'well rounded agents of change' (Antonelli and Aldersey-Williams 2008, p.24) and comments 'how the figure of the designer is changing from form giver to fundamental interpreter' (Antonelli and Aldersey-Williams 2008, p.17). When we talk of Art & Design becoming more 'social' we can see it engaging and building new relations and relationships, this seems to be a natural evolution but as educators how are we working with our students to explore this further?



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## **THE RE-FRAMING OF PRACTICE – ART SCHOOL IN CONTEXT**

Driven by changes in the socio-cultural, economic, political and technological, and by the perceived danger of growing tired and self-referential, there is a need to re-make and re-model current Art & Design education in our schools. Significantly, there is a desire to affect an educational culture, which is truly flexible, responsive, adaptable, and where practice becomes more integral to our lives. This necessitates enhancing multi-disciplinary working practices and collaborative relationships. We also seek to positively empower education through forging a strong identification with its locale, with emphasis on regeneration and the importance of the transformational effect we can bring. Our focus becomes the value of our practice socially, culturally and economically, and how it can regenerate and enhance our lives.

Re-framing responds to specific concerns both practically and theoretically:

- *how Art & Design is diverging and further becoming a multi-disciplinary participatory practice*
- *seeing Art & Design as an active demonstrable process for enhancing lives and a social enabler*
- *the need for new pedagogical approaches centred on the emergence of 'social learning', 'social media' within 'open source' distributed knowledge economies*
- *the importance of external partnership building and how creative practitioners can regenerate and support the creative economy of the region*
- *social changes in the 'value' of Art & Design education.*

## **RE-MAKE, RE-THINK, RE-MODEL**

In view of the social and cultural changes outlined, we need to reframe what education should be, clearly this has many implications. To conceive of a new physical space, we need to understand that there are other factors that need to be in place at the same time. There are three significant strategic directions that are needed to facilitate the changes:

- *repositioning of the cultural identity of the art school*
- *radical restructuring of curricula*
- *radical re-modelling of physical space*

An art school is a community and a laboratory. Our business is to encourage creative risk taking, to question boundaries and challenge the conventional. Art school is a place where language is extended and dialogue developed. Art school is a bridge between the acceptable, and the possible, between what is and what if.

By once again positioning ourselves with our towns and cities as active engagers, the wider environment becomes the playground of our staff and students, accessing and embracing a breadth of external knowledge and ideas to work with and be influenced by. The art school is an asset to any city or town and needs to be understood in these terms.

Art Schools can help to regenerate regional as well as national economies through small business enterprise and provide a research partner where social issues are explored and community identities are enabled.

## **COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

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A new physical environment is needed that allows open and fluid use of resources. Carefully considered facilities are needed to enable us to reinforce curriculum innovation through cross-disciplinary and collaborative working. The 'new school' houses a shared central heart to the accommodation. By challenging staff to move beyond their disciplines and share expertise they became collaborators in designing the student experience, focusing more on the learning process rather than expected outcomes. For some this is liberating, for others it is more demanding. As a team we have to create a structure and a physical environment where we can take substantial risks. Creative risks that are balanced in the student's interest by rewarding risk taking and focusing equally on process than on product. Students then articulate their journeys through bespoke online social networks. Through their reflection we see the progress they have made, the ownership they have taken of their own learning and confidence they have developed in their own practice.

## **FROM THE ATELIER TO THE LABORATORY**

The digital age has ensured that the edges of our disciplines are more blurred than ever before. The computer has encouraged a more democratic structure and the old hierarchies of art, design and craft have been eroded. Digital technology has enabled us as practitioners to link together the established technologies we already have, as well as providing a new invisible material for us to 'craft'. We are much more likely to work in mixed discipline teams, engaging specific skills as and when we need them as we focus on the underlying ideas that fuel our work. The nature of our teams and the relationships within them has also changed and the 'master class' is being replaced by the 'lab'.

The Lab model is usually based in a postgraduate programme. It is a multi-tiered project linked to professionals working in the region: design studios; city galleries; regional politicians and researchers. The core of the model involves students working closely with external partners on current 'live projects' connecting with the region's major public initiatives or issues. Taking the form of regular group meetings, presentations and debates around current thinking, the Lab facilitates collaboration, freethinking and inquiry in challenging paradigms for addressing change and development. With students drawn from across all programmes, the skills, knowledge and breadth of experience brought to the Laboratory of ideas, gives it a richness unseen elsewhere. This concept of inquiry and development of cognitive skills is encouraged by Schleicher (cited in Design Commission 2011). She points out:

*'Educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations. Education today is much more about ways of thinking which involve creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making.'*

To achieve this, academics have become instigators and facilitators, developing networks, negotiating partnerships. Their expertise as specialist practitioners in their field has been re-directed into designing experiences and forging relationships that enable students to behave as navigators, negotiators, activists and creative practitioners with a social conscience who can respond creatively to new challenges and situations.