THE MILLBANK ATLAS
:
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Chelsea College of Art and Design
The Millbank Atlas is an ongoing collaboration that doesn’t mind being surprised by its own work. Staff and student researchers come together with local residents and others to bring the Atlas into being. Together we trace and retrace the neighbourhood of Chelsea College of Arts, a constituent college of University of the Arts London (UAL), by creating diverse 2D and 3D maps that are open to unexpected developments, the likes of which are discussed below.

In the academic year of 2016 - 2017, students of BA (Hons) Interior and Spatial Design based in the studio affectionately dubbed ‘Chelsea Local’ used practice-based research to create and facilitate cartographic experiments. These featured in a week-long exhibition that was accompanied by a public events programme, both of which were hosted in the Cookhouse Gallery at Chelsea College of Arts (21 - 28 January 2017). We have chosen to disseminate this iteration of the project in keeping with familiar notions of an atlas as a collection of maps. The ones documented here all featured in the exhibition and are accompanied by annotations based on reflections by their student-cartographers. These short texts begin to tap the project’s diversity and scope.

When we set out to write this curatorial statement, the aim we had in mind was largely one of describing our collaborative cartographic approach with reference to an Argentinian mapping collective whose aspiration we share. Their practice is committed to mobilising the creative and political potential of graphic and artistic devices to challenge ideologically elitist organisations of territory.¹ Iconolasistas posit collective mapping as a critical means for coordinating complex territorial viewpoints to support transformational practices for community-based change.² For sure, this is also at the heart of Chelsea Local. But tectonic shifts in institutions of higher education that track with shrinkage of the public sphere prompted us to move our focus in this statement onto a more pressing concern: how the knowledge that is co-produced through our studio in general, and the Atlas in particular, seeks to mobilise research in the service of our local community in a spirit of civic responsibility.

UAL’s statement of identity and commitment asserts that: ‘We uphold the values of social justice and environmental stewardship through our teaching and research, as well as in the way we live, work and conduct our operations.’³ This provides a useful point of departure for thinking through the civic responsibility of the Atlas in several respects. To begin with, and like many with a stake in higher education - staff, students and the general public - we lament the drift of universities from civic to economic engagement in keeping with the ‘knowledge economy’ and the privatisation of education writ large.⁴ In the case of Chelsea Local’s 2017 - 2018 cohort, only three are home/EU students. Eighteen are from overseas (sixteen from China, one from Lebanon and the other from Palestine). The £17,750 in tuition paid by each international student and the £9,000 by each home/EU one is increasingly essential to support the University in the face of cuts in public funding. At the same time, growing cohorts require the renewal and development of UAL’s infrastructure. With shrinking space allocations and one-on-one contact, staff, students, administration and management are all challenged to innovate creative ways of putting UAL’s values of social justice, environmental stewardship and others into practice.

Although it was not conceived as such, Chelsea Local is purpose built to meet this challenge. While the College serves as a base, our classrooms are the neighbourhoods of Millbank.

²ibid., 6.
The studio was in fact established primarily in response to the College’s move from its former location on Manresa Road in Chelsea (SW3) to its current one in Millbank. Today it calls Westminster home, with the campus positioned on the banks of the River Thames beside Tate Britain and between the Houses of Parliament, the meeting place of the House of Commons and the House of Lords; and MI6, the foreign intelligence agency of the British Government. Since 2005, the College has occupied the grounds and buildings of what were formerly the Royal Army Medical College. This was constructed back in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from bricks reclaimed from the Millbank Prison which stood on the site before. In important ways, the desire to embed the College in both this history and the complex context of Westminster as a specific borough of London has motored Chelsea Local, with the studio self-organising to take the lead in the College’s programme of community engagement.

As the studio’s core project, the Atlas understands Millbank as comprised of reciprocal relations between the College and surrounding businesses, residential blocks, civil society groups, transportation links and other amenities, infrastructure and further aspects of this built and natural environment. At stake in this place-based approach is a commitment to civic education in the service of civil society. Significantly, however, we do not perceive Chelsea Local as an end in itself but a springboard for community-engaged action the world over. Ideally, it will come to comprise a node in a network that links together diverse projects driven by a sense of civic responsibility that are initiated by practitioner-researchers, including alumni of our course, who share our commitment to social justice. As John Goddard makes the point in a report for NESTA, ‘While [the civic university] operates on a global scale, it realises that its location helps to form its identity and provides opportunities for it to grow and help others, including learners, businesses and public institutions to do so too.’ For us as tutors of Chelsea Local, these opportunities wrap with fostering in our students a complex understanding of local, regional, national and global relations. This hinges on the capacity to connect empathically with others, both in our immediate communities and, crucially, beyond.

Many work and study at UAL because of the cosmopolitan experience this education in art and design affords. When asked at the beginning each year why they choose to pursue their studies in Interior and Spatial Design through our particular studio, students often declare their interest in not only living and learning in London but weaving these two activities together. They readily grasp that the practice of engaging the communities surrounding the College provides a portal for appreciating the lived experience of London in a more meaningful way. Charged with the responsibility of preparing our students to work in design-related activity across diverse fields and around the world, we support this engagement in the spirit of what Albert Dzur terms ‘democratic professionalism’. This identifies the professional as actively involved in facilitating lay participation at a time when the general public is often marginalised in the face of technocratic and bureaucratic decision-making. Democratic professionalism brings diverse types of knowledge to bear on social issues with the aim of stakeholders working together to strengthen a more robust public culture of democracy.⁶

The particular approach to democratic professionalism that we aim to cultivate in Chelsea Local values practice-based research. We encourage our students to not only develop a research sensibility that supports their specific concerns by developing skills and techniques as foundational to their practice going forward. We also encourage them to adopt the identity of practice-based researchers by actively engaging in the ethics and aesthetics of their individual and shared knowledge production. This tracks with our own hyphenated identities as practitioner-researchers who are deeply invested in transformational pedagogies of art and design. Our approach also
proactively aligns research and teaching through curricula. While this is often perceived as ‘bringing’ research to BA and MA programmes, Chelsea Local instead insists on the studio itself as a viable context for practice-based research. Here ‘research’ with a lowercase r - as in finding things out - provides a stepping stone for ‘Research’ with an uppercase R - as in generating original contributions to knowledge. This results in a process that is tentative, messy and ‘live’. New knowledge develops through practice and is readily applied while working in the field before being written up, exhibited or otherwise disseminated as research outcomes for the benefit of a community of practice. Granted, this hybrid approach spanning research and Research may be risky, but it is also urgent. Tapping the matter of conscience at stake in this wager, Michael D Higgins’ reflections are worth quoting in full:

Universities are both apart from a part of society. They are apart in the sense that they provide a critically important space for grasping the world as it is and - importantly - for reimagining the world as it ought to be. The academic freedom to pursue truth and let the chips fall where they may isn’t a luxury - in fact it is a vital necessity in any society that has the capability for self-renewal. But universities are also part of our societies. What’s the point unless the accumulated knowledge, insight and vision are put at the service of the community? With the privilege to pursue knowledge comes the civic responsibility to engage and put that knowledge to work in the service of humanity (emphasis added).7

Chelsea Local responds to Higgins’ question by imagining itself, not so much as serving another community, but actively constituting the Millbank community. This provides a critical context for working with other locals of Millbank to address community concerns. In the spirit of live projects based on learning through social engagement, the knowledge generated in our studio cannot be anticipated in advance. It instead accretes and iterates in response to opportunity, chance, desire, capacity and, importantly, relationship building and the acquisition of new skills.

Drawing on the College’s long tradition of art education, this process begins with what the Artist Placement Group has termed ‘not knowing’ as an ‘epistemology of ignorance’.8 This state of mind can inoculate us against taking too much for granted too soon. We discourage students of Chelsea Local from googling or accessing other sources of information that are mediated by screens and encourage them instead to experience the neighbourhood directly by walking its streets and engaging with locals. This begins with participant observation inspired by artist Vito Acconci’s Following Piece (1969). This year, the studio’s first peripatetic exercise was to inconspicuously track a fellow pedestrian for a few blocks, paying close attention to how they moved and where they focused their attention. Students were also encouraged to reflect on how this following enabled them to differently experience a context that they may otherwise take for granted. For many, this simple shift in perception prompted them to see the College’s environs through more specific details. In a small way, identifying with the person they followed may also have encouraged the empathetic understanding that is so crucial for designers seeking to work with and meet the needs of others.

Whether a walk through Millbank or a hand-drawn line on a piece of paper, we underscore in Chelsea Local that design begins with organising material and experience. This makes design less something that one starts to do further to training as a designer and instead something we are all already doing. Our former colleague Ezio Manzini has termed this ‘diffuse design’.9

We are fascinated by how it provides the foundation for more expert forms as we acquire skills and techniques for sensuous practice that key into the visual, audible, olfactory, tactile and other kinds of insight.

Our interest in mapping as a way to ‘make the complex accessible, the hidden visible, the unmappable mappable’,¹⁰ to borrow Janet Abrams and Peter Hall’s neat phrase, was at the heart for our studio brief for the 2016 - 2017 academic year. Titled, ‘Drawing Together’, it started with various exercises like the following one discussed above to ‘draw out’ facts and figures alongside hidden stories and histories of the neighbourhood, understood as both a site and a community. With their projects established, students built on their personal experience of Millbank by ferreting through archives and surfing the internet, interviewing and surveying locals, generating reflective analysis and 2D and 3D cartographic experiments, presenting these in one-to-one and group critiques. In the process, they learned how to learn about the way we live, work and conduct our operations through community architectures that fan out across the built environment and interpersonal networks. While highly contingent on the one hand, the methods used to bring this knowledge into being are often transferable, making this foundational to practice-based research.

While there is no question that design through community engagement is a broad and diverse field, it is useful to remember that for many students of Chelsea Local, the maps they produced for the Atlas were their first foray into this complex way of working. While the documentation and annotations that feature in this boxed catalogue provide useful summaries of their respective projects, what this coupling elides is all the messy learning that took place in the field. This unfolded as the students collaborated with people living and working around the college, thanks to invaluable introductions and support from community activist Wilfried Rimensberger. The Atlas unfolded through walks, meetings, appointments, phone calls, emails and numerous other exchanges that propelled the body of research that is distilled here. The richness of this interpersonal exchange - so integral to diverse and resilient communities - outstrips what we can account for in these brief curatorial remarks. Suffice to say that moving forward, alumni of this studio, residents and other co-researchers on the Atlas as well as Chelsea College (as both a pillar in the local community and an institution of higher learning) are all enmeshed in an ongoing collaboration. It takes as its mandate reorienting traditional norms of design education towards more participatory epistemology, collaborative practice-based research, local impact, a mixed culture of expert, lay and other knowledges¹¹ and a combination of ad hoc and long-term strategising. In this way, and in keeping with UAL’s commitment, Chelsea Local aims to uphold the values of social justice and environmental stewardship through the studio’s teaching and research as it critically engages in the ways we live, work and conduct our operations.

When framed as a method for understanding our place in the world and how we reproduce this through our activity, the Atlas outstrips its significance as a locally-engaged project. Overarching Chelsea Local is a sense of lived experience as distributed across myriad transactions, and that better understanding the interdependence of this exchange can result in a richer experience of everyday life. In the spirit of the civic university, conscientiously co-producing with the stakeholders involved can lead to more equitable and exciting futures.
