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Citation:

CORAZZO, James (2020). In the midst of things: a spatial account of teaching in the design studio. In: ALMENDRA, Rita and FERREIRA, Joao, (eds.) Research & Education in Design: People & Processes & Products & Philosophy. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Research and Education in Design (REDES 2019), November 14-15, 2019, Lisbon, Portugal. Schipholweg, The Netherlands, CRC Press, Taylor & Francis, 93-100. [Book Section]

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In the midst of things: a spatial account of teaching in the design studio

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The role of the material space of the studio is underarticulated in design pedagogy, despite the studio being distinctive and central to design education. This underarticulation represents challenges when defending space and its occupation, designing new studio spaces and for those interested in ways in which the material space of the studio can enhance learning experiences. In this paper, I argue that spatial accounts of learning and teaching can begin to address this underarticulated and under-researched area of design education. Specifically, this paper develops spatial accounts by focusing on design tutors' experiences and practices of teaching in the studio. Using ethnographic mapping and interviews with design tutors to show embodied and spatial accounts of teaching in the design studio offer new lenses with which to understand design education teaching practices.

Keywords: studio; design education; space; sociomaterial; design pedagogy;

Introduction

This short paper investigates the educational design studio, not as is typically encountered – a cultural ideal, rather it looks to the educational studio as a socio-spatial phenomenon. This argument for a socio-spatial lens is underpinned by two observations. First, despite the central position the studio occupies in design education (Orr and Shreeve 2017) the studio as a material resource is becoming increasingly precarious in an era of higher education managerialism and massification (UK, AUS, US). And, although the literature on studio-based design pedagogy continues to grow, little of it directly addresses the role of material space and its contribution to learning. Second, drawing on a sociomaterial perspective, I will argue for the ways socio-spatial accounts of design education can enrich our understanding of how teaching and learning happens.

To address both observations there is a need to better articulate the role of the material space of the studio. Noting such an articulation would be necessarily complex and beyond the scope of this short paper, I will instead address an aspect of this gap in the literature. Design tutors' experiences and practices of teaching in the studio (Corazzo 2019).

The specific aim of this study is to develop a spatial account of teaching in the studio. I will begin by defining the studio (a term that has multiple meanings in education). I will then move on to discuss the theoretical framework. Here I outline the necessity of a sociomaterial approach as the only means to get a purchase on the relations between material space, teaching and learning. I will then briefly describe the methodological challenges for gathering and analysing data in ways that keep the social and the material co-present. Finally, as this work-in-progress, I will share some preliminary results.

Context

What is the studio?

The studio is a space where students engage in the process of making alongside, or under the guidance of, an 'expert' tutor (Schon 1987). Although the studio takes many forms, core features can be identified: project-based learning, learning-by-doing, the use of material space, and a tendency to demand physical and temporal immersion. As Orr and Shreeve (2017: 15) note, "[s]tudio education is not delivered. Studio education is forged" and this serves to underline both the transformational intent of the studio and its core purpose; to develop proto-artists and proto-designers.

Although the concept of the studio is broadly shared in art, design and architecture education, the term 'studio' can mean more than one thing. Schon's (1987) learning constructs of the studio is a useful analytic

lens for identifying the different, but overlapping and related meanings (see Figure 1). In this study, I predominantly focus on the studio as a physical space and the studio as a mode of teaching and learning.

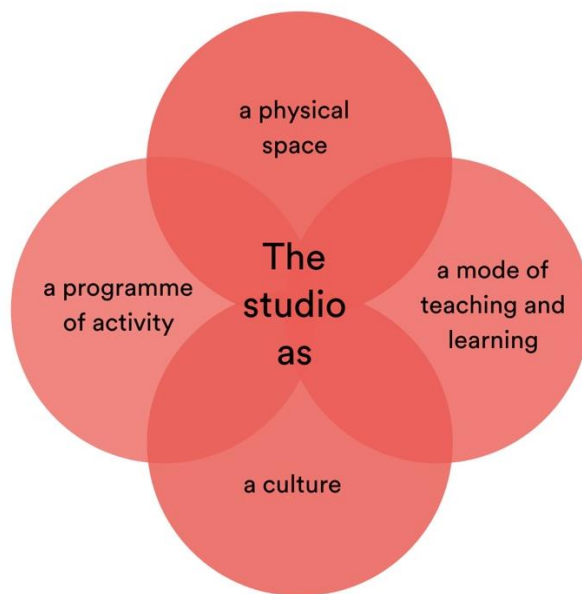


Figure 1: based on Schon (1987) learning constructs of the studio

Precarious Studio

In its ideal form, studio education is predicated on small class sizes, large spaces for inhabitation, around the clock access, the permanent display of work-in-progress and specialist resources (Boiling, Siegel, Smith and Parrish 2013). Thus, studio education is often viewed as resource intensive and expensive when compared with many Higher Education (HE) disciplines. Consequently, in an increasingly marketised HE system (UK), studio education has come under greater scrutiny.

In parallel, the continuing expansion of HE has rendered the studio ideal of a distinct workspace for each student a mostly redundant concept in design education (Marshalsey 2015). Similar issues have been noted in the US (Boling, Schwier, Gray, Smith, & Campbell 2016). The twin pressures of financial efficiencies and expanding student numbers have led to sustained concerns about the impact on disciplinary teaching and learning models (Boddington & Boys 2011; Harrison & Hutton 2014; Rodgers & Jones 2017).

Despite these sustained concerns and perceived threats to studio-based education, educators and researchers have continued to struggle when articulating the contribution of studio space to teaching and learning. As critics have noted (Mewburn 2012; Vyas and Nijholt 2012; Corazzo 2019), existing accounts of the studio tend to underplay its role as a material and spatial entity. Although, it should be noted, this is typical of a broader 'spatial lacuna' in educational research (Elkington and Bligh 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Realist Perspective

Given the importance and centrality bestowed upon the studio in design education, it is perhaps even more important such a gap is addressed. The gap prevails, in part, because many of the social theories deployed by educational researchers attend to the human dimension of teaching and learning. As Orlikowski (2007:1436) succinctly puts it “[l]anguage matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. But there is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter”.

Where the spatial dimensions of social activity are considered, space is commonly treated as an environment in which social activity takes place, rather than being integral to its occurrence (Giddens 1979). As such, material space becomes an invisible backdrop for the complexity and vibrancy of social space. In turn, such a perspective renders material space as a 'passive container for social action' (McGregor 2004: 350).

The conception of space as a container tends to dominate discussions. In this 'realist perspective' patterns of space and material entities are seen to enable or constrain particular types of human activities. In this view, space has an essence. It can be designed as open, flexible and innovative, qualities which, when harnessed by those within it, can develop 'capacities in students for the twenty-first century' (Mulcahy, Cleveland & Aberton 2015: 578).

Mulcahy, Cleveland & Aberton (2015) argue such a view is problematic because it operates in a predominantly singular direction, and implies a causality that is difficult to prove. Furthermore, it leaves the questions of how change happens unanswered, and while purporting to account for the role of space in learning, it does so by actually separating teaching and learning practices from physical spaces (Mulcahy, Cleveland & Aberton 2015). This separation, in turn, frames the relations between space and learning as instrumental – predictable, causal and stable and sustains an unrealistic and ineffectual paradigm for thinking about space and learning (McGregor 2004; Mulcahy 2006; Cleveland & Aberton 2015; Acton 2017; Bligh 2019).

The separation of space and learning is, according to (Sorenson 2009), symptomatic of a general 'blindness' towards how educational practices are effected by materials. As is typified in the realist enabling/disabling perspective, materials are considered to be things in support of education. However, Sorenson (2009) argues educational practices actually get done by a combination of the social (humans) and the material (non-humans). In other words, humans may use materials and space, but the spatial and material may also 'use humans' and influence educational practices.

Relational Perspective

Breaking with the dominant realist perspective on space, a relational perspective focuses simultaneously on the social and the material dimensions of educational settings. The social and the material are joined to form the sociomaterial. It is considered a relational perspective because the attention is not on the social or material as separate entities, but on the relations between the social and the material.

A sociomaterial approach has the potential to offer ways of understanding how space and learning are generated together (Decuyper & Simons 2016) and considers the ongoing mutual entailment of human and non-human (Sorenson 2009). As such, it offers ways to explore “encounters between space and its occupation” (Boys 2011: 51). In this sociomaterial approach, space doesn't happen in advance – simply waiting and ready to be used, rather space and the social are generated together (Mulcahy, Cleveland & Aberton 2015). Space is not “viewed as a container within which the world proceeds... space is seen as a co-product of those proceedings” (Thrift 2003: 96).

This view, argues Boys (2011), means space and the social are “inseparable and interlocked, dynamically informing and influencing each other” (Boys 2011: 50–51), space and its use is mutually constituting. As Mulcahy, Cleveland & Aberton (2015: 590) argue, the space should be thought of as a verb rather than a noun: “as something we do (a matter of encounter), rather than something we have (a new learning environment, a finished design) affords acknowledgement of the multiplicity and mutability of spatial and pedagogic practices”.

So, could such a theoretical perspective provide us with the conceptual tools to attend to the relations between the spatial and social dimensions in the educational settings of the studio? Acton (2017: 1442) has argued for such an approach in education:

The benefit of taking a sociomaterial approach to spatial research is that it carefully illuminates the junctures, tensions and lived practice of spatial-social relationships. It allows attention to focus on embodied learning and teaching, the synergies between place and people, the relations between the imagined affordances implicit in infrastructure design and construction, and the experienced realities of the people who inhabit those spaces in practice.

METHODOLOGY

Having outlined a theoretical framework that considers space and learning as mutually co-constituting, I now turn to the specifics of this study – design tutors' experiences and practices of teaching in the studio. This study presented a three-fold methodological challenge: i) the taken for granted and tacit nature of teaching in the studio; ii) the difficulties of articulating the relations between space and teaching/learning; iii) lacking the time and resources to undertake direct ethnography.

Graphic Elicitation

These challenges prompted a decision to use graphic elicitation. In brief, graphic elicitation involves the use of drawings (created by researchers or participants) together with interviews to elicit participants' experiences and understanding (Copeland and Agosto 2012). Graphic elicitation occupies a 'hinterland' between language and the graphical. This hinterland is essential because of the focus it places on the relations between the drawing/diagram and what is said. As Pink (2006) notes, this is not a purely visual process; the visual is interpreted within an interview context, the meaning is made in the relations between the visual and the verbal.

In addition to opening up a hinterland of meaning-making, proponents argue graphic elicitation can have several benefits over traditional qualitative interview processes. These include: memory recall, seeing the normal in new ways (Banks 2001), attending to the multiplicity of experiences that are easily expressed in spoken or written language (Pink 2006) and supporting participants to express complex and abstract notions (Copeland and Agosto 2012).

This study draws directly on aspects of an approach used by Nolte-Yupari (2017) who deployed graphic elicitation and map making to research new art teachers' use of their classrooms. For this study, participants were asked to draw a map of the studio they had taught in that day. Participants were then asked to re-enact the movements and journeys they made in the studio throughout the day by drawing lines – "a gestural reenactment of journeys actually made" (Ingold, 2007: 84). Participants were interviewed while they drew. The map was used to ask questions and elicit experiences, stories and behaviours of teaching in a studio. This process was filmed with audio (see figure 2).

This study focused on tutors working on a large undergraduate graphic design programme (approx. 100 student per year). Tutors were purposively sampled to include a mix of teaching experience, gender and different years (and therefore different studios). The hand-drawn maps and interviews were undertaken at the end of a teaching day and in the same studio where the teaching had taken place (see figure 3).

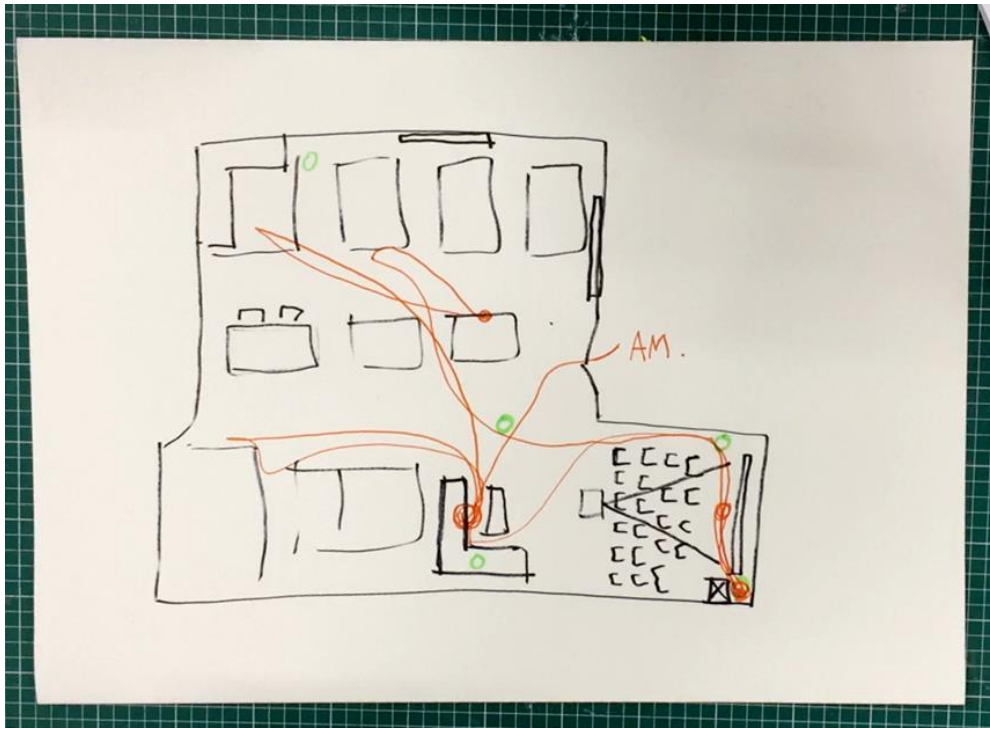


Figure 2 Participant Map



Figure 3 The interview in situ

Analysis

Analysis of data was undertaken by watching the video with audio and annotating the participants map of the studio. Here, deliberate efforts were made to co-locate verbal extracts with space (see figure 4). The verbal extracts were re-read a number of times and coded. Following this, tentative categories were generated by merging codes. All the while, attention was made to the body, tools, spaces, activities and encounters.

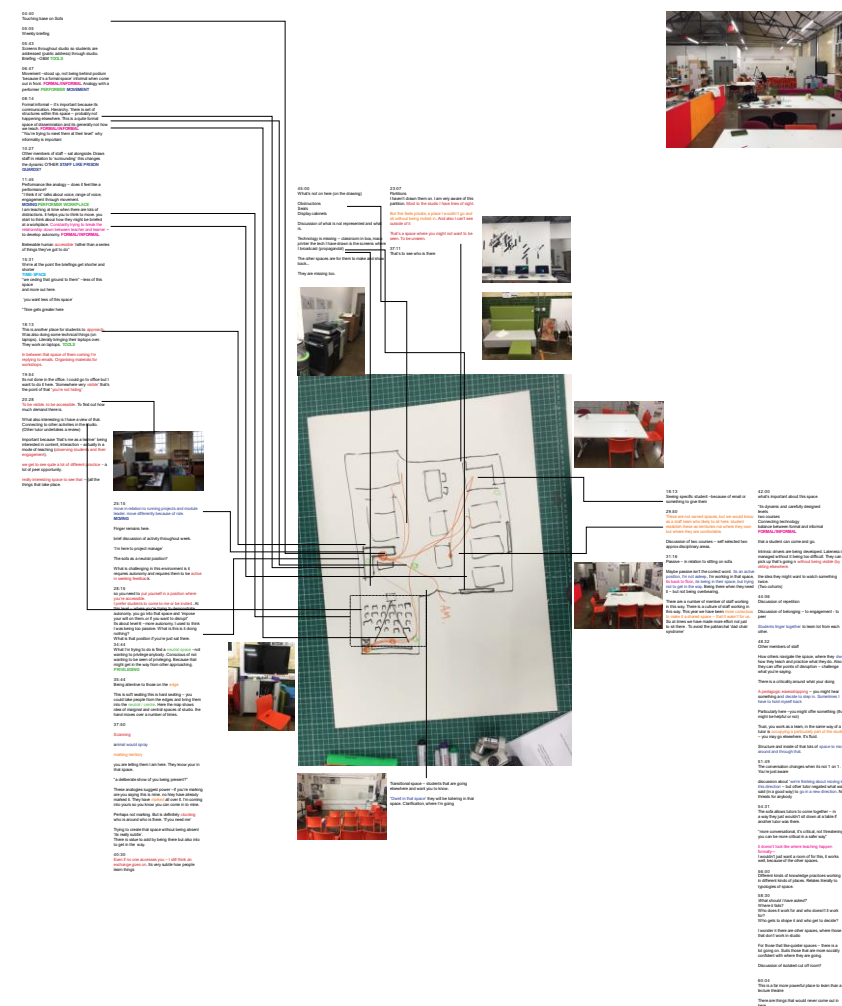


Figure 4 Visual Analysis

RESULTS + CONCLUSION

At the time of writing stage, five participant talk and draw interviews have been conducted and preliminary analysis on two of these has begun. Five nascent categories have emerged from the analysis: bodies-in-relation, visibilities, territories, informalities, and mutabilities. As way of a conclusion, I will briefly outline each.

Bodies-in-relation

The ethnographic mapping and drawing has worked to highlight a 'bodily pedagogy'; movement, body position and verticality (sitting or standing) are part of a repertoire of studio teaching. The use of the body to signal and shape particular types of encounter; in relation to how 'autonomy' is developed, encouraged, nurtured and maintained.

Visibilities (see and be seen)

Analysis reveals a conscious 'signalling' by tutors of their presence in the studio – to 'see and be seen'. Particular 'vantage points' were adopted to enable this behaviour. Even when tutors were not engaged in direct dialogue, there was a tendency to notice, clock, and observe the presence and activities of others.

Perhaps because of this omni-visibility, tutors saw partitions as problematic, and there seemed to be an ongoing, but subtle, tussle between tutors keeping the studio open plan to enable lines of sight in all directions and some students erecting partitions and attempting to partially or fully evade these sightlines.

Territories

A temporal dimension emerged, participants discussed the ways in which the year unfolded by 'literally ceding ground to them [students] in terms of less tutor-controlled spaces'. This has been evoked in relation to 'their areas' and them coming into 'our areas', but also attempts to dispel these territories and make the studio a 'home from home'.

Informalities

Participants in both their use and accounts of space appeared to spend considerable time shifting 'formalities' into 'informalities.'. From choosing not to stand behind a lectern, to the deliberate use of a sofa to conduct informal tutorials.

Mutabilities

Specific material entities in studios take on highly mutable forms. For example, a sofa in the studio that is on one hand keeping with a 21st century learning space/and or a trope one might expect to see in a professional studio. In this example, the sofa took many forms – a staff space, a student space, a peripheral space enabling escape from an uninteresting brief, a way to signal availability and a place where 'different kinds of conversations' happen to those in a desk crit.

Mess

These are very tentative categories and should be considered with caution. They are also messy, lacking the sureties of distinct categories and suggestions for future 'best practice'. However, the methodology and preliminary analysis suggests there is conceptual potential to 'illuminate the junctures, tensions and lived practice of spatial-social relationships' (Acton 2017: 1442). Perhaps most importantly, they begin to illuminate the potential disjunctures between 'imagined affordances' of space (and its design) and the lived experiences of those that inhabit them.

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