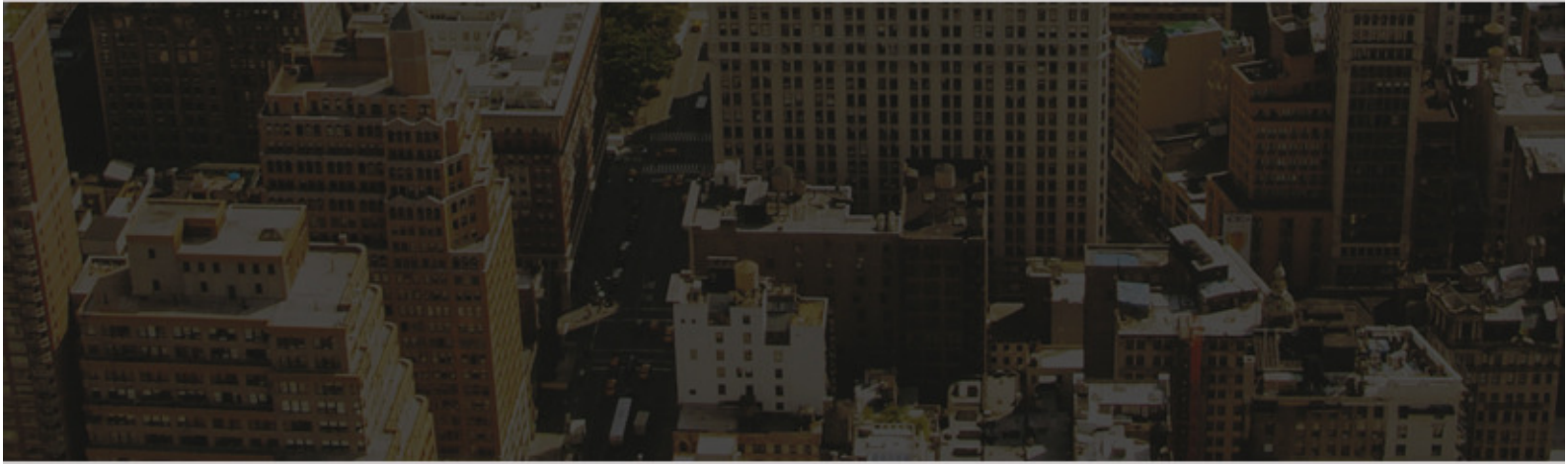# AMPS Proceedings Series 10

Cities, Communities and Homes: Is the Urban Future Livable?

AMPS CONFERENCE 10

Cities, Communities and Homes: Is the Urban Future Livable?

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AMPS CONFERENCE 10

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INTRODUCTION

This publication is the product of the conference *Cities, Communities and Homes: Is the Urban Future Livable?* held at the University of Derby in 2018. The premise of the conference and this publication is that the forces shaping life in cities are complex. The economies they are based on are multiple. Some are growing exponentially, others are shrinking. Some pride themselves on architectural heritage, others are seeking to build and rebrand. Some are old, some are new. Inevitably their urban fabrics vary. The communities that live in these places reflect these conditions. Some are long-standing, others are new and in-formation. Sometimes they are active, on occasion homogenous. More generally they are diverse. These communities need, and want, a say in their futures. Some are well connect and affluent, others suffer deprivation and social exclusion. A constant in the mist of this complexity is their need to be housed – whether by themselves, the market, or governments.

The conference and this subsequent publication seek to explore how the three issues of city development, sense of community and housing need, all combine to make lives in our cities livable – or not. How will our urban environments change in the near future? Are the cities we live in now likely to contract or expand? How will these changes impact on communities and the way they are housed? Will new technologies facilitate community engagement with planning? Will resident voices be heard by planners? Will unaffordable housing turn some cities into enclaves of the wealthy, or will the private sector and personal preference gate our communities?

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This publication, and the conference which it documents, were organised by the research organisation AMPS, its academic journal Architecture_MPS, and the College of Engineering & Technology at the University of Derby. It formed part of the AMPS program of events, *Housing – Critical Futures*.

THE CIVIC UNIVERSITY AND LOCALLY-ENGAGED PRACTICE IN ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION: THE CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY OF LOCALLY-ENGAGED PRACTICE

We have witnessed the unapologetic rise of financial profit at the expense of social, environmental and other forms of collective wellbeing. Concomitantly, the priority of education today, driven by market demand over the intrinsic value of knowledge, signals the end of the welfare state. This tracks with the waning of the post-war consensus in which united, cross-party majorities developed policies to promote cultural tolerance, gender equality, progressive taxation, fair pay and publicly funded mass education—values that are also central to the theory and practice of the civic university that underpins the position of this paper.

Many of those who voted against Brexit and Trump and deplore their value systems are struggling to imagine futures that are livable on the terms of our recent past: the heyday of liberal democracy in the West during the second half of the twentieth century. Some of us working in higher education are turning to experimental models and historical exemplars as alternatives to the present 'academic capitalist regime',[1] to use John Saltmarsh's descriptive turn of phrase, and the yawning inequality that marks neoliberalism.

As a result, the civic university and its holistic vision of progressive society is making a comeback. In what follows we reflect on the current relevance of this nineteenth-century reform, including its drive to embed learning in the communities where it takes place. Under the agenda of inclusiveness that motivates the civic university, education is an integral part of the public sphere and hence a shared resource—a common good. This is part of a broader project to mobilise civic education in the service of a civil society.

The main example we describe is from our own institution, Chelsea College of Arts (henceforth Chelsea College or the College), a constituent of the University of the Arts London. We discuss how our studio, one of seven composing BA (Hons) Interior and Spatial Design, seeks to embody the ethos of the civic university. This resonates in the context of growing interest in alternative art and design education and touching on the Civic University project led by our friends and colleagues of the London-based critical design practice 'public works', we argue that what differentiates our studio's approach from theirs and others is a para-institutional mandate. This stems from our studio being embedded in a degree-granting institution of art and design *and* operating in the local community, beyond the ivory tower of higher education. This results in productive reciprocity between these two spheres of influence rooted in a strong sense of the space and role of the institution and its potential as a community resource.

Without locally-engaged practice and other forms of civic responsibility like the kind discussed below, the UK's institutions of higher education run the risk of becoming international, while at the same time, increasingly insular. Higher education as an enclave for a global elite that foregoes responsibility to its immediate context is not the stuff of a livable future for the majority. It is our contention that grounded

in locally-engaged practice, the civic university provides a relevant and empowering model for resisting this exclusivity and the exploitation that neoliberalism depends on. Moreover, formative work in our studio suggests that art and design education is especially well-placed to advance this project.

THE CIVIC UNIVERSITY

To prime discussion on how our studio is advancing civic learning for a civil society, a brief overview of the civic university aims to outline its history and significance as an expression of social reform. The term 'civic universities' (also known, with some variation, as 'modern', 'redbrick' or 'engaged' universities) refers to institutions of higher learning, mainly in England, that were founded in the nineteenth century and which subsequently became universities in the twentieth. These sprouted in the burgeoning cities of the industrial revolution: Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Bristol, Sheffield, Newcastle, as well as Dundee and Welsh universities beyond England. Nicknamed 'redbricks', for the material of their architecture, these institutions of learning transformed higher education in the UK, and by extension the Commonwealth, by making it more diverse, accessible and nationally-dispersed.[2]

While there is no question the redbricks offered an alternative to the coterie of Oxbridge, the terms of this are something that William Whyte is keen to impress in his seminal study, *Redbrick: A Social and Architectural History of Britain's Civic Universities*.[3] The book's thesis is that there were contra tendencies to see these modern universities as 'paled or failed imitations of Oxbridge', the inclusive value system that motored redbrick universities was central to making them equally as rigorous and arguably more relevant in their distinctive but also shared approach.

At the time, Oxbridge only admitted the male elite who were in good standing with the Church of England to study a liberal curriculum, one that focused on the classics and mathematics.[4] Conversely the civic universities developed from technical colleges and would soon admit not only men but also women, regardless of their religion or social background. The curricula focused on practical and professional training, if the express purpose of Oxbridge was to reproduce a social elite to lead society, the redbrick institutions prioritised the production of useful knowledge for a richer and more equitable society. These institutions of learning were built in rapidly expanding manufacturing towns and cities to serve these growing communities in order to better knowledge of engineering and scientific advance, as well as improving medicine and therefore enhancing the health and standard of living of the local population. As Whyte argues, a distinguishing feature of the redbrick institutions is that they are not only open - as in inclusive - but also local. This place-based approach was designed to equip graduates to work in local industries and with local materials. A strong sense of civic duty[5] was central to this proximity, with this philosophy of education charging students, tutors—and their institutions—with the responsibility to give back to the communities that supported them.

A review of literature on the civic university suggests that it offers an alternative to the higher education sector's growing preoccupations with their position in the 'global marketplace', the monetisation of learning in the 'knowledge economy', as well as pressures on educators to be financially demonstrable via 'measurement and performance'.[6] The civic university seems to confront these issues by the very fact that it is locally engaged, garnering this educational reform renewed and widespread interest as a potential antidote to globalisation. That said, this risks the civic university being perceived as a provincial step back into the past in a globally-networked society. Lorlene Hoyt and Robert Hollister have argued against this by way of an extensive survey that demonstrates the international possibilities of growing discourse on civically-engaged universities (journal articles, conferences and partnerships, etc.).[7] This scholarship and practice is self-organising thanks to efforts like those of the Talloires Network, an international association of institutions 'committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education'[8] founded in 2005. John Goddard et al.'s *Civic University:*

The Policy and Leadership Challenges echoes this scope via analysis of eight European universities, which, in addition to being research intensive and publicly funded, have achieved national and international profiles for their visionary work in civic engagement, therefore evidencing the international scope of sharing this pedagogical approach.[9]

At the same time that interest in the civic university is gaining amongst colleges and universities, enrolment in higher educational institutions in the UK is down.[10] The introduction of tuition fees is proving prohibitive for many home students and EU students are staying away in the face of Brexit and the threat of terrorism. It is therefore no surprise that colleges and universities are actively recruiting international students from further afield and are becoming increasingly dependent on their fees. As classrooms fill with student visitors to the UK who actively identify as mobile and global citizens, institutions of higher education could very well once again find themselves to be enclaves of the elite. When the bulk of the student body is transient it can be difficult for institutions of higher learning to create long-term programmes to engage with local communities that are more rooted and continuous. Taking up this challenge, our spatial design studio Chelsea Local has turned to the civic university as a basis for working with local communities to cultivate the wealth of local resources, history and the creative potential of Millbank.

To contextualise our studio within this discourse it is useful to note the shift in focus of the term 'civic' that has occurred since the founding of redbrick universities. Initially, their sense of 'civic' seems to have been 'of or relating to a city or town or the people who live there'.[11] This contrasts with the understanding valued by Chelsea Local and other proponents of the civic university today who foreground this term as 'relating to citizenship or being a citizen'.[12] This emphasis is being widely explored in current art, design and architectural practice and produces a sense of agency and political participation as well as an understanding and awareness of geographical site. This contemporary meaning is exemplified by critical design practice public works' Civic University project. For more than a decade, public works has been investigating a terrain where activism, architecture, art and performance overlap. Their website asserts the following: 'Together with our interdisciplinary network, we re-work the city's opportunities towards citizen driven development and nurturing their rights over the city.'[13] Central to this project is engaging with the civicness of cities; the structures that constitute and restrict the possibilities of contemporary public life. Whilst this drives many of public works' projects, it finds explicit form in the Civic University, which is facilitated with other notable not-for-profit initiatives: R-Urban, The Old Tidemill Gardens, Interact Roman Road and Loughborough Farm.

To indicate how public works' the Civic University compares and contrasts with that of Chelsea Local, three considerations will suffice. First, both live projects are pedagogical experiments that view the production of the city and its citizens as a collective process in lifelong learning. They both address real-world needs, not of a distant other but of specific neighbours and neighbourhoods. Second, both the Civic University and Chelsea Local spring from a deep appreciation of locally-engaged practice as foundational to relating to one's place in the world in a meaningful way. Key here are the day-to-day interactions through which this engagement reproduces particular parts of London and how through coordinated action, creativity can enrich the shared experience of those who live and work in these locales. Whilst for Chelsea Local this takes places in Millbank, the Civic University is anchored in Hackney but dispersed across London. This makes the projects complementary as their sites overlap and their enterprises operate at different scales. And third, both depend on relations that bridge informal associations and formal institutions. In the case of Chelsea Local, however, the latter is core, with the studio's coursework being integral to Chelsea College's curriculum for BA Interior and Spatial Design. Whilst there is no question that the Civic University's extracurricular programme of builds, events, campaigns, etc. does invaluable work that takes place at arm's length from any institution of higher education, Chelsea Local affords a different and equally urgent form of engagement. Principally, this

stems from the critical reciprocity that our studio brokers between Chelsea College and the communities that surround it. It is beyond the scope of this brief paper to elaborate how in conducting this relationship our studio posits a modest, but also increasingly effective, form of institutional critique as it quietly troubles the current financialised educational system that is gripping higher education in the UK. However, to prime future discussions on this programme, the final part of this paper will sketch the para-institutionalism that motors Chelsea Local as a particular embodiment of the civic university. As such, it seeks to mobilise learning in art and design in the service of an alternative future in higher education, a future that is more desirable and hence more livable than our current reality predicated on an academic capitalist regime.

CHELSEA LOCAL AND PARA-INSTITUTIONALISM

Para-institutionalism is an emerging framework for analysing practices that are contiguous with institutions and other existing initiatives. More specifically, para-institutionalism wraps with the so-called 'curatorial turn' as its vision finds form in how the curatorial platform *Para-Institution* defines the term:

> [Para-institutionalism] acts as a self-critical, self-reflective tool, examining the local context and [...] exploring the potentials of an institution of co-operation, and mutual focus, and inter-linking key organisations and practitioners that share the common goal of demonstrating the role of contemporary art practices in activating and instituting cultural change.[14]

Underlying this sense of para-institutionalism as a catalyst *for* change is also how it acts in response *to* change; including shrinkage in the public sphere. We can think of para-institutionalism as a 'self-critical, self-reflective tool' for reframing and diversifying institutions that were formerly public and historically responsible for administering the post-war consensus. In step with deep cuts in public funding to higher education across the UK, many are in the throes of redefining their scope and mission. In the case of the Chelsea College, some are asking: What role are staff, students and local stakeholders playing in this process? What say do we have in how infrastructure, systems, networks—values—are revamped and managed? Faced with more questions than answers to queries like these, there is growing interest across the UK leading many sectors wondering about the foundational question: 'What are universities for'?[15] When the responses are unsatisfactory, some have chosen to leave or bypass the system by creating alternatives. Exemplars of trends in non-accredited higher education in art and design include Open School East and the School of the Damned in the United Kingdom and Bruce High Quality Foundation in the United States.

While inspirational, alternative schools of art and design also face many challenges—for example, their financial sustainability is often problematic—they may not charge their students fees but many forego paying their faculty and other workers. As naming and shaming is not our intention here, suffice to say there are countless reports of recent BA graduates approaching their former tutors to volunteer on free MAs. This means the social reproduction of alternative schools is precariously tethered to the institutions or employers who pay tutors enough to volunteer elsewhere. For all their supposed autonomy from 'the system', unaccredited programmes feed off the expertise of more established networks. Para-institutions like our studio are also nourished by host institutions, in our case Chelsea College. Our institutions—in fact our former public sphere—is cash poor, but it still has some resources. For instance, Chelsea College has space, networks, infrastructure, admin and publicity support and occasional bits of funding which help to provide hospitality for our events, pay fees and finance publications. However, if historically resources like these were for the benefit of staff and students, the way that value is produced and

distributed through Chelsea Local differs from many alternative schools[16] and degree-granting programmes to boot. We consider this with reference to a live project that has motored the curriculum of Chelsea Local in recent years.

One of the key projects carried out by Chelsea Local is The Millbank Atlas, which brings together researchers, students and residents to trace the neighbourhood of Chelsea College of Arts. The ongoing project creates meaning through conceptualising the neighbourhoods of Millbank as comprised of reciprocal relations among the College and surrounding businesses, residential blocks, civil society groups, infrastructure, amenities and further aspects of this built and natural environment. In this way, our studio prioritises socially-involved spatial practice working in real sites through live, collaborative projects as we ask students to critically engage with the local context and communities in response to their particular needs. Since 2005 this has developed through Chelsea Local's partnership with Millbank Creative Works and in particular Wilfried Rimensberger who heads up this local not-for-profit network that bridges critical fine art practice, enthusiast and hobbiest cultures and culturepreneurs. Our collaboration with members of this network finds form through shared practice-based research such as co-produced exhibitions, publications and workshops. For instance, as part of a public programme of events at the Cookhouse Gallery in January 2017 that activated an exhibition of these artefacts, we worked with Nicolas Fonti, a researcher from the Bartlett School of Architecture and a key member of JustMap (a collaboratively-produced map of London showing the city's community resources and current campaigns with the aim of connecting people together) to facilitate a workshop with students and the local community. We worked around a large 2D map, annotating it with push pin flags and other tokens to create a richer picture of our immediate environment. This aimed to tap our collective intelligence about the lived experience of Millbank with the view of better understanding local resources and strengthening solidarities amongst housing and other community-based campaigns related to the built environment.

Figure 1. The Millbank Atlas Exhibition, Community Mapping (Marsha Bradfield)

The value of this process for local stakeholders was immediate: the exhibition—and especially the workshops—helped to raise awareness of local concerns, built momentum amongst community activists and valorised their ongoing activity that responds to housing needs pertaining to affordability, upkeep and ensuring that local residents enjoy a decent quality of life. By working with these urgent issues and observing them evolve through practice beyond higher education as a detached realm, students gained

essential skills and knowledge regarding how to apply them, with The Millbank Atlas functioning as a case study of locally-engaged practice grounded in the ethos of the civic university. There is something profound about moving across representations—from the bird's eye view of Google maps to what this type of search cannot see, i.e. the worm's eye perspective that comes from spending time interacting with a local environment and stakeholders beyond the college who live and work there. In this way, knowledge that is produced not only benefits the students, who will take it with them upon graduation. This embedded process also benefits the College and local people. Holding a week-long exhibition in the College's gallery is a case in point, with this public dissemination befitting each of the stakeholders differently.

Figure 2. Millbank Creative Works at The Millbank Atlas Exhibition (Fernanda Liberti Duarte)

On the one hand, as commented on by Millbank Creative Works' Rimensberger, displaying work produced through student-community collaboration in a cultural institution of repute valorises the efforts of local activists when this is juxtaposed with artefacts and artworks produced and displayed at the College. We were also intrigued to observe that our exhibition was an unprecedented invitation to locals to visit. For many this was the first time they had ever crossed the threshold of Chelsea College, despite having lived or worked in the neighbourhood for many years. On the other hand, students benefited from having their work not only displayed but also activated through the workshops and written accounts in the exhibition's catalogue. While contextualising their practice and making connections between their work and that of their peers, the curatorial attention afforded by this publication is highly prized by those wishing to establish their reputation as professional practitioners of spatial design.

Figure 3. *The Millbank Atlas exhibition, Curated Conversation (Marsha Bradfield)*

All this is to say that whilst both degree-granting and non-accredited programmes in art and design tend to prioritise the needs of students through delivering curricula that takes place in the bricks and mortar of their campuses, Chelsea Local takes a different approach. The College serves as a base but our classrooms are the neighbourhoods of Millbank. Through this dispersion we invest in win-win scenarios where learning unfolds via a community of practice comprised of students, staff and other stakeholders. Students gain invaluable hands-on experience supported by their course and enriched by the situated knowledge of Millbank locals; local communities gain the students' attention, enthusiasm and expertise as it is brought to bear on regional issues and by way of locally-engaged collaborative enterprise.

CONCLUSION: PARA-INSTITUTIONALISM AND MORE LIVABLE FUTURES

Parasitism may seem counterintuitive as a way of bridging formal institutions (e.g. Chelsea College) and informal associations (e.g. Millbank Creative Works). However, this is precisely the rationale for Chelsea Local's practice-based approach to para-institutionalism. Inspired by the civic university and its emphasis on being open, local and practically-orientated, para-institutionalism is a loosely-knit framework for activating the interplay between Chelsea College and the communities that compose its neighbourhood of Millbank and, crucially, vice versa, in an assessment of local need. This critical reciprocity has consequences when reckoning with the systemic impact of neoliberalism. The values of liberal democracy that once underpinned our public institutions and other structures—the systems that were so hard won as an upshot of the great wars—are slated for the scrapheap unless they are fought for, renewed and become self-sustaining. Whilst many have chosen to leave higher education and establish alternative schools of art and design, Chelsea Local seeks to make the most of the welfare state's legacy by working from within a formerly public institution. Using its resources, the studio is creating impact by building a richer public sphere that is rigorous and relevant in its immediacy because it is developed in collaboration with neighbourhood stakeholders. Proponent of the civic university John Goddard states that it is our, 'civic duty to engage with wider society on the local, national and global scales'[17]. Chelsea Local aims to pursue these aims by working with an internationally-diverse student base who are embedded in the local history and surrounding built environment, forming links with

external institutions and connecting with international debate on how to create more liveable futures. It strikes us as a right and proper that this is the answer to the question, 'What are universities for'?

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[4] Ibid, p.40.

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[15] This question pivots John Goddard, *Reinventing the Civic University* (London: Nesta, 2009).

[16] It is worth noting that working in the local communities of Open School East are essential to the programme; moreover, it could be argued that as it was initially commissioned by the Barbican and Create London, it has operated as a para-institution at certain points in its history.

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