

Past, present and future communities: Between utopia and dystopia

Dr Marsha Bradfield, director of Artfield Projects Limited, and Shibboleth Shechter, senior lecturer in Interior and Spatial Design at the Chelsea College of Arts, discuss the existence between space and time, and the concept of spatiotemporality within the borough of Westminster and Millbank

Our students' activity in the 2017 - 2018 academic year was spatiotemporality, the existence between space and time. Here we reflect on this work with our second and third year students doing BA (Hons) Interior and Spatial Design at Chelsea College of Arts. Our curriculum brief was titled 'Millbank Communities Past, Present and Future: Between Utopia and Dystopia'. It was predicated on spatiotemporality as a way into this neighbourhood, part of the London borough of Westminster. In keeping with our long-term interest in Millbank, our curriculum aimed to understand what it meant for Chelsea College of Arts as an institution and those who study, live and otherwise operate here to call this area home. A constituent college of the University of the Arts London, Chelsea College sits on the banks of the River Thames beside Tate Britain and between the Houses of Parliament and M16.

Our spatiotemporal approach considered Millbank's past and speculated about its future to better grasp and contribute to the neighbourhood's present. This three-phase temporality was both a framework to organise our teaching and learning, and a means of comparing and contrasting the rich history of our students an attitude to travelling more through time than across distance. We began by reaching back into Millbank's complex past — think plague pits, the first panoptic prison, river trade and flooding, and then, in the early twentieth century, utopian housing developments.

Our historical enquiry was anchored in the Thorney Island Archive, which is run by the Thorney Island Society, a voluntary organisation that works to safeguard local buildings and promote the area's rich heritage. Each student chose an object from the archives as a fulcrum for their research into the lived experience of past communities or an historical figure. They approached the life and times of nineteenth-century societies from the perspective of material culture. In this regard an eighteenth-century embroidered purse proved especially intriguing. It contained an invitation to one Lady Gerrard to attend the Queen's coronation. Though at first the archives advised this was of Elizabeth II in 1953, a strong intuition and dogged enquiry by one of our students, Gabriela Aleksandrova, involved contacting an expert at Victoria and Albert Museum to confirm the coronation in question was in fact Victoria's in 1838.

The second phase of our curriculum took place at Tate Modern's Tate Exchange. This was an education-based experiment that explored how art makes a difference to society. Our students worked with the public to build a model of London in 2068, at a scale of roughly 1:200. We collectively constructed architectures and infrastructures for future communities and discussed how dystopias,

'Our actions today impact our futures, individual and shared'

utopias and heterotopias (which Michel Foucault describes as utopias that *are* 'actually localisable') will shape and be shaped by the worlds of tomorrow. For instance, Gugulethu Thaka and Wilson Aguirre Jaramillo imagined how waste could be turned into a form of currency. In their words: 'with this new system, all landfills would be cleared by 2050. And since rubbish has become a currency, we also set up a trading centre'. Aspirational thinking like this proved a watershed for many students. They began to grasp at a deeper level, and with much greater nuance, that our actions today impact our futures, individual and shared.

Another turning point was a walk from Tate Britain, its historical collection saturated with empire and industry, to Tate Modern as an architectural and artistic pivot for London as a contemporary capital of culture. Circulation inspired our sojourn; how some people and artefacts can move between institutions, while others are excluded from these circuits of valorization, or the increase in capital assets. Our students experimented with this by

carrying with them on the walk tiny handmade models of infrastructure. We called these 'seeds' because they were brought into Tate Modern and 'planted' on the fifth floor, the area designated to Tate Exchange. From these we grew our collectively built model of London in 2068, fifty years into the future.

To highlight the cause and effect between our present (in)action and its consequences, we asked our students to imagine life back in 1968, long before their living memory. None had any knowledge of the civil unrest that wracked France that year, making it a touchstone for so many critical and creative practitioners. This generation gap has compelled us to reinvigorate our commitment to sharing counter narratives, as well as historically and culturally diverse precedents of alternative ways of doing and being.

Having considered Millbank's past through their work in the archives and having speculated about London's future via an experimental build, our students had a much stronger sense of the ways in which their work as designers today fits into a broader scheme. Simply put, they began to appreciate what it means to be part of a project that is much larger than oneself. This found concrete expression in the curriculum's final stage, which focused on the present via self-directed projects. Many

of these were explicitly committed to making a difference. For instance, Anthea Suffell tackled overcrowded educational provision by proposing a learner-centred space distribution at Chelsea College. And, galvanised by the water shortages in Cape Town, Tao Zheng imagined a system to recycle and purify this precious resource on campus.

It is not by accident that these examples tackle problems that our students either personally face at present or anticipate doing so. Our teaching philosophy holds that local contexts — the ones where we live, work or otherwise frequent — are valid subjects of enquiry. For many at Chelsea College, Millbank is effectively a non-place, a passageway in and out of our daily business. Recasting this context proved a core benefit of our spatiotemporal approach, which was catalysed in large part by its versatility. The breadth of time and space as interdependent phenomena afforded students myriad points of access, interest and collaboration. As with the temporality of time travelling through research, the spatial dimension of our curriculum encouraged problem solving through reorientation. Telescoping in and out — shifting between micro details and large-scale complexity — is the kind of scope required to tackle wicked problems. Although it seems obvious to say, design is about producing outcomes that draw on the past and anticipate the future by effectively considering disparate and often conflicted forces. Otherwise, why bother? ■

marshabradfield@artfieldprojects.com
s.shechter@chelsea.arts.ac.uk

Above Tate Exchange, London in 2068 — Architectures and infrastructures for future communities @ Dan Weill

Above Model of Lady Gerrard's Journey to Queen's Elizabeth's Coronation @ Gabriela Aleksandrova

Left Infrastructure Seeds on the Steps of Tate Britain @ Marsha Bradfield

