



**The Ethical Table:
Facilitating inter-institutional
dialogues on the ethics of teaching
and learning practices in art and design**

**Adriana Cobo Corey
and Silke Lange**

Central Saint
Martins, University of the
Arts London

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Abstract

The Ethical Table is a platform for furthering discussions and developing curricula with a focus on ethics in design at CSM / UAL. The ELIA Biennial Conference 2024 presented the opportunity to open the platform beyond the context of our institution, inviting a wider group of colleagues to sit with us at the table. In this article we reflect on our experiences facilitating this conversational workshop with an international and multidisciplinary group of participants.

The session affirmed our conviction that facilitating structured conversations is the most valuable practice for embedding ethical principles within design curricula, moving away from the notion that practising ethics might be a simple case of ticking boxes and signing off fine print to eliminate or transfer risk. While the overarching concept of artistic intelligence was not addressed directly in the workshop space, we reflected on this throughout the conference and will summarise our thoughts here.

Session
delivered by:

DR ADRIANA COBO COREY
Senior Lecturer in Ethical Practice,
BA Architecture at CSM



DR SILKE LANGE
Head of Educational Research,
Reader, UAL

NORAH DANKWAH AND ZEINA RADY
Graduates, BA Architecture at CSM

Introduction:
The Ethical Table so far

“As more decision making within many areas of art and design practice become increasingly intertwined with ethical determination, the positioning of ethics as an aspect of learning development for higher education in design bears reconsideration” (Rendell 2016).

The Ethical Table at CSM started in late 2022, with Adriana reaching out to Silke to collaborate on establishing this platform, specifically for architecture and spatial practices. We both had common interests around articulating ways to respond to our critical times, when demand for diversity, participation, and collaboration in creative practices is ever more pressing. We had observed that, although many colleagues and students across our institution shared similar interests and/or were working specifically on ethics in design, opportunities for exchanging knowledge, sharing, and collaborating around the subject were limited.

Once we secured funding from the UAL Teaching and Learning Fund in spring 2023, we invited staff and students, predominantly from BA Architecture in the Spatial Practice Programme, to literally sit around a table in one of the design studios and work collectively on sharing common ethical concerns emerging from our teaching and learning practices.

Our aim was to find concerted ways to embed ethical frameworks of practice within design curricula. Extremely valuable material slowly emerged through planned group discussions on ethical dilemma scenarios, which were pre-designed for the sessions and tailored to the specific contexts of our institution and fields of knowledge. This collective approach proved to be effective for establishing a constructive platform for exchanging experiences and enhancing the quality and scope of the material generated throughout. Setting up conditions for co-creation also allowed the group to develop mutual trust and respect during the first meeting, encouraging all to contribute with honesty and authenticity over the course of the project.



Figure 1.
Ethical Table
at CSM in the
Spatial Practice
studio, 2023.
Photo: Silke
Lange.

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Some of the questions discussed during the workshops included: a) How do we teach and learn strategies to negotiate between, first, ambitious ideals imagined in response to a design brief, and second, grounding limitations brought about by working in collaboration with specific communities? b) How can tutors help to mitigate students' stress caused by the emotional impact inherent to working on difficult subjects and in community-engaged practices? c) How do we teach and learn to mitigate extractive practices in collaborative and participatory design projects?

Following two sessions of collective work exploring ethical dilemma scenarios, asking and discussing critical questions, participants drafted an ethical guidance document for tutors on how to structure briefs in focusing on socially engaged design. After several revisions, the guidance has been embedded into the teaching support material on the BA Architecture course.

The document *Practicing Ethics: Guidance for Structuring Briefs in Socially Engaged Design* can be accessed [here](#).

The Ethical Table in Milan: Inviting multidimensional dialogue

The workshop in Milan offered an opportunity to broaden the scope of the Ethical Table beyond architecture towards art and design fields, and to start achieving one of our key aims: to advance our work by incorporating international, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary perspectives within processes of co-creating ethical frameworks and guidance within creative practice, an objective which we consider imperative, in the context of current global crises. We started the session, as we usually do, with Silke establishing a best practice protocol for sharing the space with all participants. After this, Adriana presented an overview of the work the Ethical Table has progressed so far, with a focus on the recommendations emerging from the collective workshops at CSM: a series of actions all participants considered necessary for constituting the guidance. Here is a summary of three key recommendations for structuring and advancing work from design briefs:

Planning the assignments

It is important to prioritise process over results from the early stages of designing the brief, especially when it pertains envisioning engagement as design. This, for example, by 1) visualising timelines and key moments of interaction with collaborating groups; 2) considering other's willingness to participate; 3) creating and communicating common schedules and/or; 4) discussing scenarios that might derivate from collaborating.

Communicating with Clarity

It is crucial to specify the roles of each stakeholder involved and to define real expectations about the project at hand with clear, succinct, and accessible language from the outset. This includes describing the project in detail, including its aims, scope, time frames, and likely outputs, as well as its rationale, including gains and compromises implied for each individual participant and/or organisation.

Designing Reciprocity

It is most valuable to resist extractive practices, including that of knowledge, by embedding the design

of exchange strategies between stakeholders (i.e., students and community groups) within the overall project design. Designing and supporting initiatives derived from collaborative work, for example, alongside crediting and volunteering, are ways to reciprocate through creative practice.

This overview was followed by contributions from Norah and Zeina, both recent graduates of BA Architecture and participants in the Ethical Table project from the very first meeting in February 2023. Through their last undergraduate Design Studio Units, Norah and Zeina reflected on how to embed the co-created ethical guidance for socially engaged design as a transformational framework for their design projects. Their work has been incorporated as case studies for the Ethical Table. Here are some of their design thoughts and considerations:

**Accessibility and Integration:
A Sensory Nurture,** by Norah Dankwah¹

“My presentation aimed to critically challenge the ideal of bodily perfection, set as a universal standard that informed the fundamentals of architectural design history. This posed an ethical dilemma in educational practices, which I wanted to address through my design for a library. Having the opportunity to share my values and learning experiences at ELIA with an audience of diverse perspectives is a stepping stone to give voice to marginalised communities and to raise awareness. Although my project is hypothetical, it was insightful to hear the various discussions during the workshop, which can be further integrated into all design aspects, or a project.

Being able to contribute and witness the growth of the Ethical Table has furthered my knowledge in practicing ethics. It has also given me the confidence to explore and adapt my profound interest in the importance of one’s spatial experience for creative practice, spotlighting the emotional and mental effects of spatial design qualities.”

Designing Resistance: On Duty and the Creative and Intellectual, by Zeina Rady²

“During my presentation at ELIA, I explored the duty of creatives and intellectuals with regards to critical spatial practices and Palestine. My thoughts took form through a situated intervention devised within a well-used gathering space at CSM, where I served mint tea to all who attended my call to sit down in a circle on the floor and share concerns about the topic of freedom of expression. Speaking on the panel was a new experience for me and gave me the opportunity to share my insights on protest in academic spaces from the perspective of an international student. To me, ELIA was a space to engage in meaningful discussions with the audience and receive questions about my newfound practice.

I enjoyed exchanging ideas on the guidance framework of ethics in pedagogy, hearing how diverse perspectives shape our individual expectations of an ethical framework, and contributing to a broader understanding of ethics, both in spatial practice and creative practices more generally.

This experience not only reinforced my passion for ethics but also helped my learning of how to speak more professionally about my own practice, teaching me to become constructively critical of my own work.”

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¹ **Norah Dankwah** was a student in BA-Arch 2023-24, Design Studio 07- Destination Library: How would the future of libraries take shape in Shoreditch, London? Tutors: Cherng-Min (Ming) Teong and Dejan Mrdja.

² **Zeina Rady** was a student in BA-Arch 2023-24, Design Studio 12 - Growing City: How can spatial interventions learn from growing, as a political act? Tutors: Emma Twine and Chris Storie.

Zeina’s contribution concluded with serving fresh mint tea to participants of the workshop—a ceremony central to Arabic cultures, especially when conversations might address challenging or difficult topics. While participants enjoyed the taste of fresh mint, they were introduced to the next stage of the workshop, which invited individual reflection followed by small group discussions on the guidance and case studies presented, in connection (or not), to their own teaching and learning practices.



Figures 2 and 3.
Serving mint tea
at ELIA, 2024.
Photos: Norah
Dankwah.

Questions used to frame these discussions included:

What are the three main ethical challenges in your own teaching practice in relation to the cases presented?

What ethical principles do you use in your teaching and learning practices?

How do you connect to collaborators, students, and participants applying ethical principles?

Have the application of ethical principles aided your learning and/or unlearning in significant ways?

Participants' thoughts and insights were captured on a [Padlet](#), which grew into a resource throughout the session, providing a takeaway for everyone beyond the collective experience in Milan. Some of the responses resonated with many participants and emphasised the need for overcoming institutional structures and cultural expectations that pose barriers to creating a sustained ethical learning environment. One of our participants, for example, shared:

The main ethical challenge to teaching practices in my institution is a culture of reactivity rather than proactivity, with plans for collaborative projects across disciplines (e.g., filmmaking students working with graphic design, costume design, character makeup design, etc.) being last-minute and not shared early enough to be fair, inclusive, and reciprocal.

Their comments were aligned with our ethical guidance, and participants advocated for ethical considerations to be at the centre of discussions. The aim was to seamlessly integrate these into the teaching of creative practices and place them at the core of curriculum design and teaching methodologies. Resources such as [Ethics for Making](#) and the [Good Guide to Creative Practice](#) can support educators to lead on such process in their respective institutions.

The workshop concluded with opening the space for sharing with all participants. Referring to the Padlet, questions, concerns, and critique of context, language, terminology, and application were raised and debated. While opinions on ethical practices, frameworks, and principles varied, there was mutual agreement about the importance of these discussions for ensuring ethical considerations and practices are placed at the centre of creative endeavours and within the educational space devised by artists and designers.

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Post-workshop reflection



Figure 4. Audience at ELIA downloading QR code for Padlet, 2024. Photo: Adriana Cobo Corey.

While we presented previous work on ethics developed through the lens of architecture and spatial practice, the open discussion with participants in Milan quickly highlighted the range of disciplinary experiences in the workshop. We had the opportunity to understand complimentary and contradictory ethical dilemmas in art and design practices, as well as foregrounding the importance of case studies for thinking reflexively about ethics and connecting the universal to the specific.

Taking the Ethical Table to an international group of practitioners in art and design has given us a deeper appreciation for the complex relationships between advancement in art and design, ethics, knowledge production, and risk-taking. Moving away from regulatory approaches to ethics which are closer aligned with health and safety risk assessments, our proposition is that continuous reflection on the ethical implications that working with others bring to design practice offers opportunities for creativity and joy, which in turn provide qualitative and critical value to the work.

What we learned Framing ethical practice in design

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“Ethics provides no absolute rule but rather establishes a basis for analysis that arises from the circumstance itself.” (Beshty, 2015, p. 19).

During our session, it became apparent that framing the ethical guidance we shared within more universal and overarching ethical aims was necessary, before entering the specific ethical concerns of a subject field. One of our participants shared their work on making an ethical guide for sustainable and inclusive creative practice for students, which clearly states from the outset: “Our mission as a community of students is simple: To do our best not to harm people or the planet in our creative work” (N-TUTOR). This comment triggered an important conversation about how to negotiate the framing of ethical practices in design. While it seemed necessary for us, the session’s conveners, to emphasise that we are not working specifically on philosophical nor legal studies on ethics, the conversation with our international colleagues helped us to incorporate a more interdisciplinary and wider anchoring frame for teaching and learning ethics in design, while continuing to work on our approach to relational ethics; that is, contingent to specific situations emerging as diverse people and other entities—nonhuman or otherwise—interact.

Noticing synergies between art, design and spatial practices

During the workshop, synergies between art, design, and spatial practices emerged quickly. Socially engaged or participatory art practices usually imply working with a broad range of communities in their territories rather than in the artist’s or designer’s studio. These working situations are common to Norah and Zeina’s case studies, and to precedent analyses done by the Ethical Table, where the key guidance actions established by its framework—planning, clarity, and reciprocity—prove equally useful beyond subject specificity. Planning the content, methodology, and process of how to collaborate is crucial for creating spaces where creative practices and social engagement merge.

Practicing ethics goes beyond the ethical responsibility associated with exhibiting artwork in public spaces, art galleries, or museums. We are focusing our interests on creative practices that rely on everyday ethics, the ethical responsibility of the practitioner when working with others; situated in a specific context rather than a universal approach to any guidance. As Pablo Helguera explains, “While we need critical frameworks... to make art, they should not be understood as regulatory mandates that would impose moral or ethical demands on art making” (Helguera, 2011, xiv). Aware of the overarching need to discuss and establish ethical frameworks for practice, we also address the specificities of each situation which continuously emerge from singular projects.

Artistic intelligence

Throughout the conference, we witnessed many projects and work processes that were diverse and inspiring expressions of creativity in the field of art, sometimes focusing on technology, sometimes interdisciplinarity. By the end of the conference, we felt genuinely aligned with the words of colleague Luca Guerrini (Department of Design, School of Design Politecnico di Milano), who, in his intervention during the closing ceremony, called for the ELIA community to not get entangled in the effort to rename and/or

articulate our creative practices under a new banner—artistic intelligence—but to continue the work at hand.

We intuitively felt that the expression ‘artistic intelligence’, with particular consideration for empathy and emotional intelligence, could potentially act to counterbalance that of artificial intelligence. However, in the context of current concerns about the fast-paced and potentially harmful transformational power of artificial intelligence, we choose to continue with the process of defining and acting on practicing ethics in design and embedding ethical frameworks for creative practice within curricula.

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