Critical Spatial Practice

Introduction - what is the report about and where does your positionality sit within the review?

This report follows the development of a teaching artefact to support my students' learning process at the start of the academic year. I teach 2nd and 3rd year BA Architecture students. The artefact aims to introduce key methods for developing a socially conscious design investigation and for supporting the development of a studio culture amongst the students as well as the tutors. The artefact frames a series of activities with a particular focus on conversation.

I am Black female architect and educator who migrated from Nigeria to the UK at a young age. It is only until recently that I have started to explore in my practice these identities and how they intersect. In response to a peer's blog on the PG Cert programme, I had stated that starting with an understanding of 'self' is an important process in understanding how one relates to others. I took decades to be at ease with my migration story including the early beginnings in the UK. Unsurprisingly, housing, place, and types of employment (economic) opportunities that could be accessed by my single parent mum all influenced those early years.

Having gone through several years of training, my body contradicted the perception that most people had in mind of an architect. This led me to more attempts to acquire the cultural capital that would allow me to gain credibility, whilst solidifying the growing distance from my own Nigerian culture, started from the rupture created by migration. For many years, I designed image driven minimalist home renovation projects. Whilst they reflected what my clients wanted, they looked just like any other middle-class home in the architectural journals or 'Homes & Gardens' magazines. I was designing for a narrow demographic of society and in the same way most other architects would. My education had assimilated me into the mainstream of a profession whereby only a few sections of society could afford to commission me.

'Discourses of "inclusion" often work as a form of symbolic violence, coercing those seen as "excluded" to conform to hegemonic conventions, expectations and values to participate in a process of individual "transformation" into normalised personhoods.' (Burke et al. 2018).

Since 2020, I started to critique how the practice of architecture reproduces exclusion amongst its student body and professionals, and how it reinforces social inequities in the built environment. How can architecture be for us if we cannot see ourselves, our culture, our social practices reflected in the design of spaces?

My intention with the artefact is to plant the seed that encourages students to see the fertile grounds that difference offers for critical spatial practice.

Context – which course/department are you engaged with and why would this intervention be an important one?

Previously, the academic year would start with a visit to the site we will be focusing on for the rest of the year, followed by finding out about it. This artefact takes a different approach acting as a prompt to start with the 'self' followed by 'others.' The BA Architecture course

overview includes this following statement, *'Architecture is about people and how we interact with our environments.'* (CSM 2023), and the artefact aims to address that head on.

Inclusive learning theory - why is your work important within the Academy?

The Academy privileges whiteness, which is rooted in imperialism and colonialism. This privilege of whiteness includes knowledge that is valued within the spaces of academia, which informs 'the canon' from which students learn. Equality policies introduced in the UK since the late 1990s at various institutions including universities in the wake of the institutional racism the murder of Stephen Lawrence had exposed have focused on one aspect of inclusion, which is to increase the intake of ethnic minority students (Ahmed 2012: 44). However, these same policies have failed to address how ethnic minority students might be supported to achieve equality of outcomes. The attainment gaps between white students and Black and ethnic minority students, and students from higher social economic backgrounds and those from lower highlights the work that needs to be done once students have entered the Academy. Co-creating learning spaces and developing curricula where students can see themselves reflected in what they are learning is crucial not only to making the Academy more inclusive, but also for preparing students that can respond effectively to the needs of a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multifaith global community after their studies.

Reflection - what were the considerations as to your process of deciding on the artefact and a description of the artefact?

The artefact that I have created is a briefing for the first series of tasks to kick-off the academic year. The tasks will be carried out individually and in groups and reflected on as a studio collective through peer discussions. The aim of the tasks is to spark conversations about identities starting with the 'self' and gradually progressing to consider 'others'. The artefact will include two briefing documents covering two days of activities. It will act as a scaffold to support the students' explorations and reflections by including pre-lesson reading list and reflective journaling in between the two design studio days.

Action - How would this artefact be used/has/would be used and what does this mean to your practices?

The artefact would be used as introduction to ethnographic research where students will be encouraged to observe and understand the social and cultural practices of residents living on Broadwater Farm Estate, our site of focus for the academic year. The students will also be encouraged to consider the economic conditions and other social inequities that the spaces within the estate reinforce. Before students can design counter interventions to the status quo in the built environment, they need to understand what exactly needs to change and why. As Craig L. Wilkins explains in his book, *'Aesthetics of Equity,'*

'The road to acquiring power that can affect change must be counter to the status quo, for the status quo is object of the change effort. If difference is not allowed to gain standing on its own terms particularly in studio explorations, a long-term, useful understanding of its existence will have difficulty in smoothly reaching fruition and most probably fail, thereby reinforcing the status quo.' (Wilkins 2007: 125)

Evaluation of your process – how successful was it, what you learned and how would/could you do things differently?

The artefact has yet to be tested, however, the intention is that it will form a key part of the Action Research Project for the 3rd semester of PG Cert, where there will be an opportunity for a more rigorous study of its implementation and outcomes. Reflecting on the development of the artefact at this point, the process has led me to reflect on how I frame design studio discussions through the artefact and how students might best be supported leading up to those discussions through additional learning resources, reading lists and reflective journalling. Through the development, I was also encouraged by my tutor to consider the wording used in the description of tasks to ensure that I am providing clarity for each, so that there can be clear outcomes that feed into the following task and activities. I was also encouraged to leave open the approach students might take to record and communicate the outcomes of the activities. I had initially suggested audio given the aural nature of conversations, but decided a written piece or imagery could also work just as well.

Developing the artefact has brought me closer to the *'how'* of teaching social justice and inclusion, although I anticipate that this is a long journey of which I am only at the start. It has helped turn theoretical ideas into clearly defined practical steps that consider how the students can be supported through each stage. Reading *'The Practice of Dialogue in Critical Pedagogy'* (Kaufmann 2010)*,* which was suggested during the development of the artefact also encouraged me to consider the dynamics between participants when engaging in dialogue in the learning space. My view is that conversations in the design studio collapse the hierarchy between the educator and the students. However, I wonder whether social identities play out in terms of who feels entitled to voice their views and how as an educator, I might guide the conversation towards representation and inclusion. bell hooks describes the need for ongoing vigilant awareness, *'To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination.'* (hooks 2003: 36)

If the artefact stimulates critical thinking and social sensitivities, I hope that holding the space for deep listening to what other people have to say would have also been cultivated through the activities and reflections. Essential practice within the design studio collective and in the studio's engagement with the residents of Broadwater Farm Estate.

Conclusion - what are your key findings, observations and reflections regarding this process and your practices?

I would like to conclude on the power of conversations, languages and speech and their importance within academia. The artefact relies on the role of conversation to stimulate the exchange of ideas across peers alongside individual reflections. I have expressed in this report that the design studio structured around conversation can be democratic and inclusive. As bell hooks says: *'Conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator.'* (hooks 2003: 44). However, 'vigilant awareness' is also necessary so that one can stay alert to which type of voice is privileged in academic spaces. The mere act of speaking is not neutral. As hooks explains that when educational spaces are about teaching privileged forms of social practice, *'vernacular speech and languages other than English are not valued. Indeed, they are blatantly devalued.'* (hooks 2003: 45). Voice,

language, and speech are interwoven with identities, social and cultural backgrounds. My teaching practice aims to support students to engage with these differences and to respond to them through an understanding that starts with 'self' and goes on to inform a critical spatial practice.

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