

Alongside: A Conversation about Sustainability and Teaching Design

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In this paper we draw on our experience of teaching in an undergraduate landscape architecture design studio that aimed to test ways in which sustainability could be incorporated into design teaching. In the studio we pursued an approach to teaching that challenged students to think critically about many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about what sustainability could or should mean, and how this unfixed, critical thinking about sustainability might translate into design.

THIS PAPER IS A REFLECTION of our experience teaching in an undergraduate landscape architecture design studio where student levels range from second year to fourth year. This studio set out to challenge existing models for design that claim to be sustainable and to test alternative approaches to thinking about sustainability in relation to design. We explicitly adopted an approach to learning which went beyond acquiring knowledge about sustainability, to one where we encouraged both ourselves and students to think about sustainability as uncertain, contested and contestable.

Learning so conceived is not a process of individual knowledge construction within a socially and culturally stable situation, but is fragmented, uncertain and changing precisely because it is constructed in this increasingly fragmented and changing world (Light and Cox, 2001, p 45).

Our different disciplinary backgrounds of environmental science with a focus on teaching, and landscape architecture with an emphasis on design, allowed us to think about the same subject from different perspectives. However, whilst there were inherent disciplinary differences, there was a sympathy in our critique of sustainability (and design). We both agreed, for instance, that design and sustainability have become a hegemony that overlooks and shadows the complexity of the world, because of the assumptions embedded within them. We also agreed that design and sustainability are inherently political, that design and sustainability do not always lead to an improvement, and that for both design and sustainability to be effective they must operate in very a precise situation and time frame.

We therefore challenged what we saw as some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about sustainability as it has come to be represented within the design disciplines. These included the assumption that design and sustainability are beyond politics; that design and sustainability are necessarily 'good' and that 'universal' ideas and solutions are necessary for progress towards a better world. These assumptions

tend to simplify the world by suggesting that the way 'forward' is clear and unambiguous. We suspected that openly questioning these assumptions would provide a way of moving forward in thinking about both sustainability and design so that the inversion of these assumptions was central to the studio.

In their article "'Sustainability' in Higher Education: From doublethink and newspeak to critical thinking and meaningful learning" Wals and Jickling (2002) suggest that because decisions about sustainability ultimately rest on different interests and values, the concept needs to be openly challenged, negotiated and discussed rather than masking it's complexity under a seemingly "shallow consensus". They contrast two different approaches to education for sustainability. The first adopts an instrumental view of sustainability where "sustainability is fixed, pre- and expert-determined (i.e. academics) and to be reproduced by novices (i.e. students)". They argue that such an approach is not necessarily educational. This is contrasted to education for sustainability which is emancipatory. For Wals and Jickling an emancipatory approach to education for sustainability must be participatory, open, and respectful of different perspectives and attitudes. "Education is viewed as a means to become self-actualized members of society, looking for meaning, developing their own potential and jointly creating solutions" (Wals and Jickling, 2002). Education for sustainability then becomes a process of seeking rather than setting:

The process of seeking, rather than setting, standards for education for sustainability, from an emancipatory vantage point, above all means the creation of space. Space for alternative paths of development. Space for new ways of thinking, valuing and doing. Space for participation minimally distorted by power relations. Space for pluralism, diversity and minority perspectives. Space for deep consensus, but also for respectful dissensus. Space for autonomous and deviant thinking. Space for self-determination. And, finally, space for contextual differences and space for allowing the life world of the learner to enter the educational process (Wals and Jickling, 2002).

The studios title was "Alongside". 'Alongside' implies relation, relation between things, bodies and/or ideas. The idea of 'alongside' enabled us to engage conceptually with our position. It reflected our teaching and learning approach and also the framing of the design project. Rather than present a coherent voice, we presented the students with parallel investigations, one theoretical and one design, to acknowledge the distinction in our backgrounds and the differences and conflicts inherent in those.

Our choice of site was The Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES), because it represented a specific and singular way of thinking about sustainability. It was developed in the early 1970s at a time when the environmental agenda was gaining public support and was one of a series of 'communities' set up to present an alternative to mainstream life. It aims to present 'environmental' models for society, and where possible, it aspires to be self sustaining. These philosophical aspirations are expressed in the physical development of the place. It has been set up as a community distinct from the rest of the surrounding environment.

Rather than immediately studying the specific site of CERES, the students were guided through a series of design exercises that aimed to encourage a conceptual approach to thinking about design and sustainability. It was also intended to encourage students to think more laterally about ways to study a situation by studying parallel conditions somewhere else. To address these issues the following tactics were employed:

1. *Binary*

Binary thinking is inherent in thinking about sustainability and environment – good/bad, inside/outside, public/private, sustainable/unsustainable, culture/nature. The experience of public or private space was mapped as a series of shades rather than the traditional rendering in black and white. A further reconsideration, or teasing apart, of these binaries was used as a tool to assist students to reconsider the ‘sustainability’ of CERES and its relationship with its surrounding suburb. It allowed them to think and to work across the physical boundary of the site. It also gave them an alternative way of engaging with what was there.

2. *Boundary*

The idea of boundary, or the relationship between things rather than the things in themselves, became a focus of the studio. Boundary is the negotiation of adjacent situations. Rather than thinking of boundary as a binary construct, which is either inside or out, it was seen as something that contains many possibilities or permeabilities. A boundary is the means of negotiation between inside and out, but it is operative rather than passive. The effect of a boundary is bigger than the space it takes up. Various types of bounded sites around Melbourne were studied – such as Caroline Springs, Luna Park and Werribee Zoo. This exercise began an investigation into the relationship between the physical, constructed boundary and how that might indicate its relationship to the surrounding territory, which also encouraged a symbolic reading of physical form. This study of boundary extended the idea of image (or the way a place promotes itself) as another kind of boundary. In this case, international examples of bounded places such as Disneyland, Bali and Celebration in Florida were investigated where the image of a place was contrasted with the actuality. These ideas of boundary were later translated to a study of the CERES site.

3. *Conflict*

Another related tactic was to discuss and debate environmental justice. The environmental justice movement defines ‘environment’ as “the place you work, the place you live, the place you play” (Di Chiro, 1995), and this reorientation proved to be a useful tool for students to critique the narrowness of ideas about sustainability represented at places like CERES. The CERES site, therefore, could not be separated from its context, including public open space.

The final exercise for CERES allocated different pieces of the site to different students. Each student was then required to make a proposition for his or her allocated piece of the site. This situation often happens in ‘real life’, whereby only a small part of a project is implemented at a time. This tactic imposed the

idea of working carefully and respectfully in relation to an existing context, rather than imposing an alternative, utopian solution. The students were now working in model form, which meant all of the parts would cumulate to a whole. Once the design for their pieces was complete and the pieces re-accumulated, the students were then required to renegotiate their proposition for the site idea according to, and in respect of, that proposed by their adjacent neighbour. This was intended to encourage the idea of negotiation and multiplicity when developing a design.

Students quickly become adept at critiquing their own and others' work, but many were reluctant to take a position and translate the critique into a design proposition. This was one of the central tensions that arose in the studio. What we were looking for from students was an ability to negotiate the nexus between critique and proposition. Some, but not all, of the students were able to do this in a sophisticated way. Many retreated back into the instrumental model of thinking – defaulting to known examples.

On reflection, what we would do next time is continue to work with the tactics that we employed in the “Alongside” studio, because these did allow the students to move from the pragmatic to the conceptual consideration of theoretical ideas in relation to design. It also enabled students to engage with the complexity and conflict contained within all sites. However, while students became adept at critiquing design that claims to be sustainable, the structure of the studio tended to separate critique and analysis from proposition, and this meant some students separated these processes in their minds. Next time, we would embed the idea of proposition in all critical and analytical exercises so that these processes occur in parallel. In addition, we would present more examples of precedents that negotiate complexity (whether they are considered sustainable or not), rather than focus on the precedents that we positioned as problematic.

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