

Cultural analysis via documentary-making.

Jane Anderson.

Oxford Brookes University.

KEYWORDS Performance, Co-production, Site analysis, Documentary-making, Food culture

In 2017, Year 1 students at Oxford Brookes School of Architecture used film as a medium to explore the food culture of their city. This formed part of their site analysis for a design studio project to design a community building to support food culture in a central location in Oxford. The exact meaning of the term “food culture” was defined by each student as they developed their design brief. They were also encouraged to join or volunteer with local groups in order to gain an experiential understanding of the issues at hand.

Working in twenty-four groups of four or five, students identified local groups who were concerned with different aspects of food culture, conducting background research and then making contact with them. Although many subjects were chosen that were close to the hearts and lived experiences of the students, they also chose to explore unexpected angles with a journalistic zeal, finding unconventional and peripheral activities. Links were demonstrated between food and many other issues such as health, wealth, poverty, ethics, celebration, nature, independence, age, education, social justice, nationality, migration, isolation, family and community.

Students made a film about the particular food culture activity or organisation that their group had identified as being significant. All twenty-four films were shown to the whole cohort for discussion. This was a very successful way to disseminate information about the depth and breadth of food culture activity in the city as well as highlighting just how differently each group could interpret and communicate the information that they had found. The three films shown as part of the “Architecture Connects” conference are about a restaurant

run by catering students supported by Oxford Brookes University (“Cookery School”); a social enterprise brewery that trains prison inmates for employment upon release (“Tap Social”); and a food cooperative that supplies local, ethical and sustainable food that is affordable for those on a student budget (“Cooperative”). The Cookery School film is actually an additional film undertaken by an individual student to gain more detail in developing her design brief.



Fig. 1: Still from film, “Tap Social”. (Blanca Obrador Urquijo)

These three particular films are connected by the fact that they chose an interview format. This format was found to be particularly successful as a means to undertake primary research. Setting up and conducting an interview stimulates meaningful contact with an organisation. It requires advance research and the building of trust between parties. Students are accountable for the questions that they choose to ask. The interviewee’s response gives instant feedback to the student on their own critical thinking and communication skills. Their assumptions may be contradicted, prompting a re-think. This is more effective than the critical thinking that occurs in a conventional site analysis that doesn’t engage with people and relies on the observation and

perspective of the individual. The film was limited to a maximum of two minutes. The group were required to discuss their findings in order to agree which material was significant enough to be included in the final edit.

Interviews were also a very useful way to analyse the “site” of the activity, its actors and also the way that this was perceived by the students. The “Tap Social” and “Cookery School” films both intersperse interview footage with cutaways explaining the wider context and specific details that illustrate the points being made in the interview. Both focus on the spatial qualities of the places where these activities happen, gathering material that was useful in developing their detailed project briefs. The “Cooperative” film is less ambitious in this respect, choosing to focus on the enthusiasm and charisma of the interviewee. An aspect to these films that we did not exploit enough due to lack of time, is

that the films are very useful sources for critical analysis, visual, verbal and spatial. In future, we will follow up the audience screening session with a reflective tutorial or seminar to enable more detailed questions to be asked about the editorial decisions that were made and what this reveals about the subject matter as well as the film makers’ perception of it.

Film makers

“Tap Social”: Blanca Obrador Urquijo, Douglas Major, Ludovica Morelli, Sam Nunn Ayah Nathir.

“Cookery School”: Jane Georgi

“Cooperative”: Fynn Havinga, Tom Hunter, Emma Howard, Joe Heffernan, George James.

With thanks to:

Tap Social, Brookes Restaurant and OxCo-op.

