

The homeless project: social agency and Interior Architecture

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The design briefs in the Interior Architecture studio at Oxford Brookes University have in recent years increasingly focused on socially-oriented themes. Accordingly, the Interior Architecture programme have refined the pedagogic sequence in the design studio, as described in this article, for a better integration of social awareness into the design of architecture. In our design studio we foster the idea that design is a powerful resource to address community needs, and if necessary, to challenge divisive social and cultural conventions which oftentimes are reflected in the built environment.

The disciplines of Interior Architecture and Interior Design are often perceived as superficial application of aesthetics to high-end residential projects, or as a set of skills required to install seductive qualities in retail environments. They are not perceived as fields of knowledge concerned with positively resolving fundamental human aspirations and needs within the built environment. The initial expectation of many students enrolled in our programme is to learn basic design skills that will ensure them access to a professional world, in which high-end design is the most financially rewarding outlet. For these reasons the students consider designing for vulnerable categories, for example homeless people, less relevant to their professional development. The challenge of motivating students to work on 'social' briefs led us to look for ways in which to instil in the students a sense of professional social-responsibility and to stimulate them to consider design objectives beyond aesthetic appearance, or superficial understanding of functionality.

Those issues have been discussed and addressed in our Interior Architecture studio with a variety of design themes conducted over the years with the active participation of the beneficiaries of the design proposals, which in some cases have led to an actual construction. The list of social-briefs, in which we have encountered an ever-growing set of different social situations, have included: the design and furnishing of two nurseries in Grandpont Oxford and Bognor Regis (2005/09), spatial devices for shared activities for co-housing communities (2014/15), the refurbishment of a local community-owned pavilion (2015/16), and the redesign of a canteen facility for a primary school both in Oxford (2016/17). Thus this year's design brief, structured as a two-semester-live-project¹ with Crisis Skylight Oxford² continued our ongoing quest for social awareness and made use of our accumulated experience: both in its initial development in the studio, introducing the students gradually to the complexity of the issue, and in its external relations to the various key players relating to homelessness. The brief demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach, involving psychology, phenomenology, and architecture, and the importance of interior architects' expertise to society (fig 1.).

During the first two weeks the students met with Crisis's staff members and with a police homeless liaison officer; both offered different and informed perspectives on the topic. This introduced the students to a variety of forms of homelessness of which they, and most the general public, were not aware. These included hidden homelessness, a form of homelessness that consists of 'couch-surfing' as well as to overcrowded accommodation.³ The first objective was not to fall into clichés about homelessness, as well as to evaluate carefully ethical issues that may arise with direct contact with homeless people (Austin, 2016). Students were also exposed to social statistics concerning the expansion of homelessness in the UK, and specifically in Oxford,⁴ as well as to the diverse underlying reasons for homelessness. After their initial discussions with Crisis, the students familiarized themselves with individual stories from Crisis database,⁵ and attempted to understand how each homeless related to the outside world. To facilitate this process, the students considered different connotations of house and home. It became apparent that someone can lose their house and be technically homeless but still have possessions and memories, and meaningful social interactions and/or a particular

affiliation to certain places which might be un-orthodox buildings. Thus, ironically the homeless have homes, and the students were to enable the individual cases to reconnect their inner 'homes' with physical spaces.

The students subsequently participated in workshops which aimed to make them aware of general concepts in the discipline of Interior Architecture, such as the way people experience space as a continuous spatial field (fig. 2) and the selective perception of visual/bodily stimulation, which provided valuable insights as the project progressed. The homeless project itself consisted of four stages:

a. Suitcase brief; b. Support Van brief, c. Furniture, and d. Final Brief.

In the final stage, the culmination of the project, the students designed short-term accommodations for homeless people to be placed under the supervision of Crisis Skylight in Oxford, based on the refitting of ZED pod prototypes.⁶ The academic year concluded with a public exhibition held at Crisis Oxford, in the heart of Oxford city centre, attended by public and journalists.

a. The Suitcase brief

Each student was asked to modify a suitcase augmenting the spatial properties of a piece of luggage to reflect the notion of 'home' for a specific homeless person. The emphasis of the exercise was on the individual: his/her social background, the circumstances that led to homelessness, the meaning of home(lessness), and the different paths that he/she was taking to integrate into mainstream society. Because a suitcase is a portable personal space that contains one's most precious and basic objects,⁷ we asked the students to find and modify suitcases that represented the individual story of their chosen homeless person – who became their client for the duration of the year's work. Inside and around the suitcase, each student constructed a set of relationships between meaningful objects and spatial contraptions that captured the complexity of a life in a situation of crisis - the life of a homeless person (fig 3).

The use of 'real' suitcases allowed the students to focus on finding material qualities which they felt suited the story rather than reinventing those, thus shifting the focus from the container to its content and the ways the two intertwined (or not). The outcome presented a powerful set of narratives of homelessness; some students depicted specific moment of crisis, and others concentrated on everyday routines. The students' final pieces were exhibited in our studio and members of Crisis Oxford's staff were invited to review the work. Kate Coker, the director of Crisis Oxford offered to exhibit the suitcases and the final design outputs in a public exhibition in their headquarters in Oxford city centre. This was the first time this group of students identified and acknowledged a direct relationship between design and social impact.

b. The Support Van project

Alongside the suitcases, a more 'practical' second assignment addressed the understanding of the daily functional needs of a homeless person. The students were to adapt the chassis of a commercial van to become a mobile service for the homeless. The variety of designs included domestic provisions such as laundrettes, where both clothing and bodies could be washed (fig 4), meeting places and intimate spaces for encounters with friends and relatives, and services for recycling waste and produce basic commodities. The designs included work-space concepts, small enterprises that could employ the homeless: a bakery, a plastic recycling centre, a digital carpentry that furnishes the cityscape, and a florist who grows flowers for urban spaces. Whereas the first assignment (suitcase) helped the students identify with the psychology of the homeless and reflect upon the individual's mental space, the second assignment focused on bodily conditions, traditionally addressed in a domestic environment, and considered the interaction between practical needs and human dignity, which can be compromised or damaged by the enforced exposure to the urban realm.

c. Furniture

Each student was tasked to build a deep frame (open-sided box) 40x40x40cm (1:10 scale of 4x4x4 metres cubic space) with durable materials and to model a series of spatial elements to allow a number of 'functions' to take place, without necessarily subdividing the space into smaller units. Here it is important to note that each student had to consider what his/her person would prioritise as a need, and not to provide a range of conventional

domestic furniture such as standalone bed and tables. To promote and encourage this mode of thinking, the students modelled first at 1:10 scale some pieces of furniture acting as functional props (sleep, store, sit, rest, work). Then they merged them into one multi-functional spatial entity thus creating a furniture⁸ – a spatial device that is larger than a piece of furniture and able to manipulate architectural space. The various functions were controlled by small ergonomic adjustments whilst defining meaningful portions of space. This design approach enabled students to comprehend that designed spaces are perceived as a continuous membrane (even when made of separate objects).⁹ Elements of the suitcases and functional parts of the support vans were redeployed to articulate the spatial qualities of the deep-framed boxes.

d.Final Brief: Redesigning ZED Pods interiors

The culmination of the didactic process occurred in the last stage of the brief. The students were asked to adapt the structural frame of a ZED pod prototype, placing them on the characteristic metal props over the Nuffield car park, a site next to the Crisis building in Oxford city centre and other relevant services (job centre, train station etc.). Once the site was introduced, the studio discussion focused on the possibility to modify an urban environment using domestic design terms, thus fostering the relationship of the pods with other services into the design process, including consideration of accessibility, visibility, proximity, comfort and dignity. Changing the students' perception on homeless people from 'social-outlaws' rejected from the city-space to dwellers who perceive and use the city differently had a profound impact on the students' design decisions. This was expressed both in functional terms (some domestic functions were designed to be provided outside the pods, at Crisis building, for example) and in psychological terms: homelessness did not have to be hidden away, degrading the city by their presence, but were rather representing an opportunity to build a resilient and proud local community.

The elevated line of ZED pods in the Nuffield car park provided the unifying context for the final designs. The students could opt for a single pod design (to be mirrored as in English terraces), or to merge two pods for a compact cohousing solution. The internal allowance of space (smaller than in the previous furniture boxes) required a further process of compacting and streamlining of functions, as well as increasing overlapping and flexibility of use. The resulting designs were all different, despite being placed in identical pods. The difference reflected the process of refinements, which started with the suitcases of individual psychological considerations and spatial sequencing, and travelled through the other practical and functional steps of the assignment. Each solution was suited to specific 'social' groups: for example if the homeless individual had children, the pods allowed space for them to visit, or if the individual was a maker, the pod contained a small workshop area or art making space. The designs operated like an extension of the person, and so the different categories of homelessness emerged naturally.

Most importantly, the pods did not resemble small houses. They were not like a doll's house with living rooms, bedrooms, and bathrooms. The design criteria did not require a conventional subdivision of the spaces into rooms. Instead, the pods provided a continuous spatial field that could extend into the public space with semi-permanent partitions and change of levels to establish variable degrees of intimacy. In form and articulation, the design proposals (models and drawings) were similar to shelters or natural organic spaces that provided refuge.¹⁰

To conclude, the social-brief worked successfully to support the idea that the design studio can have the role of a social agent: already the brief itself had a social impact via the public exhibition followed by media coverage that forced public discussion. It offered alternative views and options to those currently used by the city with little success when tackling homelessness. In the long term students learned that well-being and psychological aspects are key when attempting to rethink urban issues in the context of individual spheres of interaction. This understanding does not abandon functional requirements, but rather expands the understanding of what functions mean, and by doing so restores dignity to individuals. The students also began shaping their critical awareness and willingness to proactively engage with local and global communities via a professional prism. Chi Pun, a student, summarised her learning in the project: "Before this project I didn't know much about homeless, but throughout the design process I learnt that homelessness can be both physical and psychological. I

developed closer feelings to homeless people and understood their struggles and needs. In my design, I reflected the features that could support them to overcome their situations."

At the students' exhibition of models and drawings at Crisis Oxford, it was the combined psychological and practical design approach that caught public attention, as suggested in Andrew Gant, Leader of Liberal Democrats on Oxford City Council feedback:¹¹ "...Big hostels have their problems, and new homes tend to be built out of the city centre, where people are far away from the services they need.... Obviously you would have to think carefully about the practicalities of something like this (the students' proposals), but it is a great idea and brilliant to see young people being so involved in this issue that resonates very strongly with everyone." Rachel Lawrence, who manages Single Rough Sleeping services for Oxford city council also visited the exhibition and added that the students work suggests a deep understanding of homelessness issues in the designs; one which takes into account the psycho-social trauma and not only the need for a 'roof over the head'.

/ Notes /

- 1 A live project involves a negotiation of a brief, time-scale, product and budget between external collaborator and an educational institution, (Anderson & Priest, 2014)
2. A national charity whose aim is to end homelessness whilst providing an education, training and employment support to homeless people.
3. On other types of homelessness in the UK: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/types-of-homelessness/>, last entered 23 August 2018
4. Since 2010 the number of rough sleepers on any given night across the UK has doubled: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/about-homelessness/>, last entered 23 August 2018
5. Crisis run an online campaign 'Everybody in' that aimed at breaking stereotypes about homeless people by telling their personal stories.
6. The ZED pod is a prototype developed by ZEDfactory for an affordable and highly sustainable accommodation, placed on raised platforms to let cars to be parked underneath, a characteristic that potentially allows carparks and other urban left-overs sites to become suitable for accommodation. For more information: <https://www.zedfactory.com/zed-pod>. Last entered 22 August 2018
7. For example Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise*, a reproduction of some of his famous work into a miniature version kept in a bespoke suitcase that works like a miniature museum: "Everything important that I have done can be put into a little suitcase," (1952). Other examples include Robert Golber *Untitled*, 1997 which used a suitcase as a gateway to a private world, and Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable City* series, depicting famous cities in a suitcase using clothing items, where the 'suitcase becomes the life support container of modern life'.
8. The concept of Furniture as a 'living membrane' is presented in Andrea Placidi 'Furniture' in *InHabit: People, Places and Possessions* (eds Buxton, Hulin & Anderson) (2017) Peter Lang Oxford
9. Conventional use of this design approach is imbedded in caravan or sailing boat design, and appear also in architecture, for example in Frank Lloyd Wright's domestic architectures distribution and internal orientation with overlapping 'functions', and Adolf Loos's *Raumplan* with the vertical progression of social hierarchies.
10. The theory of Prospect-Refuge, as proposed by Jay Appleton in *The Experience of the Landscape* (1975) Wiley, was used as a design methodology to understand the primordial response to our environment.

/ REFERENCES /

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2. Austin, T., (2016). Ethical Dilemmas in Managing and Teaching Live Sponsored Student Projects. Brookes e-Journal for Learning and Teaching [online], Volume 8. Available at : <http://bejlt.brookes.ac.uk/paper/ethical-dilemmas-in-managing-and-teaching-live-sponsored-student-projects/> [accessed 22 August , 2018]

¹¹ <http://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/16246798.oxford-homeless-pods-could-be-suspended-over-worcester-street-car-park/>, last entered 25 August 2018.

3. Placidi, A., (2017). Furniture in Buxton, Hulin & Anderson (eds), *InHabit: People, Places and Possessions* .Oxford: Peter Lang
4. Appelon, J., (1976). *The Experience of the Landscape*. London: John Wiley