

The Pleasure's All Ours: Productive Trades Between Practice and Research

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We're academic practitioners who have offered our expertise to clients as historians and conservation theorists. In particular, we've worked with a University client who's been evaluating a group of modernist structures that are part of its estate to make good decisions about alterations to a listed Gothic Revival building. We've brought academic knowledge to bear on our architectural judgment. In turn, our knowledge has been valued for the guiding logic it brings to projects and for providing a special credibility in negotiations with conservation authorities.

We want to reflect here on what we've gained as academics from also being practitioners. We practice through a design research consultancy named Design Office at Newcastle University in the UK. We use the fee income we get from projects to pay studentships that support fees and subsistence for PhD candidates. These doctoral students labor on the projects that the Office is hired to undertake. Work from those projects appears in their PhDs by Design, not as a literal catalogue of designs but instead by taking thematic cuts diagonally through the work. And our endeavors have been published as academic research. We will account for three research projects here that have emerged from the opportunities and frustrations of our practice.

The first research project is about valuing modernist heritage. Our University client owns a group of buildings constructed in the 1960s as part of an expansion of science in British universities. They have well-composed, if plain, façades characterized by strips of glazing and brown brick, and a subtle

layering of elements. Internally, they were built with simple finishes: fairfaced blockwork and exposed concrete structure with veneered solid-core doors and concrete or carpeted floors. Piecemeal adaptations have resulted in the painting of most surfaces and the introduction of suspended ceiling systems and surface-mounted plastic trunking. Neither the original structures nor their altered form fit the University's self-image. Asked to refurbish two foyers, our first proposal—to return to the original finishes—was rejected. Our second proposal, to use granite in place of concrete and oak in place of veneer, met with approval, the materials invoking ideas of quality and long history. Our detailing involved wrapping columns with oak strips—quoting from Aalto's wrapped columns which were themselves a quotation of Classical fluting—and a cabinet whose proportions were drawn from Corbusier's *Unité* in Marseilles. The original buildings were dismissible, it seemed to us, because of their 1960s values that appeared to reject history in favor of what was then imagined as a modern technological future. To ensure the contemporary acceptance of these buildings, we retrofitted them with a history—first, with materials suggesting longevity and second, by equipping the foyers with details referring to architectural history (specifically the history of modernism)—permitting modernism to become a valid subject of heritage.

The second research project emerged from briefing, progress, and 'VE' ('Value Engineering') meetings held with our institutional client. The internal project manager they allocated to our projects

was trained as a telephone engineer, a self-styled "practical man" with little patience for design. His boss, an architect who moved into estate management, also cultivated an impatience with visual matters. They also appointed a multinational project management firm to oversee design development. These actors preferred the discourse of efficient, profitable, and timely delivery, the value of process over product. Resulting discussions made us acutely conscious not just of their values but also our own: our design priorities, the legacies of our architectural training, and our rhetorical tropes. Our differences have played out around attitudes to technology, technological cultures, and specifically the 'techno-rational' culture where the priorities of development finance appear logically connected with systems thinking and management theory. An initial mapping of these attitudes became developed into the plan of a hypothetical city—"Practiceopolis"—which has since been inhabited with buildings and characters who embody the values we've encountered. A graphic novel is now in production, relocating our meetings to Practiceopolis and dramatizing them as conflicts between individuals and cultures. The result will caricature the values at work, rendering them explicit rather than implicit, helping us to work them through.

Our institutional client also yielded our third research. They have a standard specification for small projects in their estate. This includes a standard blue carpet tile, patterned ceiling tile, fluorescent batten fitting, vanilla paint, and plastic trunking. Chosen for maintenance purposes, because the relevant suppliers have pledged to keep these products in production,

we have fought against the extension of this standard specification to our own projects, primarily because of their visual qualities. This encouraged us to speculate about the wide range of default processes at work in architectural production. Not just in terms of BIM libraries and specification writing software linked to product literature, but specifically default as an attitude which produces space—desirable among project managers but anathema to architects. The research includes a cultural history of suspended ceiling systems using filed patents to review their development. It has also resulted in a re-working of Superstudio's famous collage "Life, Supersurface," removing its grid extending to infinity from the desert floor and retrofitting it instead as a suspended ceiling. A future aim is to design and construct a room experimenting with what might happen if the architect tries completely to sublimate their agency to defaults.

In five years of practice as Design Office, we've discovered that our distinctive expertise as academic practitioners has commercial value. Our clients have benefitted from the application of our knowledge. But we feel that we have benefitted more from the exchanges. As architects and researchers—from our luxurious position simultaneously inside and outside professional practice—we've been required to catch our own complacencies. We've been provoked by testing our ideas in the context of people who, if not always hostile to them, are often ambivalent. And the pleasure has been all ours.