

## Fieldwork: Uncovering Cultural Landscapes

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### Introduction: An Interest in Place

*"Placeless events are inconceivable, in that everything that happens must happen somewhere, and so history issues from geography in the same way that water issues from a spring: unpredictable but site-specifically"*

Anne Campbell – archaeologist and cartographer<sup>1</sup>

Defining 'place' is central to an architecture that is not only successful as a visual object but also effective in responding to how we occupy space and affect the surrounding environment. If an architect wishes to meaningfully address a place and propose relevant transformations, working from inside rather than outside the location helps them understand what is important. The role becomes relational rather than solitary, and positions the architect within a network of users and needs, where the interpretation of site will be constantly transformed and renegotiated and the definition of place will become open ended rather than singular.

In this paper I describe three years of an undergraduate design studio at the University of Brighton, and how working continuously in the field has helped students develop a response to a place that holds a richer and more complex conception of it and their relationship within this definition. Physically working in a site has implicated them in their design ideas and made them responsible for the consequences of their ensuing propositions.

### The Architect's Fieldtrip

The Grand Tour, Prix de Rome, Polyark Bus and creative residencies show that there are many approaches to leaving the safety of own's environment and bedding into an alien context for the sake of curiosity and learning. But as a learning device, these are of most interest to me when they allow the student to move from the role of tourist into a participant.

If a study trip places the student as a passive observer, a residency allows more of an active role. It is when the artist-in-resident model moves away from the format of the provision of a studio as refuge from daily distractions, and instead invites the artist to situate their work in direct relation to the context that they stay in, that an opportunity arises for an architect interested in place-making. Whether the ensuing artwork is physical, cultural, social or political, it gives a deeper insight into what the character of the place may be. In teaching architecture it asks the student to engage not only with the study of spatial and material explorations but also take responsibility for the consequences of the abstracted theoretical experiments when placed into a real world context.

At university, few architectural programmes have successfully embedded a residency throughout the length of a design project whilst still fulfilling other course commitments. Rural Studio has run its 'off-campus, design-build programme' for over 20 years, engaging with 'what should be built, rather than what can be built'<sup>2</sup>, but this is still fairly unique as a model. However, short-term residencies are also powerful tools whereby the student, taking the role of 'guest', can engage with a place and local community for a few days or weeks. This then becomes more akin to a field trip, and it is the successes of this model in my own teaching practice that I will describe later.

The motive for framing the design studio as working 'in the field' is that, when running my own architectural practice – Architects In Residence, my approach to any design project was to gain a deep knowledge of the location with the aim of uncovering complex and surprising uses and characteristics and allowing any proposition to address the extraordinary daily occupation of a place. To do this you need to spend time in it, so we would camp out on sites or move in with clients. We called what we did as Creating Storylands and our ambition was to create places that would allow every person to feel that the space was specific to them, but that each of these spaces was also

larger than them by being relational to what was beyond.

'Genius loci' is a philosophy that is invoked by many (from Pope to Rossi to Norberg-Shulz), when describing the importance of centring place at the heart of design<sup>3</sup>. But this assumes that the character of a place can be distilled to a single description or spirit. The reality is that place is far more multifaceted and contradictory and rather than having a clearly defined character, is one that is constantly in flux. Working somewhere over a long period of time reveals some of these complexities and changes, generating a deeper set of questions. Relationships can be developed, opinions challenged and both theoretical and intuitive ideas tested in a physical context rather than answers being assumed.

### Fieldwork

My teaching practice investigates the British landscape where the studio is developing cultural readings of the countryside and coastline that understand it as a place as rich and diverse as any city with its own strong cultural legacy.

The choice of place to work comes, in main, from my own personal curiosity or knowledge of a place – I look for distinct landscapes that were once teeming with life and activity to investigate lost industries and communities that had made rural Britain more than the current attitude of preserved landscape. Each of the project locations has been a rich resource to discover how the countryside and coastline is a manufactured, worked landscape that had distinctive cultures and strong communities. Shoreham's shingle spit was once home to the early British film industry. The Island of Portland used to have 100 working stone quarries, most of them now lying redundant. And the Ouse was once a busy navigation carrying goods across Sussex.

Although these three sites were chosen for their character, accessibility was a significant factor, and the proximity of each location to Brighton defined the nature of the site visit and the roles a student would take when there – tourist, consultant, guest or resident. It is this nuance of the part one plays and how it may change on repeat visits that can radically alter the student's response to a place.

As an example, Shoreham is a half hour bus trip from Brighton. The students used this proximity to visit

multiple times, but chose to position themselves outside the community, taking the more traditional role of architect as consultant designer. The students approached the project with a clearly defined educational time frame. Conversely, in Portland, although a three-hour journey away, students were invited as guests of the Portland Sculpture Quarry Trust (PSQT), and were completely immersed into island life for a week resulting in them taking full responsibility for their design proposals, remaining in discussion with locals throughout the project, returning to exhibit them at the end of the year and continuing to develop ideas with PSQT during their Year Out. The educational experience has spread beyond a university degree. These students were transformed by the place as much as they were suggesting transformations to the island.



Fig. 1. Shoreham Fort: Installing 'Look-Out' 1 of 6

To write a brief that allows students to develop a strong relationship with a place requires planning that will allow them the time to slip below the surface of immediate responses. Working in the field offers them this time. The field trip makes the student become active, working outside with changing conditions requiring the work to develop dynamically and remaining constantly receptive to external opinions and situations. It is a chance to develop and test questions that may challenge current preconceptions of a place. Before working at Shoreham Fort, the students saw it as a forgotten ruin on a windswept, vacant site. After spending six weeks working weekly in it to install large scale 1:1 'Look-Outs' for a public exhibition, they realised it had a fabulously rich history

that they were previously unaware of and that it was much loved, used and cared for by locals.

Fieldwork is part of any fieldtrip. Architectural education has borrowed it from the geography department and developed it to move beyond the observational into the propositional. The fieldwork becomes not only about recording and collecting data, but also about testing physical ideas. Along the Ouse, being on the edges of Brighton, we could veer between quick daytrips and weeklong residencies, taking a long view in discovering its nature and testing various fieldwork techniques in recording its change.

The objective is to infuse the student experience of design process with the realities of tangible conditions, complete with its disorderliness and complexity. Fieldwork fails, instruments are broken, prototypes don't fit, access isn't granted and locals don't always want to engage. But students then learn to work around these problems much as an architect does in practice.



Fig. 2. Rescuing Wayfinder from Flooded Fields

When working directly into site and alongside local residents, students forge tangible relationships and links to the real world are exposed to the consequences of their own opinions and ideas making them responsible for their design actions. When we stayed for a week on the riverbanks of the Ouse, the first of last years big storms hit so the students took on the local residents' concerns of flooding and falling power cables. They watched sluice gates be opened, saw ancient trees fall and heard of a teenager being swept out to sea. When a real connection is made to a place, the student becomes another stakeholders in its future. They begin to care about the impact of what they place into the site however radical the design.

The studio briefs that I set are intended to frame the question of whether architecture can hold multiple eras of history together simultaneously, keeping company with livelihoods and communities that have gone before but without becoming sentimental or nostalgic in these readings of place. Instead a student is instilled with the understanding that buildings are most successful when relevant to the local community for which they are made. This asks of a student to begin not with an abstract diagram and predefined opinions, but with close observation and conversation in order to cultivate a bespoke approach to site.

### Deep Mappings

Working along The Ouse in Sussex, the students developed their studio work from deep-mappings they made of the area – putting stories to places and seeing what joins them. This was to allow them to visualise their findings about place, and link scale and time with events so that architectural ideas could emerge.

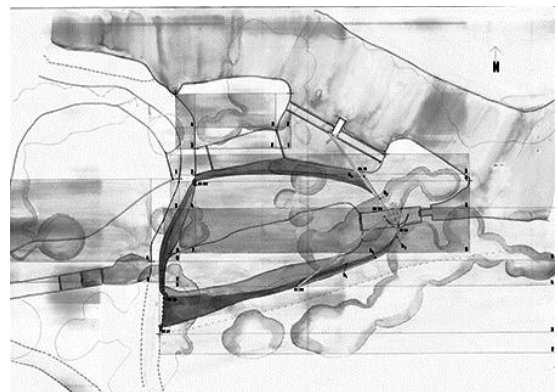


Fig. 3. Choreography of Past & Present Events, Barcombe Mills

Deep Mapping is a phrase coined by American travel writer, William Least Heat-Moon, now in his 70s.<sup>4</sup> It is used by cartographers and archaeologists, poets and psycho-geographers and refers to approaching a place by including within any reading of it, history, folklore, natural history and hearsay. Mike Pearson (theatre director) and Michael Shanks (archaeologist) wrote of this method that it is about

“...representing the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place...”<sup>5</sup>

The drawings offered the students a new type of survey note and map that they could start to draw scaled structures, spaces and programmes into. When added to, the drawing could continue to offer multiple readings of the relationship between proposition and landscape.

#### Tailor-Made Instruments, Props and Probes

This idea of relational drawings has been asked of students in the projects in order to uncover for themselves interesting histories, memories and myths about the place, so that they develop a connection with it through their own curiosity of it. In each project the drawings become the resource from which to design a physical construct that would act as a site-specific probe. They are given to particular people, placed precisely in landscapes or used as an instrument or prop to reveal change, collect data, unveil hidden stories, provoke conversations or start friendships. The studio returns periodically to retrieve and critique the findings and test new ideas through further physical interventions, events and exhibitions.



Fig. 4. Taking the Mobile Smokehouse to Cove Opie Fishing Huts, a Gift to Local Fishermen

In Shoreham we called them look-outs, referencing the role of a Fort, on Portland we called them Gifts as we were visitors to the island and along the Ouse we named them Waymarkers to acknowledge the pathways and routes that run parallel and perpendicular to it. The purpose of the probe as a teaching tool is to give immediate feedback from the site developing a two-way dialogue between student and place. As a learning mechanism it lets students' fieldwork and their ensuing ideas evolve quickly and confidently beyond the observational and into the propositional.

What evolves out of the fieldwork is the development of an architectural language in form and use, alongside a programmatic proposal, that responds to the conditions of a specific place with not only an awareness of the physical environment but also a local social and economic one. This allows the architecture that emerges to rethink uses of our landscape and reinvent structures, forms, materials, and spatial solutions – both robust and fragile encapsulating the different timescapes that have formed our countryside.

#### Case Study 01: New Uses for Historic Structures

Choosing a site that was a scheduled Ancient Monument, with fragile flora environment, meant that we needed the students to clearly understand and respect the material and environmental context and constraints of place.



Fig. 5. Resident Playing with the Kaleidoscope

By beginning their design process by building large scale 1:1 'Look-Outs' carefully placed into the fabric of Shoreham Fort, they had no choice but to closely record the existing context, making not only traditional survey notes, but also recording how the site is currently occupied against how it had once been occupied. The proximity of Shoreham to Brighton meant that the students could afford to keep returning to the site multiple times. Being there in different weather conditions and from weekday to weekend changed their opinions of the appropriateness or validity of their proposals.

Prototypes were taken back and forth between site and workshop to be installed and assessed. The failures and problems were carefully recorded, measurements were retaken and designs were rethought. The final versions were installed as an open exhibition and the local

residents and friends of Shoreham Fort were invited to come and 'play' with the devices. Meeting the locals in an informal setting with the Fort as a stage set and the Look-Outs acting as props, was invaluable to the students' grasp of their role as architect. For the first time the students understood that the residents were also their clients.

Throughout the process, the students' role remained one of a more traditional architect, acting as concerned consultants and designers - but having to install the devices for a public exhibition meant they took responsibility for the safety of the public, the care of the fabric of the fort and the custody of the environment's fragile flora. There was a direct physical repercussion if they did not. This meant that when later translating their ideas into an architectural proposition they were more understanding of the sensitivity and skill needed to design into an existing ancient structure, and more aware of the consequences of their design ideas to the physical environment and to the social and cultural conditions of Shoreham's local community.

#### Case Study 02: Guests on the Island

As a tutor, I wanted to engender a way for students to become genuinely concerned for the place they were working in so that they were transformed by it as much it could be transformed by their ideas.

From previous trips as both an architect to specify Portland Stone and as rock climber to scale the cliffs and quarries, I had met the Portland Sculpture Quarry Trust, a locally based charity that manages a redundant quarry, turning it from a municipal refuse site into a working sculpture park. They invited us to work with them, using their workshops, hall and kitchen as our studio, lecture theatre, gallery and communal dining room. They were keen to collaborate in developing ideas as to how to regenerate the island's many redundant quarries. This allowed us to run a socially engaged brief in a place three hours away from Brighton as we could work 'in-residence', closely linked with the local community.

It was an intense week starting by carrying their gifts across the island to find the person or place they were to give them to. Living in Portlanders houses gave the students immediate access to meeting others relevant to their projects and a steady stream of local knowledge and feedback. Stone carving workshops,

visits around the working quarries, and lectures from local experts gave the students a stronger understanding of the qualities of stone and geology and ecology of the island. The set up allowed students create their own community naturally supportive of peer-to-peer learning and teamwork. Nightly communal meals were shared with locals and an exhibition of their weeks work lead the ensuing conversation about redevelopment on the island.



Fig. 6. Stone Carving Workshop

During the week, PSQT had provided us with a home and a workplace, and the arrangement had caused the students to take full ownership of their projects with the fieldwork and project development becoming increasingly autonomous. The gifts still remain on the island – secreted in a quarry fissure, propped up on a quarryman's mantelpiece or hung up in a local pub.

On returning to Brighton the students had grown in confidence and ambition in translating initial findings into an architectural contribution to the landscape, one that was capable of supporting a sustainable future for the islanders and their environment.

#### Case Study 03: Fieldwork Close to Home

If there was any year to understand a relational landscape with itself and human inhabitation it was this past one - breaking records in the South East for both drought and floods. Working along a river's edge from source to mouth, the students became fully aware that any design proposition had long-term consequences to the local and global community.

Choosing a river that was on our doorstep meant the students were familiar with it, putting them in the role of local resident, with their own vested interests. But prolonged fieldwork was intended to break any complacency with their assumptions as to its character and use.

We used the river as an outside studio and mixed in a week-long residency with the weekly daytrips and site visits. On the fieldtrip we were the residents inviting our local community to come to talk to us and share in our growing understanding of the Ouse. We were staying on a farm only a twenty minute train ride back to the university, so although we lived by the river with our own studio space, the students could return to use the university workshops. This helped them to immediately modify their Waymarkers in response to failed in-situ tests, and bring them back for further testing. There was less urgency to have work completed than on Portland as we could return another day, but this was still a week of complete immersion with the surroundings and people, sharing the fears of the local community as a vicious autumn storm brewed and floods were warned of.



Fig. 7. The Plough – Using The Wayfinder

By residing next to the river for that week, the students were part of the system and so took complete responsibility the rest of the year for the consequences of their design actions. And by living close to the area, their ideas could continue to percolate as they could repeatedly return to their chosen sites and to ask questions of locals. What emerged from this process were architectural proposals that show unexpected

and speculative ideas, that move beyond the sentimental or nostalgic and could act as a catalyst to regenerate Sussex towns and villages that sit along the Ouse, working symbiotically with the river and its catchment area instead of turning its back on it.

### Conclusion: The Value of Acting in the Field

Architectural proposition is nearly always transformative, and the value for a student to work in a real-life setting, having such a direct relationship with the context of the project, is in being implicated in the work, rather than separated from the community and site. The connections made with a place are often the spark for a student in instigating a real understanding as to how architectural ideas are generated and developed, but also offer alternative ways that initial ideas can be tested to take on bottom-up as well as top-down views. Learning to be responsible for the consequences of their design proposal teaches a student to take on a level of autonomy in learning within a teaching framework and allows the generation of a personal line of enquiry that I have seen develop into an accomplished thesis. The student develops skills beyond the traditional role of architect. They learn to act as protagonist and entrepreneur, environmentalist and community worker. And they learn the value of place making in an architectural project.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> McFarlane, Robert. "Gneiss" in *The Old Ways: a journey on foot* Pin 2012. p 1846

<sup>2</sup>'Rural Studio Purpose and History'  
<http://www.ruralstudio.org/about/purpose-history> accessed on 17.07.14

<sup>3</sup> Leach, Neil. "The Dark Side of the Domus" in *What is Architecture?* The Journal of Architecture Vol.3. 1998.p.88

<sup>4</sup> Gregory-Guider, C. "Deep Maps: William Least Heat-Moon's Psychogeographic Cartography" in *ESharp: Issue 4: Journeys of Discovery* Press:Univeristy of Glasgow 2005 .p.1-2