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MIDDLE STAGE

PRACTICING REFLECTION
IN A COLLECTIVE DESIGN STUDIO

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

COLLECTIVE, TRANSDISCIPLINARITY, TEACHING, COMPLICITY

DDR STATEMENT

We see our work in the field of performative research practice using both teaching and practice projects as a real laboratory in which to develop and test ideas. Rather than remaining an observer, we seek to form a valid and highly personal research position from within active processes in the sense of action research. This requires a high level of personal reflection on the part of ourselves, the researchers, to constantly question our own inferences and assumptions. The focus of this contribution is on the ways we can better apply and coach reflective practices in our design studios. Over the course of the semester we documented our own reflections using a process of auto ethnographic enquiry and made use of this method in some of the studio tasks. The final workshop was based on a pedagogic reflective dialogue using the “4 Rs” model to prompt different levels of reflection.

ABSTRACT

At Natural Building Lab (NBL) reflection always plays a large role in our studio and project-based practice, this manifests as a focus on sensitive and effective communication in large and often inter-cultural or inter-disciplinary teams. In practice, this means we explicitly encourage working in large groups and actively seek opportunities for fully integrated collaboration with other disciplines in our design studios. This paper will aim to provide a more theoretical and pedagogical “scaffolding” for our reflective practices using the framework of the “four R’s model” to describe different levels of reflection. We will apply these ideas directly to an active design studio and explore how students put the experience of working as part of a design studio collective in context with their wider experiences and understandings of university training and wider architecture practice by referring to material from the semester and a post-semester workshop.

Practicing Reflection in a Collective Design Studio

At Natural Building Lab (NBL) reflection always plays a large role in our studio and project-based practice, this manifests as a focus on sensitive and effective communication in large and often inter-cultural or inter-disciplinary teams. In practice, this means we explicitly encourage working in large groups and actively seek opportunities for fully integrated collaboration with other disciplines in our design studios. Does this lead participants to think differently about their education & profession? This paper will aim to provide a more theoretical and pedagogical “scaffolding” for our reflective practices using the framework of the “4 R’s model” to describe different levels of reflection. We will apply these ideas directly to an active design studio and explore how students put the experience of working as part of a design studio collective in context with their experiences and expectations of university training and wider architecture practice by referring to narrative and auto-ethnographic material from the semester and a post-semester workshop.

STUDIO DAZWISCHEN

The aim of the “zu:flucht” Studio was to finalise the planning and realisation of a spatial installation using 6 former tempo-home containers. The installation will serve to activate the space behind the ruined portal of Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin, where in the coming years the construction of the Exil Museum will be starting ¹. The studio consists of 18 participants in the architecture masters programme, who collaborated with a series of external partners including civil engineers, communication designers and the user



After my first online semester in summer I was not very motivated for a second one. That things worked so well with this group was both a surprise and a relief. The experience threw up a number of questions for me. How do I want to work in university and professional context in the future? I think that I have refined my view of what constitutes a “good” collaboration and discovered new aspects of what it can mean to work “together”. I want to apply and expand these ideas in the future – maybe with

Participant (Anonymous), Reflective Dialogue
26.02.2021

IMAGE: The final presentation was performed as a walkthrough of the exhibition using the whiteboard tool Miro, serving to highlight the interdisciplinary approach of the studio ©Studio Dawzwischen, WiSe 2020-21



themselves (Stiftung Exilmuseum). From the outset we planned to position the studio as a single collective ie. everybody working on one project with different specialisations and expertise, the collective named themselves Studio Dazwischen. Our previous experience shows that such a studio requires participants to practice a high degree reflection, especially in the terms of how to structure the collective effectively and also in how to communicate with other participants, cooperation partners and especially with the users/clients themselves.

As many colleagues will have experienced, the pandemic has put the studio model under considerable strain, yet more evidence of our need to function effectively in absence of a “stable-state”². From the outset we asked ourselves - can we really expect the participants to be able to collaborate effectively in a group of 20 people digitally? Remote collaboration requires self-discipline and awareness as well as strong communicative and organisational skills, and this to a degree far beyond the scope of what is traditionally learned in architecture school. We decided to proceed with the studio in the collective format and performing the entire studio remotely proved to strengthen, rather than limit the efficiency of our collaboration.

COLLECTIVES & COMPLICITY

But what do we have to gain by operating as a collective? The last decade has been marked by an increasing dilution and disappearance of traditional job descriptions across all sectors caused by the short-term nature of today’s job market. One estimate is that a young person entering the labour market in 2000 will change employers twelve to fifteen times in her lifetime³. Instead of the solid identity promised by a career in an established profession or institution, our working lives will be defined by constant change. This volatility gives rise to a *situative professionalism* meaning that we will learn to approach complex problems from different perspectives throughout our careers, problems which can increasingly only be solved through inter- or transdisciplinary approaches⁴. In the context of architectural education, this dilution of traditional identities and skillsets means that while spatial and technical prowess clearly will remain part of some architects key competency, an increased proficiency in soft skills such as communication, moderation, empathy, listening and self-awareness will provide graduates better with the skills needed to succeed on tomorrow’s job market.

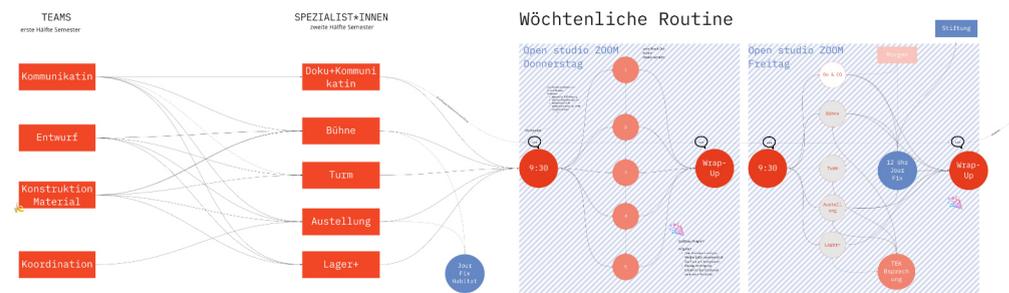


IMAGE: Diagram showing the way group structures developed over the two phases of the semester and the how these translated into weekly routines between zoom and miro. ©Studio Dazwischen, WiSe 2020-21

Taking the “collective” rather than the “design competition” as an organisational model for the studio reflects an interest in alternative organisational forms and their potential to challenge established power structures, understandings of authorship and professional identities in wider architecture practice. The collective as an organisational form brings with it connotations of a certain volatility or short-termness, which is often falsely considered as negative, running as it does against established notions of stability. Culture theorist Gesa Ziemer describes this kind of project-based collaboration as *complicity* and its practitioners as *accomplices*. Ziemer’s aims through this new terminology is to highlight the potential of this kind of collective practice, which has always been part of the avant-garde and served to critique existing norms and power structures⁵. Her research finds contemporary evidence of *complicity* in the arts, economy and science, describing a kind of temporary, highly intensive and affective, yet radically innovative collective practice that can be well applied to the interactions in a collective design studio. Experimenting with the collective as an organisational form exposes participants to a different type of group experience not so common in mainstream architecture practice or education.

CONCEPTUALISING REFLECTION

In relation to the design studio, one of the best-known theories of reflection is Donald Schön’s *reflection in* and *reflection on action*⁶. Schön saw that studio-based training was successful because it was based on controlled and simulated versions of professional practice, that is the studio task mimics the design tasks that one encounters in a practice scenario. Initially very popular and seen as a blanket vindication for the primacy of the studio model, Schön’s work has come under criticism in recent years. His highly formalised and

patriarchal pedagogical encounters reflect an extremely narrow view of architectural practice and serve only to discipline students into becoming the most traditional kind of architects 7. Schön's model serves well to understand how we learn design skills through simulated practice, yet is unsuited to explain how the studio can train us to reflect on exactly the disciplining practices that Schön's kind of teaching prescribes.

To understand how participants reflected on the *complicit* interactions taking place in a collective process, we looked to a less vocationally focused model. Researchers agree that there are different levels of reflection, ranging from how we make sense of experience in the present to how we use these experiences to construct our practice in the future. In university education the 5 R's Model describes these levels. Ryan proposes a simplified four "R's": reporting/responding, relating, reasoning and reconstructing. This model appealed to us due to its learning focus and its lack of discipline specific baggage.

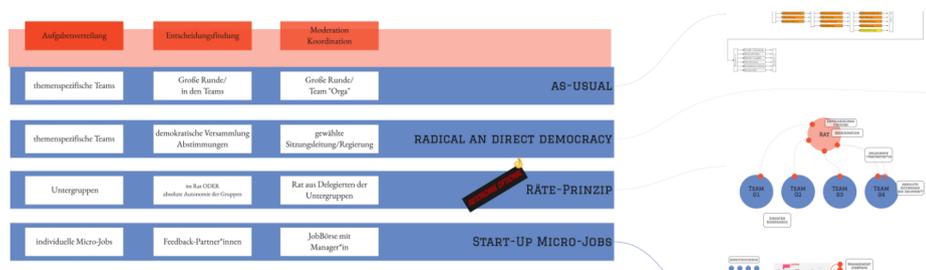


IMAGE: The structure of the collective and its associated processes was treated as a design task to be iteratively developed and tested against the challenges presented by new developments each week ©Studio Dawzwischen, WiSe 2020-21

REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE

Reflection on both processes and communication played a key role throughout the semester, which concluded on 26.02.2020. For the final session we planned a specific workshop to collect responses for integration and analysis, as context we watched together the research film which accompanies Ziemer's *Komplizenschaften*. Using the 4 R's model we used a series of prompts and questions specifically aiming to place the experience of the studio within a wider university and practice context and to reflect what effect the digital semester had on the way we collaborated. In groups of 4-5 the participants documented their discussions in the whiteboard tool miro. A number of interesting points arose in the discussion which will be described in detail in our presentation at the symposium and the following proceedings,

linking these responses back to the levels of reflection and potential of *complicity* described above..

LITERATURE

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