

Matthew Crabbe

Matt is an idealist and thinks that group skills are underpriced in architecture school, often in favour of a competitive attitude to design, that has its endgame in an intractable and environmentally unfriendly building sector. At NBL he values the chance to collaborate with a huge variety of like-minded and inspirational people on projects which present a more hopeful vision for our shared built environment. His big wish is to inspire and empower NBL'ers to realise these visions in their own critical and collective spatial practice. Originally from the UK, Matt has been based in Berlin since 2011 and joined Natural Building Lab as a teaching and research associate in April 2018. He is part of the team responsible for teaching-related projects at NBL while working on his PhD dissertation.

POSTCARDS FROM PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

It has always been the case that the “freedom” of university learning exists in an ever-perceived tension with the “constraints” of mainstream practice. However, in the current climate of constant crisis, the absolute urgency of so many of the challenges facing the profession is causing this gap to widen at an alarming rate as progressive institutions try to compensate for some of the apparent deficits of mainstream practice by following a critical agenda in cooperations and formats that often run against mainstream trends and economic concerns. This urgency is also acutely experienced by individuals, and in our experience, our graduates expect their job to provide a path for them to progress these transformational agendas. Whether ecological, social or personal, these agendas increasingly reflect collective goals and values rather than individualistic ones. As a result of these tensions, many graduates initially require some convincing that the profession can make good on their demands for a job that can impact the most pressing issues of our time. Yet harnessing new practitioners’ drive, potential and ability to drive transformation in the sector should be a priority for practice.

Forming a professional identity is a key part of university and early practice experiences. In an interesting study investigating teachers’ career stories, Kelchtermans identifies five components that form a professional identity (PI): self-image, self-esteem, task perception, job motivation and future perspective. For the purposes of this proposal, I am particularly interested in the first two aspects: self-image is how we perceive ourselves as professionals and is influenced by how others perceive us, while self-esteem is how well we think we do our jobs and how confident we are at handling its associated pressures and stresses. These are clearly two aspects of professional development that are strongly affected by the “practice-gap” between university and practice, is the job what I expected and am I equipped with the tools to handle it?

My proposal is inspired by the paper “The Ground the Walk On” by Diane Kettle, in which she combines snapshot photography with a narrative enquiry approach. In Kettle’s study interviewing headteachers, she takes a Polaroid portrait and asks them to write a description of who they see in the photograph on the back. The result of her study is a powerful account of the challenges facing headteachers. Using Kettle’s methodology as a basis, I am interested in using a practice-based method inspired by the established ethnographic approach, photo-elicitation. Usually, in photo elicitation, photographs are used to structure an interview with the participant - that is, the photographs are used to “elicit” responses related to the research themes. I plan to combine this method with an artistic research approach to portrait photography. In fine arts photography, the portrait is often used to explore the theme of identity. It represents a powerful exchange between photographer and sitter, where outcomes and reactions can vary immensely between subjects, thus making portraiture one of the oldest and most compelling forms of photographic practice. As part of a practice-based research approach, photography can be understood as a medium capable of transmitting a totally different non-verbal set of meanings

and emotions. It also provides the researcher or artist with a new set of “eyes” to look on the world, bringing with it a new and revealing perspective.

The first stage of my investigation will involve seeking consent from 10-15 master’s graduates

from the last five years to be part of the project. Having provided the project abstract, we will look for a suitable date and context for a 30-minute photo session and conversation. The context for the portrait would ideally be a typical and everyday work situation; for instance, the office or building site, but it could equally be another context related to the background above, depending on the specific person and their circumstance. This could be discussed in a briefing session or via email before the session.

After the session, I will take a week or two to sort and edit the outcomes and choose the most suitable image for the project. This image will then be printed A6 postcard format and mailed to the participant at their workplace. Each participant should fill out the backside of the postcard with a short text. The portrait should serve as an impulse for this text; is your job what you expected, and how well did university equip you to do it? These completed postcards will be returned to me and compiled with the other responses, along with a short text relating to our conversation on the day of the sitting and a reflection on the ability of this methodology to produce new insights on the “practice-gap” between university and practice.

Keywords

Practice-gap, Architectural Education, Portraiture, Photo-elicitation, Professional Identity

DDR Statement

The proposal forms part of a practice-based dissertation focussing on new approaches for interrogating teaching practices. I am particularly interested in experimenting with media and methodology to produce new kinds of knowledge. Thinking in different mediums of expression can bring surprising, media-specific challenges and insights. In this sense, my approach to this project is a combination of practice-based and performative research, in which I reflexively experiment with new approaches and media. My aim is to find new ways of reflecting on and consequently critically reconstructing my practice as an architect, teacher and researcher that can make an original and situated contribution to institutional and disciplinary knowledge through approach and content.