

A Vocabulary of Engaging Practices: Reflecting on the Work of the Bureau of Design Research

BDR: Prue Chiles and Leo Care

This paper re-visits recent critical reflections on the nature of architectural practice to explore the nature of the alternative practice of the Bureau of Design Research in Sheffield. It situates the BDR as a research-based consultancy, a project office and something other. It discusses the importance of collective responsibility and the role of the academy in the formation of a new practice.

Situating the Bureau of Design Research and the Lineage of the Project Office

¹ Project Offices in architecture schools have largely taken the model of Grenville Baines at Sheffield. It enabled students and staff to practice but there was no explicit social agenda. Another pioneering Project Office was in New York at the Pratt Center, pivoting between Pratt Institute's planning department and local organisations struggling to address issues of urban deterioration and poverty. Architecture and planning students and the faculty were based on a campus located at the edge of Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York's second largest African-American community. They were challenged by the community leaders to respond to the area's physical deterioration and pervasive poverty. They were further challenged not to study the problem—in the words of one leader: 'We've been studied enough!' but to be both a resource and an advocate for an agenda defined by the desire for urban revitalisation. From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, the broad political consensus that enabled the passage of national civil rights legislation also supported a war on poverty, which (briefly) channelled significant public investment into Black and Latino communities.

² Cf. Rachel Sara, 'Between Studio and Street: The Role of the Live Project in Architectural Education', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield, 2003).

³ Richard Wilcox, 'Practice Profile—Academic Consultancy', *RIBA Journal*, 96(6)(1989): 48-50.

⁴ William S. Saunders et al. (eds.), *Reflections on Architectural Practices in the Nineties*, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Establishing a *Project Office*¹ in a School of Architecture has proved an elusive goal, both historically and in contemporary institutions. The trend emerged during the 1960's as a new programme of advocacy architecture,² emphasising process over product, social and political content over form, and most importantly prioritising teaching and enabling students' 'practicing'. Despite each Project Office attempting a different take on practice, many have had fleeting success before disappearing. Reasons for this stem from either removing themselves from the university and becoming too commercial, or by being too polemical, too removed from reality so that financially they became unsustainable. To achieve the necessary credibility to attract both research funding and industry or commercial patronage, whilst remaining true to a collective idea of social responsibility remains difficult to achieve. However, many universities have persevered in trying to define their own form of alternative practice. The Bureau of Design Research (BDR), established 5 years ago, hopes to learn from past mistakes in forging a new future.

University of Sheffield has had two previous Project Offices,³ one of which was set up under George Grenville Baines in the 1960's, and was eventually sold off to BDP to become a thriving regional office. One of the main aims of this Project Office was to employ students and to act as a teaching tool. In 1985 a different kind of consultancy office was set up to draw on the specialist skills of the staff, rather than encounter the problems of finding clients who would commit to a project with a design team comprising mainly of students. It had a small team of architects supplemented by the academic staff. In the first four years they developed two main—and quite large projects—one on the university campus. However, by 1991 when I first came to the department, and thought I might be able to practice within the consultancy office, it was clear that it was in trouble. By 1992 it had closed—a silent and unexplained ending. It was very detached from the School of Architecture by this time.

Reflecting—the BDR as an Emerging Alternative Practice

Not exactly an architectural practice, the BDR lies somewhere between a research-based consultancy, a Project Office and *something other*. It is the evolving 'other' that is of interest here and needs situating—how can we navigate the murky waters of working outside the normative professional models we feel comfortable with? By revisiting recent critical reflections on architectural practice, the developing ideals of the BDR can be seen as a reaction to some of the failings of an exclusively architectural practice. One of the last major projects reflecting on architectural practice, carried out at Harvard University in the mid 1990's, is interesting to re-visit.⁴

The edited volume published as a result feels remarkably current and it makes me wonder how much we have redefined our practices over the last decade. This yearlong symposium, with voices from both sides of the Atlantic, covers the traditional discussions on the duality of the profession: the disparity between objective and technical knowledge, artistic and subjective ability and the marketplace versus ideological and ethical concerns. It also puts the architectural profession and the way we practice, within its context of rapid technological change, globalisation and the volatile economic climate of the 1980's and early 1990's. The introduction calls on the profession to re-affirm its legitimacy through a renewed interest in all aspects of the built environment.⁵

⁵ Cf. Roger Ferris, 'Introduction—Overviews of Architectural Practice', in Saunders, *Reflections*, p. 9.

However, over and above all these aspects of the profession are two suggestions for the future. Firstly, a number of the authors discuss in one way or another that we need more collective responsibility. Secondly, a resounding theme throughout is the importance of the connection between education and practice. Peter Rowe particularly singles out education, encouraging speculation and innovation together with greater collaboration and raising the issue of the role of the academy in the formation of new practices. It was attention to these two slowly emerging trends that initiated the BDR in 2002, within the School of Architecture at Sheffield.

In his essay of the same volume, 'Poverty and Greed in American Cities', David Harvey asks:

What are the real possibilities for you the architect in your position in society, not as hero who is going to save society, but as worker who is engaging practices that have the possibility of opening up new ways of doing things here and there [...]⁶

⁶ David Harvey, 'Poverty and Greed in American Cities', in Saunders, *Reflections*, p. 104.

He then goes on to lay out succinctly the key malaise we as a profession are still struggling with twelve years after this essay was written:

[T]hat is linking with other people, not remaining outside of what else is going on, but being integrated into a general social and political process, and unfortunately, in so doing, having to make choices as to what kind of social relations you seek to support, and what kind of social relations you seek to suppress?⁷

⁷ Ibid.

Peter Rowe discusses the very idea of what constitutes architectural practice and the identity of architects and declares that architectural practice;

[...] requires substantial expansion [...] because [...] the design problems presented by society continue to transcend 'normal' practice [...] this is not only a matter of increasing the scope and usefulness of architectural services, but also of addressing the socio-cultural role of architecture more critically.⁸

⁸ Peter G. Rowe, 'Introduction: Architectural Practices in the 1990s' in Saunders, *Reflections*, p. 5.

Something that has changed over the last ten years is the way we are defining new roles and shifting perspectives in order to prioritise the social role of architecture. Rowe hints at this in the Harvard study when he says that; ‘a repositioning of practice then will necessarily require two things: advancements in design itself and further collaboration and cross-disciplinary knowledge’.⁹

⁹ Ibid.

It is using the framework suggested by Harvey’s call for ‘engaging practices’ that we find we can best describe and categorise the ways in which the BDR works within the realm of architectural knowledge and production. That we can best categorise our practice through our ‘ways of doing’ is perhaps one of the key aspects that marks our work as an alternative architectural practice. It is this, alongside the previous history of project offices at the University of Sheffield, that we aim to elucidate and theorise in this paper.

An appropriation of Harvey’s vocabulary of ‘engaging practices’, ‘linking with other people’ and ‘finding ways in’, acts as a prompt for the activities and methods of the Bureau.

Linking People, Linking Places

Building and sustaining links with other people—communities, practitioners, academics and students—is one of the key activities of BDR. In our position as a Project Office sited within the academy, working in the studio, the city and within communities, we find ourselves on the one hand inextricably linked to academia, whilst also continually forging new links through our pedagogy and our visioning and construction.

In the four years of the Bureau’s emergence, we have attempted to expand our understanding of what role the architect can have with both feet in the university. What is our strategic statement of intent—our point of view? It defines at its core the implicit skills and challenges of architecture as a subject today, including the day-to-day logistics of making a practice work financially, and the challenges of trying to expand the understanding of research and consultancy within the traditional research environment of a science-based university. Over the last four years we have completed over 40 funded projects, many of which include all facets of a ‘virtuous triangle’ that we are seeking to attain—teaching, practice and research—all seamlessly employed.¹⁰ We have worked with different, rewarding and sometimes confusing agendas. Sometimes feeling quite schizophrenic we lurch from design, ideas, research and teaching to feasibility, research consultancy and consultancy projects. We have built up a reputation for expertise in the areas of school design, community visioning and future oriented thinking. All projects try to contribute to the emerging paradigm of ‘research by design’, and link academia with practice and the community. We would argue that this enables both reflection and

¹⁰ For more detailed information on all our projects, see our website: www.bdr.group@shef.ac.uk.

the development of innovative design processes, with the potential to contribute to a new form of practice...



Fig. 1. 'Linking People'; Working with pupils, staff and parents at Hunters Bar Infants' School to design a series of workshops. The session aimed at engaging parents in the design process and showing them the work of the children as a key part of the development of the scheme. Photo: BDR.

Our practice must be situated in and related to the place we are in and respond to the vitality of that place. At the BDR our theoretical practice is firmly rooted in place, materiality and tradition—a political tradition, the 'centrifugal force' of what Frampton calls a 'critical regionalism'.¹¹ Key to Sheffield is its industrial past of heavy engineering and craft, its natural attributes: the topography of the hills, valleys and rivers. Together these form a direction that economic regeneration practices can build upon. In Sheffield we are responding to and challenging the city's modes of practice with a political will to seek change.¹² This does not imply a provincial mentality dealing only with local issues, but an ability to *work within* the systems and parameters of the city and to then *reflect* that city in a national and international context—a new critical regionalism.

¹¹ Cf. Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983). Although Frampton was not particularly concerned with a political frame of reference.

¹² This was addressed in the first BDR project, a framework document for North Sheffield, 'Working with the Southey and Owlerton Regeneration Board'. We developed neighbourhood strategies for the Regeneration Framework for the area, worked on developing a positive identity for the transformation of the area, and looked at new ways of communicating this to the outside world.

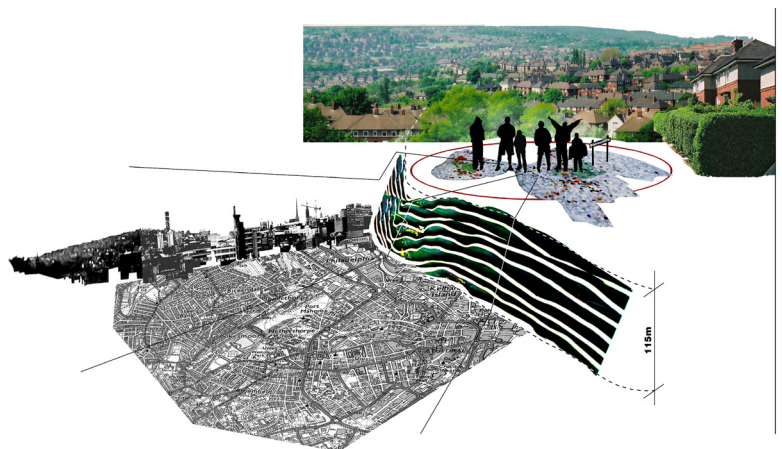


Fig. 2. 'Linking Places'; The SOAR framework document drew together the thoughts and ideas of residents from a number of neighbourhoods to establish principles for the regeneration of the Southey and Owlerton area. These were later coined as the 'Five Big Ideas' and have informed subsequent development. Image: BDR.

A Project Office is not about traditional research—it is about consultancy and a new type of research. All our projects contribute to an ongoing process of ‘research by design’, linking academic research practices with consultancy. This enables reflection and development of design processes within the consultancy, moving towards defining new forms of architectural practice. While Project Offices have traditionally implied a building project, we consider the term ‘project’ to have a broader sense, which could contribute to an alternative type of architectural practice. The clients involved in many of our projects have a long-term agenda, which is always social and they are not interested in short-term expediency.

We are also able to look at new methodologies of teaching both in the university and the community that are not so much about traditional skills and knowledge based teaching but are more about confidence-building, enabling and support. We devise and deliver courses to communities as part of their community-led regeneration programmes;¹³ this also provides opportunities to involve architecture students in paid teaching roles.

¹³ Such as the ‘Buildings by Design’ course and others for The Glass-House, a national charity offering design advice, training and project support to community groups throughout Britain.

Not Remaining Outside / Finding a Way In

Prompted by Harvey’s call for architects ‘not to remain outside’ of what else is going on, we can categorise a second series of engaging practices around ‘finding ways in’, both for ourselves as theorists and practitioners and for the people we work with. Making design and regeneration accessible to communities and to students, not through simplification, but through offering both tested and innovative ‘tactics of engagement’ is a key element of all our work.

Working from a regional scale to the design of a small detail on a youth shelter to be built by teenagers, is both a privilege and a necessity of the work of BDR. In large-scale projects, our work often centres on the need to penetrate the multiple layers of information surrounding regional development and dealing with the multi-tiered agencies involved in



Fig. 3. The Abbeyfield Park Youth Shelter engaged local teenagers in both the design and implementation of their shelter. The project was designed to engage and engender a sense of ownership from the users as well as making a shelter that responded to the local area. Photo: BDR.

effecting change. In the same way, switching between working with one child to a whole regional development agency, allows different perspectives that are important for the development of a new kind of practice.

However, another role of a Project Office should be to synthesise and transfer knowledge whilst working with other disciplines within a supportive framework. At its best the teaching and enabling role is part of a reciprocal relationship allowing innovative thinking to pass between everyone involved in the projects.

Creating a vision Re-imagining the whole coalfields area

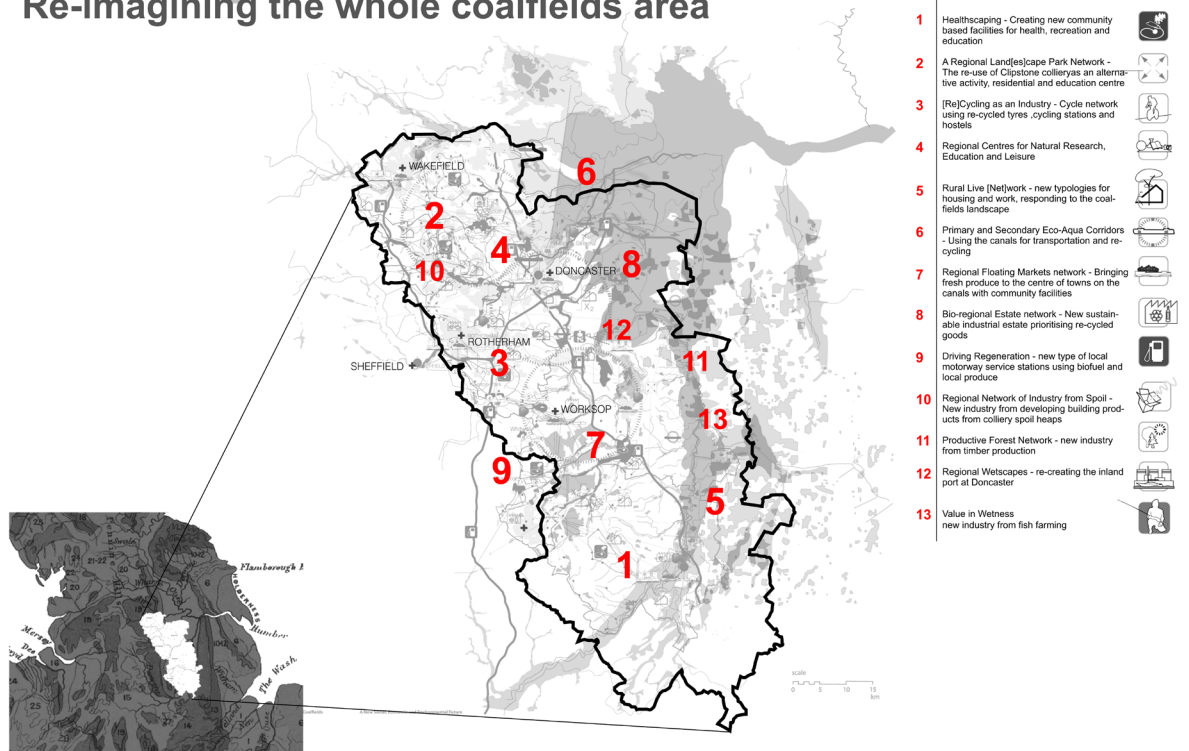


Fig. 4. 'Finding a Way In'; The Coalfields project looked at the regeneration of a massive area of post-industrial landscape in the North East of England. The project looked at ways of finding a 'way in' to understanding the complex, multi layered problems faced in large scale regeneration. Image: BDR.

The BDR plays a pedagogical and enabling role in both the academy and the community. Teaching in architecture schools is an accepted part of architectural practice: new practices particularly need the regular income but also teaching is a way 'of get paid for thinking', to reflect, to be more alternative, to retreat into the ivory tower, '[t]o the tasty realm of subjective freedom...'.¹⁴ Within the studio project this can create a cycle of idealism—unrealisable idealism promoting radical social agendas passed on to students who are in turn disenchanted with practice.

How can we turn that disenchantment into action? Potentially with the types of projects we carry out both as BDR and in the studio. Key to the

¹⁴ Kirtstin Aitken, 'Building on Social Values—Implicating Architectural Education', (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Sheffield, 2007), p.12.

¹⁵ For more detailed information on the Live Projects, see the website; www.liveprojects.org.

practice of BDR is the Live Project programme at Sheffield.¹⁵ The initial reason for forming BDR was to develop this relationship between the academy [university] and the community [city] through the Live Projects. The live projects sometimes enable further funded work that then involves both BDR staff and diploma students. We are now developing a framework whereby a live project can become a yearlong studio project supported by BDR and individual tutors.

In an architectural industry that is increasingly governed by legislative standards and contractual wrangling, experimentation and exploration are restricted. In a world of big business, ideas are carefully guarded secrets and the transfer of knowledge is rarely free flowing. Even in regeneration projects, where guidelines are laid down detailing how the general public should be involved in the improvement of their built environments, large organisations and local authorities still struggle to inform and involve people who are affected.

What is lacking in all areas of architecture, from academic education and research to practice and business, are the links between the different areas and transfer of knowledge between them. One of the conclusions of the *International Projects Office Conference* at London Metropolitan University (2005) was that a project office has to be generous!¹⁶ That is not to say that that the generosity has to be based around doing work for free, but rather being generous with knowledge.

¹⁶ *International Projects Office Conference*, Department of Architecture and Spatial Design, London Metropolitan University, 17–18 November 2005.

Integrating

We have taken a political position that BDR should mediate between the strategic agencies involved in policy-making and the affected communities, integrating two ways of working that often, particularly in regeneration, do not meet in the middle. We can use our privileged position within the academy to be an ‘agent provocateur’, useful to both communities and the ‘top down’ strategic partners. This has proved one of our most challenging and elusive agendas, due to the fragmented nature of the regeneration process and the piecemeal funding regimes the government has in place. We have also ensured that key elements of architectural practice should always be high on the agenda, including blue-sky thinking, the reimagining, reinterpreting and reinventing of traditional practices, looking at more sustainable futures and of course always ensuring the importance of good design. Embedded within our practice is the desire to form new roles for an architect—more than that of a mere mediator between agencies and communities. We have deliberately tested the water by trying to be responsive to the current needs of society, both in the city and beyond, rather than having our own proactive agenda, which gives direction to the projects we take on (not so different from university research agendas led by the research funding councils). Devolving power to establish better relationships...



Fig. 5. ‘The Matrix’; The education matrix looks specifically at identifying ‘good practice’ in the educational sector with an aim to integrate the knowledge and ideas of a wide group of sectors within the construction industry. Image: BDR.

BDR focuses on people as much as buildings, broadening the definition of the word ‘building’, devolving power to establish relationships—*making space for people*. We have found our voice in three areas: design and research of learning environments, community-led design and the future of regeneration within post-industrial landscapes. This is where we situate our practice.

In our experience clients perceive the work of BDR in a number of different ways. Feedback received from community groups we have worked with has shown that being from a university imbues us with



Fig. 6. ‘Design Enabling’; it is essential to help stakeholders develop a common design language that aids communication across all parties. This can take a variety of forms from models and montages to verbal and visual presentation skills. Photo: BDR.

more authority than a private consultant. We are also perceived as less threatening and perhaps the fact that we are a not-for-profit organisation helps them feel they are getting value for money.

Local Authorities form the client group that is perhaps most challenged by the work we do; they particular struggle to take our work on board, especially if community involvement is included. Many projects have been well received but larger-scale proposals rarely implemented. Businesses that have commissioned research projects from the Architecture department previously, are often impressed by our knowledge of the industry and practice rather than an abstracted academic view. Charities are often one of the most rewarding client groups to work for and are in need of ideas that they cannot afford to pay for. Working with students on such projects has often meant that clients have low expectations at the outset of the project, but are overwhelmed by the results.

Between Three Stools

Through disengaging with the academy (either through gradual disassociation or the clearer-cut process of being sold on to form a new company) previous Project Offices at the University of Sheffield lost their unique position of linking academy, city and communities and ultimately ended their life as offices of 'engaging practices'. How can we remain engaged and engaging but allow ourselves room to grow out of the academy and beyond?

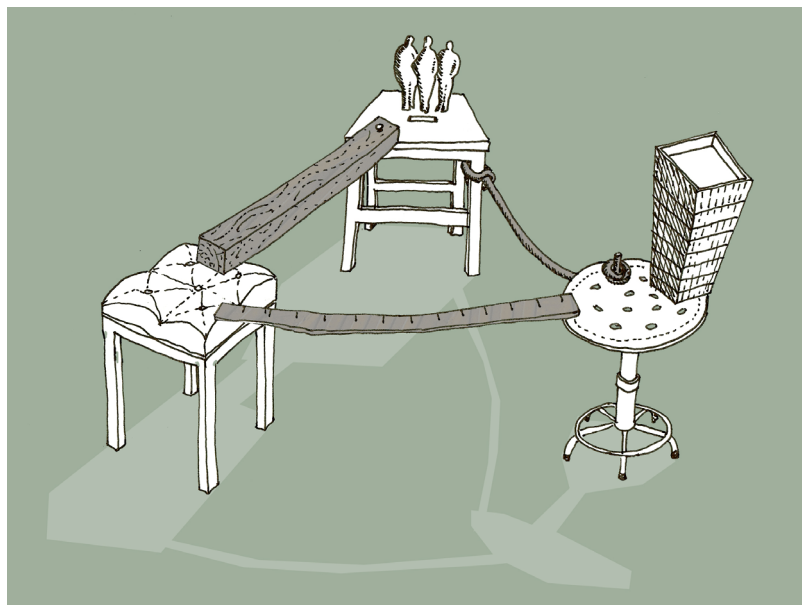


Fig. 7. 'Between Three Stools'; bridging the gap between community/city, academy and practice. Images: BDR.

The answer perhaps lies in the way that the projects are procured. We now have all but three projects funded by clients. This has been deliberate, allowing us to test the water and to be reactive to the demands of the

groups that we connect with. This approach has made us adaptive and dynamic, which perhaps sets us apart from previous Project Offices. In reality, BDR is a multi-headed beast, taking on all sorts of commissions, from internal university grants to industrial research projects and community regeneration projects. The nature of our workload is becoming broad, perhaps too broad to allow us to keep developing specific skills quickly enough. It is now a question of whether becoming more specialised and focused would have a stabilising effect, or whether in fact it may just narrow options and limit our ability to make connections and engage in different ways.

This paper could be called ‘between three stools.’ This title not only hints at our role as we see it—bridging the gap between community/city, academy and practice—but also the precarious nature of this existence. While answering Harvey’s call for ‘engaging practices’, the Bureau of Design Research has now reached a point where we need to strategise our plan of engagement for the future.

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