

Colloquium: Exploring Common Grounds – Architectural Methodologies in Doctoral Learning

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The ‘Common Grounds’ Colloquium was a workshop-based event which took place on the 14th/15th of January 2011 at Gladstone’s Library, St. Deniol’s. It was organised by James Benedict Brown and Anna Holder, students from Queens University Belfast and the University of Sheffield. The event was devised in response to a growing awareness that as architects we have a particular way of thinking about and carrying out research, whilst also a magpie-like approach, often borrowing from other disciplines.

‘Common Grounds’ was a name chosen to signify the need for developing a shared body of knowledge, and a place to collaborate and reflect on these concerns.. The following review, co-authored by a participant and a workshop organiser, gives an account of the event and draws out emerging themes and commonalities of experience which can be used to develop understanding of the specificities of doctoral research in architecture and the built environment.

Workshop Aims

- 1 The colloquium is not in any way affiliated with the 'Common Ground' company, publishing house or series of conferences.

Our main aim in organising the two-day 'Common Grounds'¹ colloquium was to provide a unique forum for postgraduate students and early-career researchers to come together away from the university and enjoy an informal but focussed discussion and exchange of ideas. We also hoped to share resources and skills in order to help one another to build capacity for high quality research on architecture and the built environment, perhaps developing thematic clusters of support for research-in-progress, or possibilities for future collaborations.

The idea for a student-led research event specific to these disciplines emerged from the experiences of the organisers during the first year of their PhDs. Doing research on or in the field of architecture can feel like a methodological 'free-for-all', borrowing from the arts, humanities, physical and social sciences. At the University of Sheffield, research methods courses that provide relevant skills (such as case study and qualitative methods) are offered by departments as diverse as East Asian Studies and Health Studies, who are themselves 'borrowers' of methodologies. We had encountered what felt like stumbling blocks in the subsectors of our discipline borrowing from the natural sciences – positivism, hard and fast rules for research process, clear cut relationships between researcher and thing researched - all conflicted with the more contested, contingent and creative questions of social and spatial research. There was an inkling that as researchers with a very specific design-based and professional training we brought a certain set of attitudes and skills to the research process – the idea of propositional or performative research, activism and participative research and the confusions and possibilities offered by undertaking research by design.

Participant aims

The workshop design was constructed to allow flexibility and to accommodate and support the aspirations of participants. Prior to the event aims from the workshop participants were solicited, creating the following co-produced workshop aims. We should provide an opportunity to:

- present, discuss and constructively critique research-in-progress
- collaboratively consider what might be particular about architectural research.
- question 'what is a PhD by design?' How and where might it differ from a 'conventional' architectural PhD? (If it actually does. Are there more designer-ly 'conventional' PhDs and conventional 'PhDs by design'?)
- explore what counts as 'design' in the context of PhD research
- develop ideas of what forms of representation might be employed to present and disseminate the research?

- begin to clarify any form of methodology for its research and production. (“I have a much better feel for the subject matter than for the way in which I am going to research it.”)
- discuss with others the methodological implications of carrying out a PhD by Design - to discuss this approach and investigate with others the opportunities but also limitations of (methodological) approaches.
- learn from others’ experiences in (different methodological) areas.
- meet a group of doctoral researchers at different levels but within same area of interest, build networks, discuss our experiences and share practical advice
- see different types of research processes and approaches that can be applied to the architectural field
- get input and references from others to develop or articulate my own methodologies and research choices



Fig. 1. Image of the workshop, 2011

Themes and concerns emerging from the workshop

1. Bringing design approaches to research.

Discussion of the experience of moving from a design education or practice background to developing the skills of a researcher brought recognition of the way we transferred design skills and approaches to our research work. Whilst design work can be part of a rigorous and systematic process, there is acceptance of intuition, and of applying overarching ideas or approaches from previous projects or precedents based on a 'try and see what fits' heuristic. This is not necessarily linear, and frequently makes space for loops, iterations and overarching processes. In trying to define or develop methodologies for architectural research we have been surprised by our inability to articulate a design epistemology as well as lacking architectural methodologies to call our own. As architects both socialised and embedded in our discipline, we have a strange lack of awareness about 'what we do'. How do we make our knowledge and approaches apparent to ourselves and to others? This links back to workshop participant's experiences of miscomprehension when working in academic departments other than architecture - perhaps by moving into someone else's space or discipline and being forced to explain ourselves, we can improve the architectural discipline's self knowledge.

2. The disconnect between, and translation of, the research process as written, and experiences of research.

A common thread of perception throughout the group was a disconnect between the research process as 'written up' or presented in research methods literature (a linear, directional progress from ontology to methodology and methods), and the research process as we experience it. The latter is often a tangled back-and-forth, with an ontology emerging throughout the process of developing methodology and collecting data. Developing on the previous theme, we found parallels between research experiences and the iterative or emergent nature of the design process, which is reliant on 'hunches' or following emerging patterns, an element of 'trusting the process'. The 'translation' of this immersive and imprecise process into an account of a rigorous and direct methodology for research in the process of 'writing up' was recognised as another layer to take into account.

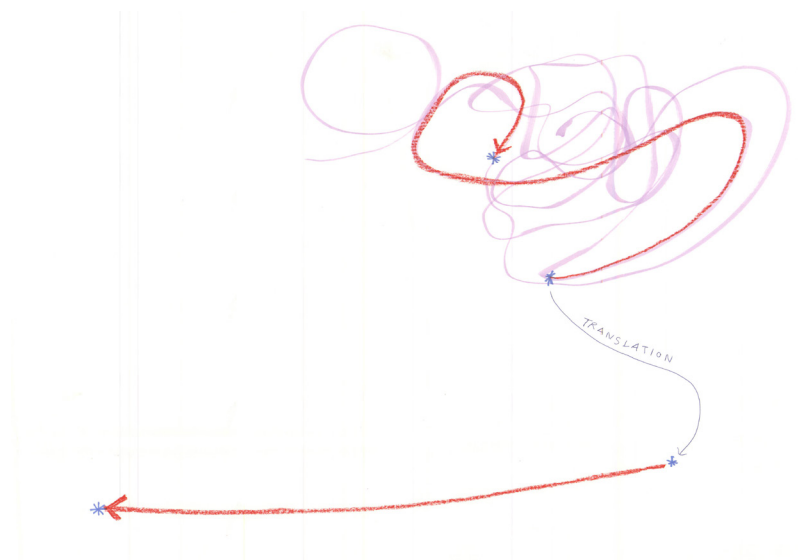


Fig. 2. Diagram: translation, 2011

3. Knowledge and action in emancipatory, participative and performative research.

This theme straddles ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns among participants. There were concerns about the types of knowledge valued in academia and in practice. Practice-led research focuses on knowledge seemingly biased towards the tangible skill set of the practitioner. It privileges an understanding of space based on what can be drawn and built, and an understanding of relationships and communications to make building based on what is written in the forms of official permissions, tenders, production information, specification. Through our conversations we explored the preoccupation with information which is not easy to communicate; the values that users and makers attach to space and place; forms of knowledge which facilitate working with diverse groups of people; ways of communicating and representing which attempt to break down the hierarchies and distinctions between built environment professionals and other disciplines and users. We recognised parallels in research and practice of acting or working performatively to break down the dominance of the written word or the drawing. We discussed the desire to open up architectural research to pay attention to and include the views of those outside of the discipline and of non-professionals.

4. Research collaboration (and cross-pollination), across and within disciplines.

Experiences of working across disciplines, straying into unfamiliar areas of literature and working with others either not from the research

environment or trained in other disciplines; all required the research skill of “being multilingual”. There was cynicism from one participant about the values of interdisciplinary work, and whether it was motivated by genuine interest in sharing and connecting knowledge or simply ‘ticking boxes’ for research funding calls. As architects we acknowledged our ‘all-rounder’ interests and happiness in moving between areas of knowledge that were not our specialism, but questioned the appropriateness of this approach within the research sphere, where expertise in one defined area is valued.

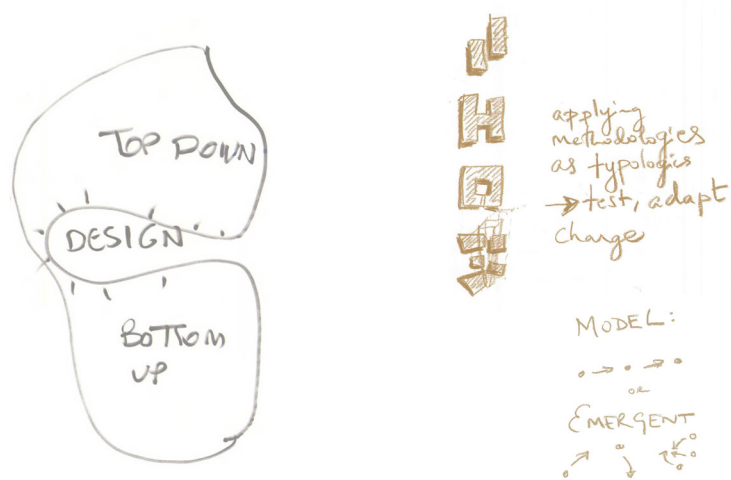


Fig. 3. Diagram, ‘amateur’ research interests vs. the master of a particular field, 2011

Commonalities... Architecture in the context of other disciplines

One of the first things that emerged from the workshop was the idea that there might be research experiences specific to the architect as researcher. We propose that this may be due to the role of ‘design’, both in terms of our learning and the ways in which we build knowledge. Amongst the workshop participants there was a strong personal link between research and practice, with all either currently involved in both practice and research or with practice experience prior to beginning the PhD. It was felt by all that the two activities are strongly related and inform one another, yet as researchers and as practitioners we struggled to articulate this connection or reciprocal relationship clearly.

Two students at the event had their background in architecture but were undertaking their studies in other disciplines or academic departments: for one student this had raised a whole range of concerns; activities and approaches common to the undergraduate architecture student were thrown into question when seen from the perspective of a social sciences ethics committee. Her account of the extremely cautious approach her

department took to the site visits and walks through the city which made up her methodology raised questions about the assumptions those of us with a design training hold about the way we carry out study in architecture. In Undergraduate and Masters study, and to some extent in practice, we as architects are always going, doing, seeing, 'visiting site'. It is part of our received understanding of research. To be there bodily - to climb over fences, to walk across the uneven ground - is a way of understanding that particular space, its relations and its boundaries, both visible and invisible. The questions which arise from seeing this from the perspective of other disciplines or norms make visible the power associated with the role of the architect as professional – the 'permission' to go anywhere, the respect that we perceive. From the earliest stages of study we find that *if you tell people you are an architect you generally get access to things and places*; this is also true in practice where we often have conversations in and about people's homes, or places of work or play, their ways of life and their desires and values. As a researcher this has distinct ethical implications: should we consider our access not just to people's data, but also to the data we extract from places and space?

We were also prompted to consider the values that we develop through approaching 'site' in such a way: by experiencing sites like this we are also aware of people who don't or can't or who think doing this is problematic...

Discussion ranged from the practice theory of Bourdieu (2005) – the kind of knowing that comes from 'doing', and Giddens' 'practical knowledge' (Giddens 1986; Schneider and Till 2009) to types of embodied knowledge. For a number of participants who were studying spatial practice and action on community projects it was important that these kinds of knowledge were very often (if not always) collaborative. Many of us shared an interest in 'knowing' which was constructed and developed through relational practices and was situated both spatially and socially amongst the groups creating and using it. We had the realisation that we are doing research for the 'purpose' of developing spatial practice and drawing on and contributing to collaborative, situated and relational knowledge. We therefore questioned how this might change our approach in terms of theory and practice.

... and Common Grounds

A crucial outcome of the event was a growing awareness of the importance for PhD students and researchers of developing and discussing ideas together, taking the *workshop approach* which is common to architectural practice and the design studio but seems missing in the research/academic environment. We ask the question *what could a research studio be?* It was felt that there should be space in our research for more group approaches to working – both on shared projects and on our individual projects, perhaps informally, around themes. Most obviously there are the benefits

of sharing references and discussing approaches to research gleaned from other disciplines, as we all felt we were in different ways working beyond our discipline. Contesting the individualist approach we have found in academia, we state the belief that it is empowering and constructive to help one another and important to develop shared resources at the same time as pursuing particular research topics.



Fig. 4. 'Common Grounds' colloquium: workshop/studio approach to research, 2011

What worked...what didn't?

A particular success of the event was in its informality; this was enabled by the small size of the workshop, the variety of sessions and the method of presenting and discussion, and also the event location. The programme of events moved between individual presentations, group discussions and small group tasks; presentations were short and were given without

'PowerPoint' or slides, so that they would be less daunting to produce for those early in their PhD studies.

On Day One the sessions took place in a meeting room with a large table around which we sat, facing one another. This enabled easy group discussion (though it was less useful for facilitating breaking out into small groups) and made presenting work less confrontational. A criticism of not having more formal PowerPoint presentations was that it made it difficult to convey information which could be easily put across in images of drawings or photographs. Also those with more visual memories found it difficult to process or 'take in' abstract concepts without the information being displayed on screen.

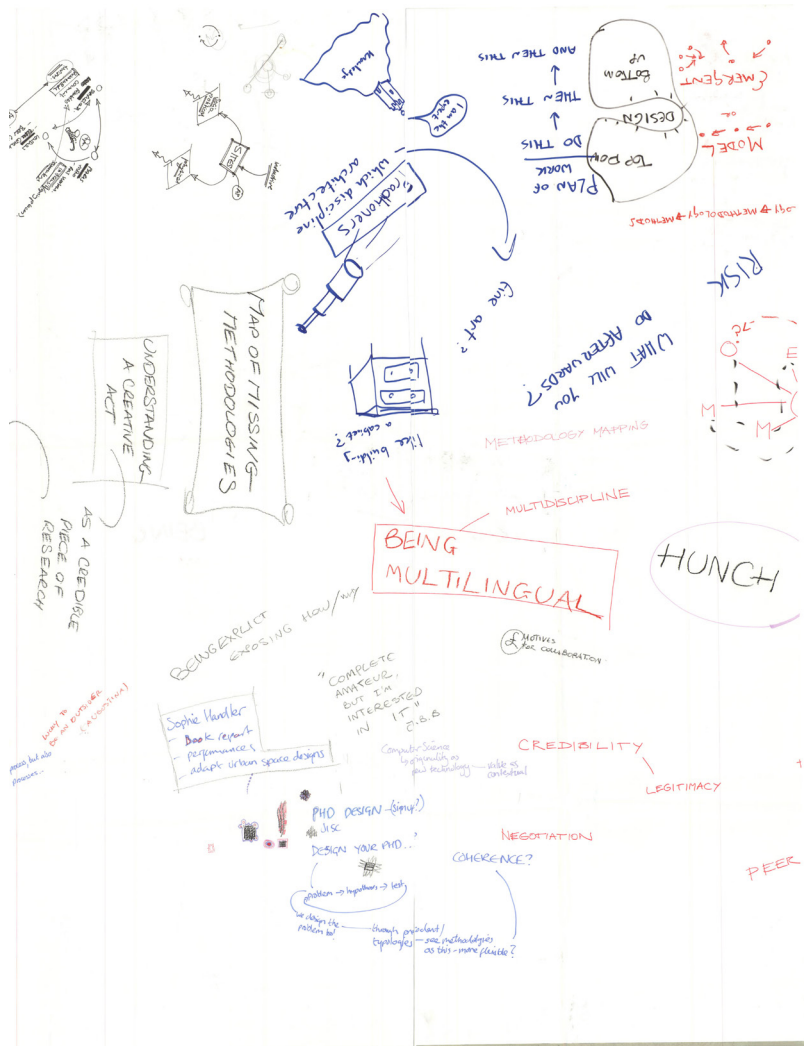


Fig. 5. The big piece of paper, 2011

We covered the table around which we sat with a big paper 'cloth', and encouraged, through talk and example, the use of this as a way of note-taking, recording ideas and developing discussion with diagrams. After a little initial reticence, the group welcomed this mode of working – it was particularly successful for the large group discussions, developing more abstract concepts of how research processes mirror or differ from design.

The location of the workshop – on 'neutral territory' in a new location with which no-one was familiar, meant that the group could explore and 'claim' the space together. Having meals and a plentiful supply of tea and cakes available in-house meant that discussions could flow over the meal table, and sessions could continue out of their time and place boundaries. A residential workshop in a little village kept the participants together and focussed for an intensive two days – though we were exhausted by the end, it was felt that this was a good format.

Our initial idea for recording and disseminating the event had been to co-produce a small document in the course of the workshop, but with the amount we had tried to fit into two days, it became clear that this was too ambitious. However, we found that collecting information from participants after the event was difficult, as everyone has so many competing demands on their time. The 'big piece of paper' worked well for capturing emergent knowledge from discussion sessions, but there was work to be done decoding it and developing it into something that might disseminate the experience of the event to others. We are keen to look at how methods of recording and disseminating knowledge in the course of discussion and action could be developed in future events.

What next...? A proposal for development of networks and conferences

This colloquium was based on an intuitive notion that architecture as a subject may suit other forms than the traditional conference; this was developed during the weekend through discussions of what is particular to architectural research. It was agreed that due to the propositional nature of design, the non-linear ways of thinking and the range of 2-d and 3-d representation that are used to explore and convey ideas we may need to rethink the format of conference events. Image and text are frequently paired; however it should not be assumed that the text does the critical work and the image or design is purely illustrative, often this can be the other way around. In this respect architecture as a research subject could be understood to be closer to music or fine art.

Architects often have to move between a series of subjects whilst designing; be they social, technical, or aesthetic, and understand the relation between them all. This requires knowledge of a range of subjects,

but also crucially a certain set of skills to negotiate the relationships between seemingly disparate things. During this colloquium we used collaborative drawing techniques to draw out ideas and find productive relationships between our subjects. We felt this was very useful and would like to take this even further in the future, evolving and refining these techniques.

Further to these discussions we also looked at what was particular to our approaches within the field of architecture and how these might inform future events. We all had a preoccupation with ideas of participation, activism, site and situatedness and felt that approaches we took forward should acknowledge and build on these themes. Some of those attending the workshop were carrying out PhD by Design, so were specifically interested to explore what it means to frame design as research.

Propositions and ideas for developing event-based, collaborative architectural research

1. Site:

One proposal was to explore the same site from the perspective of each individual's research. The work should develop the themes and ideas the researcher is exploring but respond to the 'particularness' of a place. This could allow links to be drawn between topics and facilitate discussion about the relationships between subjects, whilst emphasising the differences between approaches. The invitation to contribute should be limited so that it is achievable but allow for creative interpretation in terms of format- so could be a walk, a talk, a drawing or an activity.

2. Collaborative knowledge; generating and recording:

In order to address the issue of getting to grips with the interrelationship between ideas presented at the workshop it is crucial that the exploration and recording is collaborative. It was raised that some conferences publish papers but fail to pick up on the emergent collaborative knowledge. At Common Grounds we addressed this through the creation of a 'big drawing', which was very useful in terms of generating and sharing thoughts together, but needed to be reformatted and summarised for dissemination. The second proposal is the creation of a 'zine during the conference or colloquium that allows us to explore our ideas collectively through text and image. This will then be a useful format for dissemination amongst those who attended and others who are interested, both electronically and as a paper copy.

In order to carry these ideas to fruition we propose meeting again as a group to develop them collaboratively. Proposals from other researchers are actively solicited: please contact the authors or contribute to discussion via our weblog: <http://exploringcommongrounds.wordpress.com/>

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