Experimental studio ecologies: A productive thrownotogetherness

By Ed Wall and Alexis Liu

Introduction

Design studios are ecologies of relations, the coming together of things through time: project sites, overlapping contexts, academic buildings, drawing boards, digital devices, students, tutors, coffee, design briefs, materials, ideas, deadlines, conversations, and dreams, intermesh in the pursuit of possible futures. Every human and more-than-human entity in design studios has its role to play as associations are formed, tensions established, and imbalances found. As both physical sites of meeting, sharing, learning, and producing – as well as temporalities within academic timetables – design studios embody important spatial-temporal qualities that tend towards landscape processes and experimental design practices.

In this chapter, we explore experimental design as productive relations between design studios at the University of Greenwich's School of Design, design projects developed by students, and situated (and contextualised) challenges such as the climate crisis. There are a few unique offerings university education can give to professional landscape architecture practice. In this chapter, we argue that experimental design studio, as a thrownotogetherness of place for learning and inventing new approaches to design, is the most important of these. The geographer Doreen Massey uses the term 'thrownotogetherness' to describe place as 'a constellation of processes rather than a thing' (2005: 141). At Greenwich, we consider design studio as a thrownotogetherness of place where knowledge is generated through recognising patterns, negotiating conflicts, and highlighting contradictions; where project trajectories work productively from these tensions; and where the speculation of new worlds come together in design proposals.

We argue in this chapter, and evidence in our Greenwich studio practices, that to confront global challenges, such as the climate crisis, we must advance two propositions. First, we need to continue to pursue and invent techniques of working with design and landscape as process. Second, we must defend and expand critical design studio teaching as sites of creative practice and innovation based on rigorous research. We intersect these concerns with three conceptualisations: 'thrownotogetherness,' 'trajectories,' and 'hyperobjects.' We borrow from Massey, who develops the term 'thrownotogetherness' as a way to describe 'the event of place' (2005: 140), and 'trajectories' as relating to the multiplicity of processes of space. We also refer to Timothy Morton's notion of 'hyperobjects' (2013) to make sense of vast entities, such as air pollution, that expand beyond traditional conceptions of space and time. We recognise the overwhelming range of spatial and temporal dimensions of landscapes, always in the process of construction and reconstruction, and their potential to be transformed through critical and creative experimentation.

[Insert Figure 1]
[Figure 1 caption: *Glaze Unit Fire Squad Magic* was challenged by the global pandemic in 2020, with design experimentations moving to kitchen tables and grandparents' gardens.]

[Figure 1 credits: Altan Dervish, MLA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2020)]

[Insert Figure 2]
[Figure 2 caption: The clay landscape of The Generators making visible material relations and social lives.]
[Figure 2 credits: Altan Dervish, MLA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2020)]

Studio thrownogetherness

The university design studio is a physical place – a room, hall, or building – where students develop projects, where they meet their tutors, and where they present their proposals. Design studio also exists in time: we mark design studio in the timetable, as moments during the week and rhythms across a semester. However, the initially perceived spaces and times of design studios belie conditions that become impossible to contain and even more difficult to describe. Once discussed, planned, developed, and launched by design tutors, design studios rapidly become things extending beyond campus walls and enveloping all hours of student life. The coming together of briefs, sites, projects, colleagues, advice, deadlines, external collaborators, published articles, exhibited projects, and influence on professional worlds beyond the university – collectively form something simply termed 'design studio.' Such entanglements of students, tutors, and more-than-human entities highlight that design studios always exist within larger ecosystems, including economic policies, global climates, and automated networks, where decisions that inform the design of new worlds are not always ours to make. From environmental events to technological forces and from design tools to other species, the extent of more-than-human influences in the formation of landscapes is core to our studio thinking. Somewhere along the journey, the vast and expanding spatial and temporal dimensions of design studios transform what we initially plan and where we expect them to go.

Through a meshwork of intersecting and expanding ecologies – relations between projects, places, people, and temporalities – it can become impossible to identify a single form of design studios: 'This is the event of place in the simple sense of the coming together of the previously unrelated… This is place as open and internally multiple' (Massey 2005: 141). Once launched, design studios, and the design projects produced, can no longer be contained spatially or temporally. Design studios are the nexus from which design projects embark, projects that quickly leave the limits of the studio building, expand outside the studio timetable, and extend beyond the studio brief. Design studios become messy, negotiated moments, contested directions, where futures are waiting to be claimed. As Massey describes of the thrownogetherness of place: 'There can be no assumption of pre-given coherence, or of community or collective identity. Rather the thrownogetherness of place demands negotiation' (Massey, 2005: 141). We consider design studios in ways that Massey describes events in place:

> They implicate us, perforce, in the lives of human others, and in our relations with nonhumans they ask how we shall respond to our temporary meeting-up with these particular rocks and stones and trees. (Massey, 2005: 141)

This pulsing, evolving, and expanding nature of design studios provides an essential environment for experimental design practice. This requires openness to how design projects develop, how they form collective agency, and how they engage critically with other lives and larger challenges.

No time, and no studio at Greenwich, has demonstrated repeated negotiation more than the *Glaze Unit Fire Squad Magic* design studio in 2020. Working within the context of the Greenwich school discourse of *Disruptive Ecologies: Designing for Direct Action*, design tutors Harry Bix and James Fox developed a design brief with youth education charity Global Generation. The teenagers, who call themselves 'The Generators,' were a client for *Glaze Unit Fire Squad Magic* and the task was to develop a landscape in London's Canada Water with a network of developers and local government stakeholders. The aim of the studio was to forge close relationships between designing and making, while also claiming the teenagers, design students, and tutors as 'The Generators.' Camping overnight, digging clay from the site, talking together, making objects, burning things, mixing materials, and polishing objects, all became ways of developing productive social spheres that formed new ecologies within and beyond the confines of the site (See figure 01 and 02). Projects made material and social relations of landscape projects tangible – processes that often remain invisible due to remote sites of mineral extraction and global networks of distribution.

In March 2020, when the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic led to our school at Greenwich moving online, and the UK government requiring us all to stay in our homes, the situated ecologies of *Glaze Unit Fire Squad Magic* were hugely challenged. The messy material and working practices of the studio stalled while online relations and digital production became dominant. The resources of students' homes, and the networks they were able to maintain from bedrooms and kitchen tables, revealed extraordinary invention and determination. Also exposed were contrasting domestic circumstances, including unequal access to technology and green spaces, and varied support from friends and family. Students found themselves in places, as Massey argues, that 'necessitate invention,' but also 'pose a challenge' (2005: 141). The productive uncertainty of experimental studio practices was challenged by new uncertainties beyond our control, of when we could return to campus, how we could work together online, and who is looking after our families – not to mention, how we or our loved ones would be impacted by Covid-19. Projects began to focus more on our roles as landscape architects within uncertain and changing worlds (see Figure 03). Ecologies of material flows, social relations, and future projects became dislocated, and then reassembled, as the global pandemic and digital working intersected with projects already in progress.

[Insert Figure 3]
[Figure 3 caption: The landscape architect in residence, co-making a landscape based on new forms of terrazzo, constructed from found materials and local waste.]
[Figure 3 credits: Ross Redman-Shaffer, MA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2020)]

Design trajectories

To engage with landscapes as processes, design projects at Greenwich are developed and planned as incremental practices. Like trajectories, design projects are entities that move forward, interact, combine, splinter, accelerate, and occasionally slow down. Like design studios, the stepping off point of design projects can be located spatially in project sites – all projects involve repeated fieldwork – and temporally in studio briefings. Also, like studios, end points become impossible to discern as projects develop their own lives through exhibitions, publications, and their influence on live projects. In *For Space* (2005), Massey uses the terms trajectories and stories '… to emphasise the process of change in a phenomenon' (2005: 12). Stories provide Massey with a means to describe the 'history, change, movement, of things themselves': and in the coming together of trajectories 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far' (2005: 12). The relations between pluralities of trajectories entangle design projects with the landscapes they set out to inform. Situated design projects become part of the processes, or stories-so-far, of landscapes, where multiple trajectories provide a means for seeking out untold narratives, otherwise excluded voices, and often silenced concerns (see Figure 04).

[Insert Figure 4]
[Figure 4 caption: A kit of instruments is central to reading, measuring, and protecting local activist designers from the air pollution in Deptford, South London.]
[Figure 4 credits: Henry Wilson, MLA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2019)]

[Insert Figure 5]
[Figure 5 caption: Advanced and makeshift technologies are adapted and combined to mitigate air pollution caused by construction vehicles.]
[Figure 5 credits: Henry Wilson, MLA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2019)]

Deptford Air Force Technician Youth, by MLA student Henry Wilson (2019), takes London's illegal levels of air pollution as its point of departure. In 2018, the UK's High Court ruled that the government's policy on air pollution was 'unlawful.' At the same time, in South East London's Deptford, 43 per cent of residents reported someone in their household had developed health conditions as a result of air pollution. The largely unseen entity of air pollution, created by vehicles burning fossil fuels, was particularly acute in Deptford – a neighbourhood in South London formerly the home of John Evelyn, author of *Fumifugium*, a critique of air pollution published in 1661**.** *Deptford Air Force Technician Youth* forms a series of utopian and makeshift interventions (see Figure 05). It first encloses the sources of air pollution (such as vehicle exhaust fumes and construction air particles). Second, it pumps polluted air into a large historic hanger. Then it cleans the air with the aid of elaborate planting. Finally, it distributes clean air to nearby playgrounds and local schools via giant tubes and spouts.

In the context of government inaction, *Deptford Air Force Technician Youth* recognises the common agency of environmental protesters and local residents in making change locally while also addressing a planetary climate crisis. Described by Wilson as 'A true tale of

insurrection in Deptford,' the entanglement of development practices and commuting by car comes into conflict with the day-to-day concerns of residents and an uncaring government: 'The city only lives if the planet will!' Wilson writes. These interacting narratives reveal ecologies of plants and living beings considered more natural, and entities of pollution claimed as artificial. While the sciences of ecology are core to our landscape architecture teaching at Greenwich, a more deep-rooted ecological thinking and questioning is core to our design studios. Our site-specific project approaches resonate with Lorraine Code's observation that 'ecological thinking relocates inquiry "down to the ground" where knowledge is made, negotiated, circulated' (2006: 5). Ecological thinking reinforces the importance of grounded research and knowledge informing designs, while at the same time providing opportunities to design from a multiplicity of differentially scaled perspectives, across material and planetary relations. To address conditions of air pollution or global warming – entities that Morton terms 'hyperobjects' (2013) – we must think ecologically: 'It is not as if some abstract environmental system made us think like this; rather plutonium, global warming, and pollution, and so on, gave rise to ecological thinking.' (Morton, 2013:48)

The dynamic ecologies of design studios, that we can understand as events in time largely defined by the trajectories of design projects, provide a means to engage with vast processes such as air pollution. The unfathomable spatial and temporal dimensions of hyperobjects compel relational and process-oriented thinking. Morton defines hyperobjects through five qualities: first, they adhere to anything that they come into contact with; second, they challenge traditions of time and space as fixed; third, their vast distribution spatially and temporally cannot be understood in a specific location; fourth, the massive extent of hyperobjects makes them difficult to perceive; and fifth, they are formed from relations between more than one object. The condition of London's air pollution that *Deptford Air Force Technician Youth* aims to address resonates with Morton's definition of hyperobjects. Considering air pollution as a hyperobject reveals the challenges of site-specific practices, like landscape architecture, in effectively confronting it. However, we have found that if there are aspects of projects that have the capacity to address hyperobjects, then approaches that have the greatest potential are those that intersect disciplines, designs that have agency across multiple scales (situated and remote), and proposals that embed contrasting temporalities.

It is tempting to consider design studios as hyperobjects. Through the multiple trajectories of projects, design studios can become too big to fully comprehend, especially when working within them. But design studios differ from Morton's hyperobjects, as it is possible to gain distance from or step outside design studios. However, the extensive temporal and spatial dimensionality and relatedness to other things that define design studios reveals potential agency to confront hyperobjects of global warming and air pollution. The open-ended nature of experimental design studio ecologies, as evidenced by *Glaze Unit Fire Squad Magic,* make design studios useful events in time from which to engage with hyperobjects. The throwntogetherness of design studio can engage with hyperobjects: 'It means that the negotiations of place happen on the move, between identities which are on the move' (Massey 2005: 158). Design studios can develop dynamic qualities that make them useful for exploring challenges such as the pollution, climate, and storms. Processes of landscapes and trajectories of design projects entangle, interact, and influence each other –

and in so doing, design studios have potential in engaging with entities, such as global warming, that defy spatial and temporal traditions.

Structuring processes

Tensions between material entities and entanglements of landscape processes are highlighted in landscape architecture design projects at Greenwich. In the context of the experimental and open-endedness of our design studio processes, we recognise the need to realise common milestones – tangible and consistent moments in design projects that evidence progress within what can be less predictable trajectories (see Wall 2019). In the past two decades, academics and scientists have examined and proposed complex and dynamic ecological landscapes, but the difficulties of landscape architects working with these conceptions have been less discussed (see Wolff 2014). Design studios, once launched, develop lives of their own, collective momentums that are increasingly difficult for tutors to steer. However, as a school we give great importance to three moments in design projects. These moments, which ground process-oriented approaches, encapsulate three aims. First, to draw conclusions from project research. Second, to precisely describe and map the dynamic actions of the proposal and site. Third, to go beyond visual representations to illustrate the construction of experiences. We achieve these outcomes, respectively, with what we term the 'base drawing,' the 'operational drawing,' and the 'scene.'

[Insert Figure 6]
[Figure 7 caption: Reading levels and conditions of wetness of river landscapes through a composite base drawing.]
[Figure 7 credits: George Armour, MLA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2019)]

[Insert Figure 7]
[Figure 7 caption: The climate crisis advanced by global urban development industries – still related to historic global power structures, such as British colonial trade.]
[Figure 7 credits: Cesare Cardia, MA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2017)]

[Insert Figure 8]
[Figure 8 caption: The Island Factories on London's Isle of Dogs reconceive a range of landscape relations, informing industrial, waterfront, and planetary ecologies.
[Figure 8 credits: Mais Kalthoum, MLA Landscape Architecture, University of Greenwich (2018)]

Of these three compositions, the base drawing is essential for making use of research knowledge and structuring design proposals. We argue that it is necessary to make sense of research data to establish a basis for making design decisions (See Figure 07). Research in design disciplines tends to contrast research in more academic subjects, whether in anthropology or ecology, geography or economics. At best, research by designers is briefer,

being a necessary stage of design processes with the objective of developing propositions; at worst, it is a time-consuming activity undertaken with insufficient care and lacking rigour, the results of which are ignored as design proposals are composed from intuition. Greenwich design studios require students to develop clear arguments based on their site research, forming the basis from which design speculations can begin. The base drawing is a single composition constructed by bringing together, redrawing, editing, and synthesising data collected from project sites and contexts (See Figure 08). The aim of the base drawing is to make critical conclusions from which inventive design proposals can be developed and tested. The base drawing requires visualising data from interviews, texts, and other methods, and bringing these data into proximity, recognizing relationships, with more traditional maps, plans, and drawings.

The base drawing becomes an essential moment within the experimental processes of design projects at Greenwich – a point of reference within trajectories of design projects, and a milestone in the stories-so-far of the design process. Along with operational drawings and scenes, the base drawing is one of three consistencies within our design studios that are generative through their experimental approaches and diverse results. Experimentation is a core practice reliant on essential processes of questioning, where points of departure may be located but where open-endedness needs to be embraced. Constant and simultaneous activities of unsettling and settling are required, where knowledge is continuously produced and repeatedly tested. However, amid this uncertainty, there is a need for knowledge, skill, and structure. The base drawing, we argue, offers this. The other two project milestones we ask students to recognise are operational drawings and scenes. These are described further in the essay 'What… is landscape?' (Wall 2019). Building on conclusions made through producing the base drawing, operational drawings and scenes describe how the design works as an entanglement of human and more-than-human actions, as well as the constructedness of our experiences with landscapes designed.

Closing

We claim design studio as throwntogetherness of places, as events in time. The creation and productive interactions of project trajectories, including accounts of conflicts, moments of tensions, and contradicting stories, frame the experimental practices we have developed at Greenwich. We recognise the capacity of experimental studio practices to engage with hyperobjects of the climate crisis, such as global warming, air pollution, and storms. The potential of design studios to impact outside university walls, and live beyond the structure of timetables and durations of semesters, is evidenced as discourses and designs inform professional practices. The dissemination of projects through exhibitions and publications, as well as engagement with project stakeholders, grounds our experimentation and inspires those that we work with. Students also bring their concerns about the climate crisis, and their invention, to addressing such massive challenges to professional practice, impressing design studio knowledge and culture beyond the university. Through working with a throwntogetherness of design studios, and aiming to inform the future direction of hyperobjects, we embrace our roles within landscapes and test the bounds of our capacity to inform change.

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