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**Making Space, adding value; *locating and defining the 'creative space' of spatial production.***

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**Abstract**

Ideas are born within a mental 'creative space' and are valued across creative disciplines. However, as architectural practice frantically responds to demands of time, economy and style, the value of such 'creativity' and 'space for creativity' is often overlooked or treated as an add-on. Despite expectations on architects to improve the built environment, neither ongoing changes to the role of the architect, nor imminent changes to educational structures recognise and value the imagination as key to the synthesis of professional knowledge and design vision. As part of a larger research project exploring the relationship between mentally imagined space and physically experienced place, this paper focuses on *defining and locating* the mental 'creative spaces' within invisible structures of creative practice. The findings of focus-groups with architects, artists, students and educators from a range of disciplines identify themes linked to invention and synthesis within the design process; exploring where these 'spaces' exist within design methodologies, practices and educational structures. Discussions and analysis are guided by underlying concepts such as 'the outside', 'third space', 'rhythmanalysis' and 'undirected thought'. Conclusions will be used to reassert the salience of, and need to protect the 'creative space' within modes of architectural practice and educational pedagogies. Key words: architecture, creativity, neuroscience, pedagogy, undirected thought.

**Introduction**

The design (or experience) of physical space involves two imaginations (Pallasmaa, 2014); one to visualise the geometric space (or to see it) and the other to imagine possible inhabitations (or to notice them). Prior and ongoing research suggests that this second, empathetic imagination is harder to access and activate. This could be one reason why it is often less considered and sooner dropped from the agenda in the context of ongoing external pressures on the practice of architecture. If we agree that the ideas and imagination inherent to architectural design also involve the intellectual capacity to link mentally imagined space with physically experienced place, then it is necessary to give some consideration to locating and nurturing the intellectual or 'mental creative space' where 'architecture' is conceived and developed. The wider research project aims to elucidate and valorise the relationship between institutional and pedagogic structures, creative practices and the location, emergence and activation of 'mental creative space'. It will investigate, using mixed methods, the location of this 'space' in both pedagogic and practice-based structures as evidenced in their tangible matter (for example briefs, curriculum, rhythms, institutional hierarches) and manifest in praxis. Are there reciprocal relationships between where and how we practice architecture, the designs we produce and the contemporary trend to objectify architecture? Do these isolate the lived experience of place from the accepted norms and expectations of the creators of our built environment?

This paper describes a pilot focus group carried out to gather the views of individuals from across a range of arts disciplines and presents the main findings in terms of the research questions and methodological implications for how future research may be carried out. The broad aim of this study was to better understand how mental processes are enabled in the working methods of practitioners from different disciplines and to move towards a clearer location and definition of 'mental creative space' within a range of creative practices.

> Moments are those instants we would each, according to our own personal criteria, categorise as 'authentic' moments that break through the dulling monotony of the 'taken for granted'… Moments are 'revelatory of the totality of possibilities contained in daily existence…. Moments are those times when one recognises or has a sudden insight into a situation or an experience beyond the merely empirical routine of some activity. A moment is a flash of the wider significance of some 'thing' or event – its relation to the whole, and by extension, our relation to totality. (Shields, 1999, p.58)

The specific objectives of the pilot study were threefold:

- to generate initial themes and concepts linked to the research aims that could be refined and further explored in future research;
- to explore whether harnessing the views and experience of professionals from other (non-architect) artistic and educational disciplines would inform the wider research aims within an architectural context;
- to determine whether focus groups as a research method provide an appropriate or useful contribution to the wider study.


**Methods**

**Study Design**

This study used a qualitative focus group methodology. Focus groups are a form of 'group interview' in which participants discuss a group topic introduced by the researcher. Focus group discussion falls between 'conversation and meeting' and capitalises on the dynamics of the group communication to generate qualitative data (Kitzinger, 1995). While individual interviews are useful to probe an individuals' experience in depth and not nuanced by the views of others in the room, focus groups encourage a more spontaneous discussion, less constrained by the intense interviewer-interviewee relationship in one-to-one interviews. They also enable participants to explore themes that are most interesting and relevant to them, using their own vocabulary and pursuing their own priorities (Kitzinger, 1995). By including individuals from a range of disciplines in this group, it was hoped that the exchange of anecdotes, experiences and viewpoints would provide rich information relevant to the study aims, and a comparison to those focus groups planned for later in the study which would be made up from homogenous sets of people from separate disciplines (for example; architects, clients, students, tutors). A focus group was also preferred in this instance for its potential to open-up the subject and spark debate, hinting at themes and methods for future research.

**Recruitment and participants**

The study made use of a weekend residential research 'retreat', during which twelve individuals from a range of creative and educational disciplines - including an educator/academic, an architect/educator, two authors, three artistic directors/curators, two artists, an artist/farmer and an academic psychologist/amateur artist - came together to explore a variety of common interests and ongoing projects. These individuals were the participants in this focus group session, they were informed about the nature of the study and the wider research aims. They were also assured of their anonymity in the reporting of the study and their freedom to withdraw at any time. Prior to the focus group, each gave informed consent to participate and for the focus group to be audio-recorded. Individuals own self-descriptions are illustrated in Table 1.

*Table 1: Focus group participants self-described roles*

| No. | Self-description |
|-----|------------------|
| 1 | *I am a trained and practising architect and designer, I have also been known on occasion to direct and produce installations and choreographies* |
| 2 | *I am whatever I do or don't do in my spare time, I make my living as a scientist, I am a jobbing scientist, I am a psychologist* |
| 3 | *I am a practising artist* |
| 4 | *I am currently executive director of a renowned gallery* |
| 5 | *I have a fine art practice, a studio practice which is focused on drawing, painting and printmaking, and I have shifted in the last few years, I now make films as well which I really love and there has been a shift to working more with people* |
| 6 | *I am a writer by profession, began as a journalist* |
| 7 | *I juggle many practices that range from writing to podcasting and broadcasting and curating spoken word events, festival events and I enjoy giving talks, anything that is subversive or counter-culture has always drawn me in* |
| 8 | *I am curator at an art gallery and wrote my PhD on remove the 'other' theoretically and in reality from the [art] equation and what motivates us to make and how do we make meaning if we are not speaking to an 'other'* |
| 9 | *I currently work as a director for a print workshop, the thing that all my experiences and works have in common is that I make order of things, I pull things together to make things happen* |
| 10 | *I read and I think and I talk and write or make things happen and at the moment I mostly do that at a University* |
| 11 | *My main activity is farming, running a very small farm which is also set up as a small community, I see myself as a custodian of this piece of land* |
| 12 | *I realised that I don't really like making things but I do like this role of dreaming about possibilities and then making them happen, sometimes* |

**Data Collection**

The focus group lasted 2.5 hours and was structured around the following topic guide questions:
- Can you describe, define or locate mental 'creative space' within your own artistic / creative practice?
- How do you access it? And can you describe the conditions of its appearance / disappearance?
- Do you think there is a parallel between the moment of 'cognition' when viewing art or experiencing architectural space, and that place or moment of 'invention' in your practice?
- Do you think there is there a need to protect this 'creative space' within different modes of 'artistic' or inventive practice and educational pedagogies?
- What do you think is at stake in each of our disciplines?

The focus group began with a brief introduction to the wider research study and introductions of the participants to one another for the purposes of the session (this may differ from formal roles or previous understandings and relationships between participants) (Table 1). Next, several paired themes were introduced using selected quotes read aloud from across a variety of disciplines; including writings on science/art, romanticism/classicism, professional/amateur, lived/imagined, education/practice, production/process, slog/eureka and visualisation/improvisation. These acted as a stimulant for group discussion, and provided the group with some guidance as to the expected tone for the session. Participants were then asked to consider the above questions which were interjected as appropriate to the natural flow of the conversations. An additional topic guide was developed and further, shorter quotes chosen prior to the focus group, in order to probe and prompt discussion where needed. The setting aimed to be informal, consideration was given to the spatial layout and all participants were encouraged to share their views.

**Data Analysis**

The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed. The audio was listened to again, and the transcript re-read for familiarisation alongside notes made during the focus group itself. The data were analysed thematically. Initially, descriptive open codes were noted in the margins of the transcript; any emerging thoughts about important concepts or patterns were noted down as memos. Themes were compared across the participants and through the focus group to determine any patterns that could inform the research questions set out at the start. For future analysis of multiple focus groups, a copy of the transcript will be given to another researcher to descriptively code, and then both sets of codes will be discussed, refined and an initial coding framework agreed. The transcript will be inputted into NVivo (NVivo, 2012), a qualitative data management software. Following further discussion, codes will then be refined and grouped into higher order categories and themes – becoming more abstract and less descriptive.

*Table 2: Focus group participants sample quotes*

| No. | Quote |
|---|---|
| 1 | On what 'it' is: *to find a better name for it… stuck with creative mental spaces and I am not sure that is exactly what it is… not what creativity is but where it happens and what enables it to happen… in the invisible often not discussed structure of creative practice.* |
| 4 | On 'creative space': *interesting in being in space, I trained as a ballet dancer as a young man, studied literature and then fine art… interested in people... I am obsessed by why we are here. I feel that the excitement of things is the possibility of the attuning of being in space, things coming into focus or tuned.* |
| 1 | On how we see 'it' in our practice: *locate the individual mental creative spaces that exist, or that we create within each of our modes of practice and in the education of our discipline, so you could call this the moment of creation, eureka, synthesis, vision, conceptualisation, insight, intuition… or perhaps this just doesn't exist in the way you work, maybe it's a process, a place, a distraction, something else that influences you.* |
| 4 | On the translation of thought to output: *I find it constantly depressing that I think I have got an idea and as soon as it comes out it's not quite there.* |
| 2 | On play, professionalism and process: *Play is a really interesting issue in psychology, with play in children as a twilight zone between the inner and the outer and as the well-spring of creativity.* |
| 6 | On what matters: *For me and for most writers, especially for novelists and in non-fiction, the important work is done during the editing.* |
| 3 | On discussion about studio space and working method: *The place where you do your thinking might be different from the place that you do your work.* |
| 10 | On 'multi-purpose' space, what this means for creativity and whether this contradicts or provide a different viewpoint to the idea that you need separation or distinction of spaces in order to activate 'mental creative space': *The medieval library was not a silent place as everyone read aloud and libraries are like that [again] now, they are creating sofas where you can talk about things, that homogenisation is really interesting.* |
| 10 | On space: *I am a person who tends to think that I don't think much about the spaces that surround me but it occurs to me that I do. I think I am continuality in search of community, I believe in community and I believe in community politics and I believe that places should somehow not stifle communities.* |
| 6 | On scene change: *The classic thing is just going for a walk to clear your head and realise that there is a bigger world out there than this thing you are concentrating on or the problem you can't solve.* |
| 10 | On the relationship between power and the production of knowledge: *The post-war universities funding was set up to fund knowledge as independent of policy driven initiatives, it has increasingly been brought back into policy driven initiatives by whatever government is in power. In order to get research funding, you have to sign up to something which is very clearly government defined.* |
| 9 | On where creative space is: *I have just made a note about where my creative space is and I think it is where there is no noise and I don't mean silence, I mean none of my noise there.* |

**Findings and Discussion**

Four findings have been identified from the initial analysis, discussed in more detail below:

- There was a tendency of participants to veer towards a commentary on the physical space they inhabit whilst working, despite an attempt by the author to re-focus the conversation on the 'abstract' or 'mental' space under scrutiny.
- There was a recurrent theme of 'distraction' or finding an 'other' place to enable 'creativity'.
- The nature of a focus group made for a varied and enlightening conversation but it was difficult to elicit feedback of direct relevance to the research questions.
- Future methodological approaches have subsequently been considered.

**Physical and Mental Space**

> *[L]ocate the individual mental creative spaces that exist, or that we create within each of our modes of practice and in the education of our discipline, so you could call this the moment of creation, eureka, synthesis, vision, conceptualisation, insight, intuition… or perhaps this just doesn't exist in the way you work, maybe it's a process, a place, a distraction, something else that influences you. (Table 2: no.1)*

Given the researcher emphasis on the abstract, 'latent' spaces of 'creativity', the salience of physical spaces in the discussion was unexpected. It is possible that participants were influenced by the knowledge of the study's aims and of the researcher as an architect; the conversation repeatedly returned to physical space despite a concerted effort to elicit views about the abstract mental space for creativity. But, it is also possible that this affirms or clarifies the importance of a relationship between 'physical' and 'mental' space in line with the research questions. One of the main findings was a clear expression by the participants of the importance of a stable physical 'studio' space in enabling access to a 'mental' or 'abstract' creative space. They described their physical 'studio' or 'office' space as essential to them being able to then access the 'mental' space for their artistic practice (either there, or elsewhere); they also emphasised the importance of being able to control and change their physical space at will as an impetus for creativity; a distraction or a change of scene within familiar surrounds, not only in the pub or café or staring at the sea. This implies ownership and/or regular inhabitation of a personal work area combined with the opportunity to leave it at will.

> *The classic thing is just going for a walk to clear your head and realise that there is a bigger world out there than this thing you are concentrating on or the problem you can't solve. (no.6)*

All participants were educated in an era when regularly inhabited, personal 'studio' space was the norm (whether shared or not) and have continued to practice in this manner. Their artistic practices had been developed before the onset of 'neoliberal' thinking and its incorporation into architectural design and space production (Spencer, 2016). What effect does the shift in working methods which result from inhabiting 'smooth space' - or hot-desking - instead of personal permanent inhabited space have on the subsequent production of space? The spaces for 'the production of space' inevitably affect the ability of an artist or designer to access and practice the 'mental' or 'abstract' space as 'other' (as there is nothing to be 'other' from); is the development of the 'abstract creative space'

subsequently therefore hindered by physical surroundings? How might we be able to investigate the effect this has on our built environment as ultimate output of this inhabitation and working process?

> *Rather than democratic in any familiar sense, the equalization of things – simultaneously the heterarchical drive of the market... is a mode of power that serves the expansion of neoliberalism and its forms of thought. Interpretation and critique are disenfranchised. The social cannot be prioritized over the commercial. The public cannot be favoured over the private. The subject cannot be afforded more concern that the object.* (Spencer, 2016, p.127)

There is an additional understanding of artist studio spaces as belonging to a 'community' and a further implication of social isolation through neoliberal manipulation that could negatively impact upon access to the 'mental creative space' for design processes. It was interesting however that participant no.10 saw the blurring of boundaries of defined spaces for activities as an opportunity for the promotion of community and interaction rather than as isolating people and thinking from one another. This leads on to the additional question of how we inhabit space in relation to how it was designed, and what socio-political conditions mean that one or the other dominates? Will it be the unexpected occupation of neo-liberal workspace as truly social which is its downfall?

> *The medieval library was not a silent place as everyone read aloud and libraries are like that [again] now, they are creating sofas where you can talk about things, that homogenisation is really interesting… I am a person who tends to think that I don't think much about the spaces that surround me but it occurs to me that I do. I think I am continuality in search of community, I believe in community and I believe in community politics and I believe that places should somehow not stifle communities.* (no.10)

**Methodological Reflection and Future Work**

In light of the diverse conversation stimulated in the focus group, the author is considering whether to include additional individual interviews or questionnaires in future research; to pin-point responses to specific questions more carefully and to include the opinions of a larger number of participants from each homogenous strand (architects, educators, students, clients etc.). The classification of participants might be useful in terms of their generation in order to explore further the change from personal to shared physical space, its impact on 'mental creative space' and subsequently on the production of our built environment.

In parallel to the qualitative research, the author would also like to further explore whether it is possible to draw upon the theories and writings of philosophers and thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Maurice Blanchot to help to define and elucidate this ephemeral subject and experience.

> *…work is a work only when it becomes the intimacy shared by someone who writes it and someone who reads it, a space violently opened-up by the contest between the power to speak and the power to hear.* (Blanchot, 1982, p.37)

Lefebvre's *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* also describes an architectural imagination that mediates between thought and action; thinking about architecture and thinking architecturally about

how we inhabit the world (Lefebvre, 2014). In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot circles the void surrounding the moment of cognition (Blanchot, 1982) and later debates the experience of the outside with Foucault (Blanchot, 1990).

> *Any purely reflexive discourse runs the risk of leading the experience of the outside back to the dimension of interiority; reflection tends irresistibly to repatriate it to the side of consciousness and to develop it into a description of living that depicts the "outside"" as the experience of the body, space, the limits of the will, and the ineffaceable presence of the other.* (Blanchot, 1990, p.21)

It was not clear from the focus group what the impact of the 'loss' of our 'mental creative space' might be on the different artistic or design practices discussed and so parallels could not be made with the processes which result in the production of our built environment. The larger question of whether there may or may not be a need to protect the 'creative space' within modes of architectural practice and educational pedagogies remains.

> *[Capital] kills artistic creation, creative capacity. It goes as far as threatening the last resource: nature, the fatherland, the roots. It delocalises humans. We exhibit technology at the slightest suggestion. Yet technologies do not emerge from the living. Communication? It remains formal, we have seen: content? Neglected, lost, wasted away.* (Lefebvre, 2004, p.63)

## Implications

We are facing an overhaul of the rhythm of architectural education and where the construction industry is realigning itself with other more powerful priorities driven by time and money rather than quality and inhabitation. The ongoing RIBA Education Review, which includes a 'compact between practices, students and schools of architecture in order to better define the working relationship between graduates and employers in professional practice, and provides tangible benefits for both', considers much about professional practice experience but little about the importance of the space for imagination and experimentation in developing an architectural brain. Industry and practice concern themselves primarily with meeting the demands of developers and investors; as architects, we should take some time to re-define the function and input of architects in the construction industry to include adding value to the experience of the built environment. It is here that the relationship between the experience of space and the influence that has on our capacity to subsequently design space needs to be clearly articulated through future research. There is an opportunity at this moment in time to protect and maintain a space for invention and cognition in our practices. This could add real value to the built environment and our experience of it.

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