Education, Design and Practice – Understanding skills in a Complex World

• Paper / Proposal Title:
STEAMhouse in a Birmingham Context

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• Abstract (300 words):

Birmingham is the largest city in the UK outside of London. Its heritage as a Victorian Industrial city is still ever present in its culture and the creative sectors it hosts in the region.

However, there are three conditions that is affecting the relationship between the city, its creative industry, and the economic impact it generates.

It has one of the largest percentages of manufacturing in the country but is now under threat as the city’s proximity to London is starting to show the usual markers of gentrification.

At the same time, artists and creatives are moving to the region in their droves as they are being priced out of London but with limited cultural infrastructures to support them in order to develop their practice.

State education is making changes to national policy with the Design Council highlighting how these will affect employment in the creative sector as there is a sharp drop in design degrees.
As a result, Higher Education is looking at new initiatives to take a share in the competitive University market; to attract more students, and to bring in more investment through research and enterprise. In this context, Birmingham City University (BCU), is a former vocational college turned University, has the largest art & design university faculty outside of London. To counter these influences, BCU has established STEAMhouse. A centre for innovation and STEAM philosophy for SME’s to develop new products and designers or artists to further develop their practice. It offers a transitional support network for new graduates during setting up new enterprises and is fostering a creative community that will attract more students.

This paper will explore the impact of STEAMhouse against the pressures of gentrification, marketisation of education and mobility of the creative class in the country. It will map the collaborative network it requires by combining academics working with artists and designers to create a support network for the community, and how the institution worked within more fluid networks of smaller organisations to establish the STEAMhouse programme in the first place.

- Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Alessandro is a Senior Lecturer at the Birmingham School of Architecture and Design. He also co-established and leads the Collaborative Laboratory (Co.LAB) a teaching initiative and organisation within the school that integrates teaching with practice through live projects, staff research/design and external consultancy.

Prior to joining the university, Alessandro has worked in architecture and research practices in Manchester and London, with experience in evidence-based design and historical refurbishments. He graduated from the Manchester School of Architecture with a distinction in both postgraduate architecture and MA Urbanism prior to developing his portfolio as an independent artist/designer.

As anviere, a self-identified design guise, he has developed a portfolio of site-specific installations and artworks commenting on the subversive qualities of our physical environments.

Alessandro brings these characteristics forward to his teaching as an academic and researcher; taking an active role in the discussion of architectural pedagogy, urban theory and the contemporary vernacular. It is applied by engaging in the city’s cultural network through an ongoing process of collaborative practice.

Recently he has joined the Birmingham City Council’s Planning Design Review Panel and sits of the board for Centrala gallery.