Designing with Uncertainty: An Experiment in Introducing Alterity in Design Studio Pedagogy

Thomas-Bernard Kenniff

Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), École de design

In a radio interview in which she spoke against the certainty expressed by political figures and the ideals of perfect citizen-consumer behavior, Montréal author Fanny Britt argued eloquently for uncertainty as a necessary aspect of social life: “The problem with certainties, she said, is that they kill our curiosity and make us mediocre. What we find in uncertainty, on the other hand, is shared humanity.” This paper explores the ties between uncertainty and design practice as a mode of critical engagement with social complexity in design education.

Modes of practice for students and professionals tend to be aimed, sensibly, at the resolution of uncertainty rather than its encouragement (Beheshti). This paper, however, explores the use of uncertainty as an agent in the development of design projects (Manolopoulou, Tyszczuk) and reflexive (Schön) and “transformative” practice (Petrescu), specifically within the context of design studio pedagogy. Uncertainty shifts the focus of the studio from artefacts to processes, destabilizing the project and its subject(s) by obscuring a possible resolution and establishing a constant dialogue.
between designer(s), skills, objectives, methods and tools. The paper presents two notions developed from Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the concept of dialogue and argued to be crucial in developing such a pedagogical approach: ambivalence, or uncertainty about choice and signification, and alterity, or uncertainty about identification and subjectivity.

The paper draws on the author’s own pedagogical experiments in design studios at the Carleton University School of Architecture and Urbanism. The studios took place in the last semester of the undergraduate degree, thereby raising timely questions about practice and skills as graduation approached. Ultimately, the paper suggests that the relevance of uncertainty in design pedagogy is that it alters both project and subject, and so actively engages students with the architectonics of design across the boundaries of the individual and the collective, the trivial and the complex.

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

Thomas-Bernard Kenniff is Professor in the Environmental Design program at the École de design, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) where he teaches design studios and theory and criticism. He joined UQAM in 2015 after having taught in the architecture schools at Carleton University, Ottawa, Université de Montréal and Université Laval, Québec City. He holds a PhD in Architectural History and Theory from the UCL Bartlett School of Architecture and a Master of Architecture from the University of Waterloo. His research addresses preoccupations tied to the public realm, working out the ways in which subjectivities and relationships are transformed by the collective practice of making social space. Thomas-Bernard’s PhD dissertation explored the transposition of dialogic theory to design, with a specific interest in public space and critical practice. He is currently working on a three-year research by design project on the recent development of Montréal’s public realm that looks at how public space emerges from the multiple interfaces assembled between associations and individuals. Thomas-Bernard’s research and publications have included work on participant-research methods, oral history methods in architecture, urban identity, interstitial space, uncertainty and dialogic methods for design.