Educating Attention: teaching anthropology to architects and teaching architecture to anthropologists

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Working between the disciplines of architecture and anthropology, it is often rightly assumed that architects have a great deal to learn from the social sciences. What is less often recognised, however, is how much anthropologists can learn from architecture. Architecture remains a professional and academic discipline, and has its own histories and theories which allow for sophisticated understandings of space and our uses of it. This paper draws on my experiences of cross-disciplinary teaching over the last decade. This includes formal university teaching sessions as well as the pedagogy integral to research networks and interdisciplinary projects. My involvement with the ERC project Knowing from the Inside (2014-19), examining anthropology, art, architecture and design, is central to this, as learning from one another’s disciplinary expertise was central to the work of the group.

Pedagogy is central to ongoing cross-disciplinary research. The desire from other disciplines to have carefully packaged parcels of teachable components speaks to a desire to learn, but also a misunderstanding of how one learns a discipline such as architecture. Interestingly, this modular approach is not how a field site would be conceptualised, but the equal power relations and university setting of pedagogy encourages the shortness and sharpness of delivery.
That said, the aims are less to produce anthropologists who can practice as architects and more to ensure that the spatial understanding of architecture is available to anthropologists and others as a tool for their own research.

My experience in teaching anthropological concepts and practices to architects has a different outlet: the long-running Graphic Anthropology elective renamed as Anthropology of Home in response to current circumstances, focusing on theories of dwelling, the importance of home and its material culture. The approach of pairing anthropological understanding with graphic practices is central to the approach of the elective*, making the social sciences directly accessible and applicable to students.

What both approaches have in common is the approach of educating attention where assumptions are broken down, and the complexity of the everyday revealed.

* This was recently consolidated into the monograph Anthropology for Architects (Bloomsbury, 2020).

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Ray Lucas has a PhD in Social Anthropology for the thesis A Theory of Notation as a Thinking Tool (Aberdeen) and an MPhil by research in Architecture with the thesis Filmic Architecture (Strathclyde). He is Reader in Architecture at Manchester School of Architecture (MSA), where he is currently the Head of Humanities, working across the BA and Masters programmes, setting the agenda for our programme of architectural history, theory and pioneering delivery of architectural social sciences. At MSA, Lucas is responsible for delivering a range of courses including Histories of Architecture, Thinking Through Drawing, Writing the City, Anthropology of Home, and Filmic Architecture as well as leading a dissertation group on Inscriptive Practices. He is a member of the Flux research collective and co-convenor of the Expert Panel and Provocations lecture series. Lucas is Author of Research Methods for Architecture (Laurence King, 2016); Drawing Parallels: Knowledge Production in Axonometric, Isometric, and Oblique Drawings (Routledge, 2019); and Anthropology for Architects: Social Relations and the Built Environment (Bloomsbury, 2020). Lucas is also co-editor of the volume Architecture, Festival and the City (Routledge, 2018) and author of a wide range of additional book chapters and journal papers.