The Millbank Atlas: Catalysing Practice-based Research in a Spirit of the Civic University

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Abstract

For too long, Chelsea College of Arts has operated in a bubble, sealed off from its surrounding neighbourhood in London, UK. The Millbank Atlas aims to buck this trend as an ongoing collaboration that convenes staff and student researchers based at the College with local residents and others. Core to the curriculum of Chelsea Local, one of seven studios on BA Interior and Spatial Design (Hons), the Atlas has unfolded as a collection of maps that trace and retrace the surrounding neighbourhoods of the College through diverse 2D and 3D cartographic experiments.

This paper considers the Atlas as a case study for unleashing practice-based research in cultural production beyond academia, the art world and the design sector. The spirit of civic learning for a civil society that animates the Atlas aims to create a particular kind of space that both exemplifies and challenges the new participatory paradigm that has marked the social, cultural, economic, technological and other dimensions of life in the UK in recent decades. In what follows we explore this participation as a catalyst for the Atlas as a community of practice/practice of community as it coordinates research in the local neighbourhood, embedding research in the curriculum and disseminating it as research outcomes, such as this paper. By drawing on some of the cartographic experiments in The Millbank Atlas in its 2016 - 17 iteration, we indicate how the project embodies the civic university's commitment to 'integrating teaching, research and engagement with the outside world such that each enhances the other' (Goddard and Kempton, 2016, 13). The paper concludes by underscoring the Atlas' significance in relation to questions that propelled the 2017 conference of the Art of Research.

KEYWORDS: civic university, community engagement, cultural narratives, mapping, participatory paradigm, practice-based research in art and design, space

PART 1 - Catalysing Paradigms: Participation, Community, Practice, Research, Education and Work

The Millbank Atlas is part of an ongoing collaborative project that doesn't mind being surprised by its own work. Staff and student researchers of Chelsea College of Arts (a constituent college of University of the Arts London) come together with locals of the Millbank neighbourhood in Westminster to bring the Atlas into being. In the 2016 - 2017 academic year, mapping techniques were central to Chelsea Local, one of seven studios on BA Interior and Spatial Design (Hons) at the College. The cornerstone of Chelsea Local's curriculum, the Atlas traced and retraced the College's neighbourhood, with this finding material expression as diverse 2D and 3D cartographic experiments (discussed more below). Individually eccentric and collectively eclectic, the maps probe the lived experience of Millbankers - local people who reside,

work, study or otherwise engage in the area in a sustained and recursive way.

Drawing on first-hand knowledge, the Atlas challenges the dominant but also superficial understanding of Millbank as a 'community in place' (Rimensberger, 2017). This includes assumptions about the people composing the area's community/communities and what their capacities entail. Many locals are baffled by the government's apparent perception that Millbank is a resourceful neighbourhood at a time when public funding is in rapid decline. According to the community network of Millbank Creative Works (MCW), their efforts have been catalysed not by some joyous expression of community spirit but deep solidarity that has pooled as state support has dried up. The force behind MCW, Wilfried Rimensberger, who is also a key collaborator on the Atlas and a 'local-in-residence' at the College, leaves little to the imagination when he asserts 'If we don't help, no one will' (2017). The veracity of Rimensberger's claim notwithstanding, there is no question that MCW's outreach, with this finding form in the Atlas and other community-based projects, responds directly to local need. To understand how this is shaping the Atlas as socially-engaged research—and what consequences 'responding directly to local need' is having for socially-engaged practice-based research in art and design more generally—it will be helpful to locate the project within what Clements and others have dubbed a 'new participatory paradigm' (2008, 13).

Of course, the drive for greater public involvement in the UK is not new. But the intense political significance this acquired in the noughties tracks with The Millbank Atlas as an expression of civic learning for a civil society. The first decade of the twenty first century saw a spate of initiatives like the Blair government's White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG 2006). New Labour policy like this were inspired by a 'duty to involve' those who were impacted by policies more actively in their making (Clements, 2008, 14). Witness the rise of 'community consultation' and similar mechanisms for participation. As is well known, ineffectiveness soon made the cynicism-breeding impotency of this approach impossible to deny. As James Panton makes the point, '[There was] an appearance of democracy because the process was discursive [when in fact] the contours of the debate had been established in advance' (as quoted in Clements, 2008, 15). In other words, a great deal of community consultation provided a platform without purchase. The outcomes of planning, housing, infrastructure, etc. were largely predetermined. The result: a classic case of top-down mandates masquerading as bottom-up empowerment. Is it any surprise that many of those involved in this type of engagement a decade ago are today choosing to actively *disengage*?

If 'participation' like the type described above was the dog whistle of New Labour's vision of community, the Conservative government's 'Big Society' plays a similar role in the present and relentless age of austerity. Following the General Election of 2010, and widespread privatization in the wake of the so-called economic downturn, citizens of the UK have been tasked with 'pitching in' and 'doing their share' [read: 'If we don't help, no one will']. Little wonder that volunteering, exemplified by the members of MCW, is today core to public engagement, with 'rebuilding' communities out of a sense of civic duty driving this agenda (Clements, 2008, 18). As there is no scope here to unpack the legion of issues with this, an indicative sketch will have to do.

First up is the labour--the work--involved in rebuilding communities. Today, much of this is done by volunteers, with two types predominating: those who can afford to work for free thanks to disposable

time/income, and those who are forced to volunteer as part of workfare or similar schemes. Either way, volunteer labour takes the place of state-organised programmes of paid work. Once the workhorse of the post-war consensus, funded government programmes that today invest in the public sphere are in decline. Added to this is the problem of 'rebuilding' in the first place. Whether or not this nostalgic quest is based on objective fact, i.e. that communities *were* historically 'stronger' in contrast to being 'different', is beside the point for our argument here. Also extraneous is the political condescension and divisiveness implied by parochial campaigns to clean up and civilise our streets (Williams, 2008, 57) [read: dirty difference in the form of scruffy migrants or worse]. More pressing for our immediate task of contextualising the Atlas in the new participatory paradigm is the conviction that *engineering communities is almost always a recipe for disaster* (Williams, 2008, 53 - 64).

As educator-researchers working in Interior and Spatial Design, it stands to reason that we would substantiate this claim by referencing failed experiments in post-war housing. Witness the Grenfell Tower disaster. This devastating fire in London (2017) that killed 80 inhabitants, injured hundreds and displaced even more is only one of many horrors. But as citizens of the Global North, the authors of this paper are equally inclined to martial the Brexit vote and the recent election in the US as compelling examples of inadvertently engineered communities with polarising consequences. If the outcomes of both votes have taught us anything it must be that communities are more inclined to form, storm, norm, perform *against* something than *for* something. This could, in fact, provide a useful way of conceptualising community at a time when, as Williams observes, 'No one has the first idea of what community really means let alone how it is to be achieved' despite being 'a key component of [so much so-called] enlightened architectural discourse' in recent decades (2008, 59). How, then, to make sense of The Millbank Atlas as a self-defined community project, one with the espoused aim of re-presenting the lived experience of locals in the neighbourhoods of Chelsea College of Arts? How to think about the Atlas as a collection of maps embedded in a broader community campaign lead by MCW, our studio and other groups and people?

As coordinators of the Atlas, our motivation for pursuing the project may be surprising, especially given how we contextualise it above. We not only *like* community we also believe that a strong sense of what it entails can make our live/work relations more meaningful, ideally more equitable--even more fun. Hence our relentless advocacy for *more* community. For sure, it provides a dynamic and dare we say *interesting* context in which to undertake research in cultural production. And so we hold fast to The Millbank Atlas as a practice-based community approach through and through. But instead of engineering 'community' via a top-down programme, or re-enacting 'community' as a lost value of yesteryears, or conceding that 'community' works best as a process of reactionary politicization, our studio seeks to embody and enact it—whatever 'it' may be—as a highly situated and contingent expression of sociability. Community is made and remade and hence *practiced* in much the same way that art, design, architecture, medicine, law, etc. are practiced.

This emphasis on practice speaks to the significance of practice-based research as a catalyst for community formation. In the Atlas, 'practice' operates as an application of something, i.e. the maps are practical objects. Our studio also values 'practice' as habituating of something, i.e. undertaking it on a regular basis. Social engagement remains a constant of the Atlas while the specifics of how this finds form can shift from year to year. Together practice as application and practice as habituation sustain the

Atlas as a dynamic process. As such, the project coordinates members of the local community, students of Interior and Spatial Design and practice-based researchers at the College into a 'community of practice' (CoP) that outstrips Lave and Wenger's common-sense understanding (1998). As this latter concept is well enough known to dispense with lengthy description here, suffice to say that in addition to evidencing the three hallmarks of CoPs (mutual engagement, joint enterprise, shared repertoire [Lave and Wenger, 1998]), the Atlas is also very much about *practising* community. If the project had a motto, it would be: 'As vital as it is fragile, community is subject to ongoing renewal by way of practice-based research'.

The chiasmus - community of practice < > practice of community - points to our paper's secondary preoccupation. As should by now be clear, engaging with the ontology, teleology and epistemology of communities are some of our core concerns, which we are exploring through the indigenous features of Millbank's communities. As educator-researchers, we are also alive to the Atlas as a university-based project. This makes Chelsea College of Arts in particular and the University of the Arts London of exceptional interest, especially at a time when like so many universities, they are communities in flux.

It's uncontentious to say the university and its disciplines, including Interior and Spatial Design, are changing. More contentious are claims regarding the futures of teaching, learning and research. Working with MCW has encouraged us to value projects like the Atlas as collaborative ways of producing culture and knowledge that have the potential to grapple with this uncertainty at a local level, by reinvigorating the university from the inside out and vice versa. For this reason, a secondary agenda of this paper is to propose the Atlas as an expression of the civic university and its commitment to 'integrating teaching, research and [community] engagement such that each enhances the other' (Goddard and Kempton, 2016, 13).

Otherwise known as 'redbrick universities', civic universities were established in the nineteenth century to meet the needs of the UK's growing industrial cities. These institutions of higher learning provided access to more diverse students, including women and others beyond the social elite. Civic universities also provided training to supply local industries with skilled workers, with this underpinning their place-based approach to education. Today, the model of the civic university offers an alternative to other conventions in the UK. Most immediately the elitism of Oxbridge on the one hand; and on the other, the rise of private universities, their prohibitive fees making them also elite by putting this education out of research for many students from lower income backgrounds.

In future we aim to use the Atlas to research how the civic university wraps with urgent labour-related concerns: the proliferation of work at a time when jobs are declining; how volunteering in a spirit of civic responsibility might couple and uncouple with the anticipated leisure time and/or social unrest arising from something like 47% of jobs being automated by 2030 (Frey and Osborne, 2013). This calls into question how today's educational and training programmes are anticipating tectonic shifts in tomorrow's employment. Surely, these developments will result in tremendous consequences for our communities, catalysing inconceivable change. What role will practice-based art and design research play in negotiating these paradigm shifts?

These discussions are urgent. But they are also as speculative as they are unwieldy and for this reason, we raise them but forego exploring them in depth. Our paper also dispenses with a conclusion. Rather, the final section indicates the relevance of The Millbank Atlas for the current state of practice-based research in art and design. This coda is composed of brief responses to the questions that propelled Art of Research 2017: *How can ideas and/or practices of catalysis be considered with particular research processes, in relation to larger contexts and realms of art, politics and society? How can artistic and practice-led research intervene in the realms outside the art world or academia? How does it relate to artivism/ activism?* Our reflections prompted by these questions are shot through with The Millbank Atlas, its recent production, exhibition, dissemination and other impact. This brings us to…

PART 2 -The Millbank Atlas: A Partial Portrait of a Project in Process

The Millbank Atlas is a collaborative project that brings together researchers, students and local residents to trace the neighbourhood of Chelsea College of Arts. The Atlas creates meaning through conceptualising Millbank as comprised of reciprocal relations among the college and surrounding businesses, residential blocks, civil society groups, transportation links and other amenities, infrastructure and further aspects of this built and natural environment.

Fig. 1. Private view for The Millbank Atlas exhibition at the Cookhouse Gallery, Chelsea College of Arts (2017)

While the College serves our studio as a base, our classrooms are the neighbourhoods of Westminster. Chelsea Local was in fact established primarily in response to the College's move from its former location on Manresa Road in Chelsea (SW3) to its current one in Millbank. Today it calls Westminster home, with the campus positioned on the banks of the River Thames beside Tate Britain and between the Houses of Parliament, the meeting place of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and MI6, the

foreign intelligence agency of the British Government. Since 2005, the College has occupied the grounds and buildings of what were formerly the Royal Army Medical College. This was constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from bricks reclaimed from the Millbank Prison, which stood on the site before this. In important ways, the desire to embed Chelsea College in both this history and the complex context of Westminster as a specific borough of London has motored Chelsea Local, with the studio self-organising to take the lead in the College's programme of community engagement.

In the 2016 - 2017 academic year, students in our studio used practice-based research to create maps and other cartographic experiments that identify distinguishing characteristics of the lived experience of Millbank as a particular part of London. The maps were showcased in a week-long exhibition, accompanied by a public events programme, both of which were hosted at the Cookhouse Gallery, Chelsea College of Arts (21 - 28 January 2017). The following description draws on the boxed catalogue that we recently published to disseminate the exhibition (Bradfield, Shechter et al., 2017). In addition to our curatorial essay and a text by Rimensberger that observes the impact and value of the project for Millbank's local communities, the catalogue includes facsimiles of the maps on display. These are annotated with reflections by their student-cartographers, which in turn inform our discussion below.

Fig. 2. 'Chelsea Local' student testing a food trolley prototype, Millbank Estate (2017)

The exhibition consisted of two strands of student work. One involved 3D spatial interventions. They were designed by small groups of students as tools to understand and expand MCW's existing projects. Highly propositional, these spatial interventions were practical tools to further understand the who, how and where of Millbank. A case in point is the food trolley created by Yuqi Jiang, Cintia Huang Si Teng, Rongzan Lin and Shijie Zhang (Fig. 2.). The trolley developed through a sustained conversation with Rimensberger regarding basic infrastructure for MCW's regular food service. It collects unsold and

recently expired provisions from local vendors and delivers them to Millbankers in need because they are atomised by old age, unemployment, mental health issues or a combination thereof.

Sturdy, convenient and adaptable, the trolley was built for the task at hand (Fig.2). In addition to being practical, it was designed to bridge disparate people and encourage community inclusiveness. As Rimensberger makes the point, a delivery requires people who might otherwise be isolated to open their doors and let the outside world in (Rimensberger, 2017). In this way, the trolley feeds into the Atlas' broader interest in crossing thresholds. These include moving between public and private space, shifting between the College and Millbank's other communities and working across teaching and research, with these activities understood as constituting each other in ways that cannot be anticipated in advance.

The second strand of student work in the exhibition of the Atlas included maps of Millbank that were crafted by individual students to explore a specific subject. These ranged from local crime patterns and pollution patterns, green spaces, changes in use, smells, sounds and other themes. Once the students received their assignments, we encouraged them to 'take their subject for a walk', to hit the streets of Millbank, immerse the bodies and minds in the local environment, fully participate in the urban landscape—pay attention to their lived experience of London.

Fig. 3. *Touch and Sense Map Part I*, Evans Ye, The Millbank Atlas exhibition at the Cookhouse Gallery, Chelsea College of Arts (2017)

For many of us this direct encounter seems 'common sense', hardly worth mentioning as a method of practice-based research. In fact, an important insight of the project is that we cannot take this for granted. Embodied encounter with a site is no longer the default postinternet (i.e. since 'being online' has come to proliferate the everyday). The lure of Google is so compelling that for many millennials like the bulk of

our students, *the common sense is that if something is not online, it doesn't exist*. One of the most effective ways of exploding this myth is to intercut our studio's 'desk research' with face-to-face interpersonal exchange. This process entails introducing our students to Millbank locals with the express purpose of catalysing a conversation. Through this, our studio can gain local knowledge and, in the process, better appreciate the resulting reciprocity: how the community shapes its members and they shape their community in turn, with this including the built environment of their neighbourhoods.
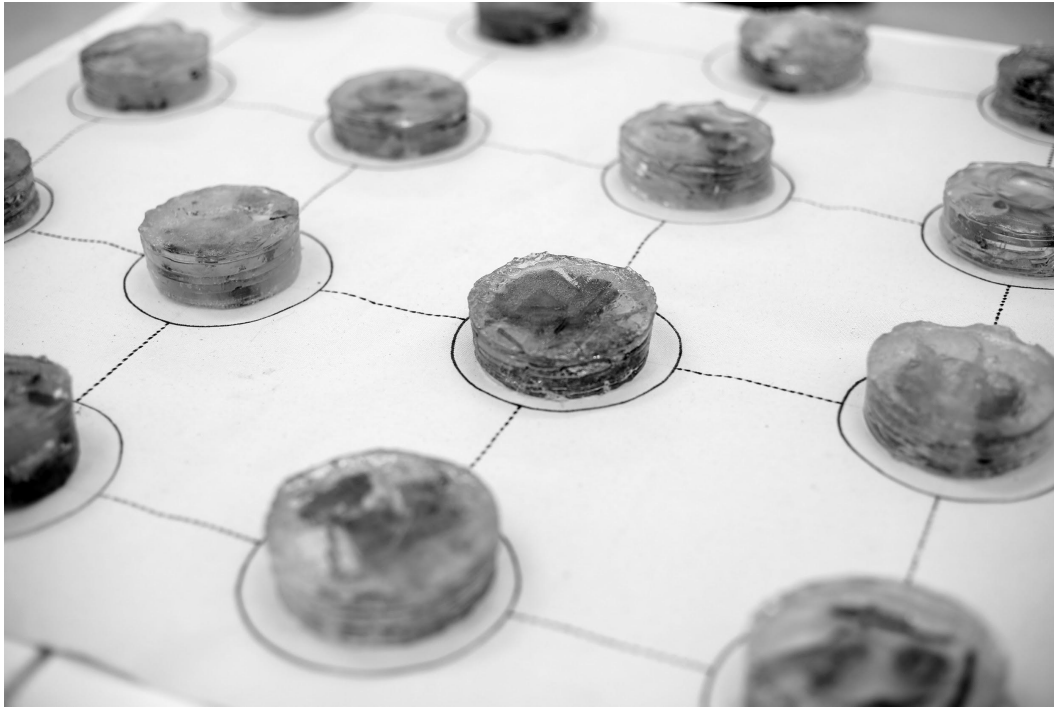

Fig. 4. *Touch and Sense Map Part II*, Evans Ye, The Millbank Atlas exhibition at the Cookhouse Gallery, Chelsea College of Arts (2017)

Consider the example of Evans Ye's *Touch and Sense Parts 1 and 2* (Figs. 3-4). His practice-based research was inspired by the textures of Millbank, especially the brick facades, which he learned about through his desk research, discussions with us and other tutors and conversations with Rimensberger and experts with knowledge of the terrific transformation this patch of London has experienced through time. Ye wanted users of his map to feel the history of this neighbourhood through their fingertips. Many of the buildings in the area were built from bricks that were recycled with the closure and demolition in 1890 of the Millbank Prison (Jeremy Bentham's first panoptic prison, which in turn proved so central to Foucault's sociological research on the mechanisms of discipline and punishment). The map features textures that were cast from buildings that today stand in the prison's original footprint. A canvas map below the plaster casts showed outlines of the buildings and displayed their names.

Ye's other map used the language of geological sampling (Fig. 4) It features materials collected from selected points where the Millbank Prison once stood. Evans cast the materials in glass wax to make them visible as units. By separating them out and suspending then in the clear material, he aimed to highlight things that we often take for granted.

Smitten with the casting process, Ye built on the experiments he showed in the January exhibition, developing them further in the final project of his degree, with *Touch Bench* representing his practice in the graduating exhibition (June 2017). Nodding to the traditions of architecture and urban planning, the small-scale models that motored Ye's practice in the fall of 2016 were replaced by spring 2017 with the 1:1 scale that distinguishes socially-engaged, community-led design. *Touch Bench* manifests as a fully functional chair clad in the cast panels featuring the kinds of textures described above. It also includes a QR code that provides access to information about the project and Millbank online. Today *Touch Bench* is permanently installed in a local housing estate, where it offers much needed public seating in a busy thoroughfare. Providing this is something volunteers had struggled to realise for some time. Ye chose to meet this need through one of the projects during his studies. In this way, the community's loose brief provided the student with an interesting and actual opportunity. In exchange, Ye created an artefact that instead of being skipped after the degree show, enjoys a vital afterlife, recalling the designer's presence and contribution further to his return to China.

Fig. 5. *Touch Bench*, Evans Ye, Installation view, Millbank Estate (2017)

Our interest in mapping contingencies like those exemplified by *Touch Bench* chimes with our commitment to 'make the complex accessible, the hidden visible, the unmappable mappable', to borrow Abrams and Hall's (2006, 12) neat phrase, was at the heart of our studio brief for the 2016 - 2017 academic year. Titled 'Drawing Together', it envisioned the Atlas as both a process and a product for 'drawing out' facts and figures alongside hidden stories and histories of the neighbourhood, understood as both a site and a community. Through this practice-based research, the students of Chelsea Local learned

how to learn about the ways we live, work and conduct our operations through community architectures that fan across the built environment and interpersonal networks. While highly contingent on the one hand, the methods used to bring this knowledge into being are often transferable, making them foundational to practice-based research as the bedrock of a lifelong practice of Interior and Spatial Design.

PART 3 - CODA: Resourcing The Millbank Atlas in the Service of Art of Research 2017 and Its themes of Catalyses, Interventions and Transformation

Part 1 of this paper scoped the new participatory paradigm as the broader social, political, economic, environmental and technological context in the UK. Our aim here was to highlight community formation as a practice that is emergent, complex, fragile and core to our lived experience in general but takes on special significance in the work of socially-engaged practitioners, including interior and spatial designers. As a project that is community led and also takes community as its focus, the Atlas is compelled to grapple with its place in the university as one of the communities in which it operates. Hence our interest in establishing the Atlas as an expression of the civic university and its commitment to 'integrating teaching, research and [community] engagement, such that each enhances the other' (Goddard and Kempton, 2016, 13).

Part 2 of this paper explored this integration obliquely by describing some of the process involved and products featured in an interim exhibition of the 2016 - 2017 iteration of the Atlas, which took place in the College's gallery in January 2017. As both the literal and figurative heart of this paper, Part 2 provides concrete examples which inform the third and final section of this wide-ranging discussion. We have chosen to format this as a coda, unfolding as a Q&A. Here we offer schematic reflections on the clutch of questions that propelled the Art of Research 2017. These indicate the relevance of The Millbank Atlas to practice-based research in art and design, especially when tasked with creating new communities of diverse stakeholders in response to growing demands to demonstrate impact and engagement, in keeping with the participatory paradigm outlined in Part 1.

Q: *How can ideas and/or practices of catalysis be considered with particular research processes, in relation to larger contexts and realms of art, politics and society?*

Shading in our sketch above, and circling back to our nascent discussion of The Millbank Atlas as an expression of the civic university, we want to respond to this question by underscoring our conviction that practice-based projects can catalyse change on multiple fronts. If in the past, their potential to impact their fields of study was regarded as somehow separate from the realms of art, politics and society, today knowledge production is under attack, putting it on the frontlines of the public sphere This is especially so in contexts like the UK where formerly public services like education are being rapidly reconfigured to make it more efficient in keeping with its privatization as for-profit enterprise.

Differently put, The Millbank Atlas is not only about responding to local need, making communities of

this London neighbourhood more visible and supporting them in community-led change. The Atlas is also about demonstrating the relevance and vibrancy of the university programmes that, in the spirit of the civic university, straddle the institution of higher learning and its environs. Crucial here is the two-way movement the Atlas promotes. These outflank students and staff going *out* into the community. Millbank locals have also crossed the threshold of the College, some of them for the first time. Today Rimensberger has literally taken up residence here. With an office serving as the headquarters of MCW, he is a constant presence on campus. In exchange for this access, his open-door policy has made him a living resource, not only for students of Chelsea Local but anyone studying or working at the College who wants to learn more about its community context. In this way, and in collaboration with Rimensberger, we are testing the conceptual and practical boundaries of Interior and Spatial Design by mobilising this area of study as a feedback loop to monitor the interface between the College and the communities that it overlaps.

Fig. 6. Wilfried Rimensberger, 'local in resident' in The Millbank Atlas exhibition at the Cookhouse Gallery, Chelsea College of Arts (2017)

This feedback is also challenging the scope and focus of Interior and Spatial Design as a field of study as our particular course responds to its specific context. To give a concrete example, a student recently observed that she enrolled in our programme to learn how decorate the homes and workplaces of wealthy clients. Three years later, this same student produced one of the most politically engaged works in the degree show. As describing this in detail would betray the student's anonymity, suffice to say it tackled social injustice head on. This compelling project used practice-based research to spatialize chauvinism, highlighting its pervasion and hence invisibility. It is catalysis like this student's profound change in focus that reminds us where our practice is located. Not *out* in the community. When students and staff form as community of practice, their work and its self-organisation both become legitimate subjects of

enquiry.

Q: *How can artistic and practice-led research intervene in the realms outside the art world or academia?* As we have hinted above, the Atlas challenges the hegemony of research as an institutionally mandated process of knowledge production and posit instead something much messier. This may even be recalcitrant because it challenges the value of *expertise* as the holy grail of research conducted by or for PhDs to highlight instead other essential qualities of research *practice*, including care, interest, commitment and, notably, diverse types of contribution. Recalling Rimensberger's assertion that 'If we don't help, no one will', many are asking not only why there is not more help available but who should provide it. This tracks with questions about what universities are for and hence the purpose and value of research and other forms of knowledge production (Goodard, 2009). As unapologetic practice-based research, the Atlas takes as its point of departure that this needs to be turned out of the hallowed halls of academia, unleashing it from research enterprise that is both embedded and primarily valorised by university departments (history, biology – art and design). The Atlas exemplifies research as co-investigation, especially when this entails building heterogeneous communities comprised of established practice-based researchers, student researchers and lay participants or other members of the general public. What emerges is a micro-culture that has the potential to host dialogue and pool energy, time, skills and knowledge to address the threats and opportunities the stakeholders share.

Fig. 7. Collaborative mapping workshop in The Millbank Atlas Exhibition at the Cookhouse Gallery,
Chelsea College of Arts (2017). For more information about the public programme that animated the exhibition, see Bradfield, Shechter, Rimensberger et al., 2017

Q: *How does [artistic and practice-led research] relate to artivism/activism?*

The Millbank Atlas as a collaborative cartographic project is part of a growing network of similar initiatives around the world that are committed to valuing lived experience and understanding how it is shaped by social, cultural, economic, geographic, political, technological and other conditions. For instance, we operate in solidarity with Iconolasistas, an Argentinian collective committed to mobilising the creative and political potential of graphic and artistic devices to challenge ideologically elitist organisations of territory. Iconolasistas (2016) posit collective mapping as a critical means for coordinating complex territorial viewpoints to support transformational practices for community-based change. Applying this to our immediate context, Chelsea Local aims to work in collaboration with MCW and other members of our local communities to embody and enact the University of the Arts London's statement of identity and commitment. It states that 'We uphold the values of social justice and environmental stewardship through our teaching and research, as well as in the way we live, work and conduct our operations' (2017). An ongoing process, the coherence of this espoused theory and how it finds form in our studio is necessarily subject to constant renewal.

Our approach also proactively aligns research and teaching through the curriculum of Interior and Spatial Design. While in practice this sometimes entails little more than 'bringing' research to BA and MA programmes, Chelsea Local instead insists on the studio itself as a viable context for practice-based research as activism. Here 'research' with a lowercase r - as in finding things out - provides a stepping stone for 'Research' with an uppercase R - as in generating original contributions to knowledge (Frayling, 1993). This results in a process that is tentative, messy and 'live'. New knowledge develops through practice and is readily applied while working in the field before being written up, exhibited or otherwise disseminated as research outcomes for the benefit of a community of practice beyond the studio as an immediate one. Granted, this hybrid approach spanning research and Research may be risky, but it is also urgent. Tapping the matter of conscience at stake in this wager, Higgins' (2012, 7) reflections are worth quoting in full:

> Universities are both apart from a part of society. They are apart in the sense that they provide a critically important space for grasping the world as it is and - importantly - for reimagining the world as it ought to be. The academic freedom to pursue truth and let the chips fall where they may isn't a luxury - in fact it is a vital necessity in any society that has the capability for self-renewal. But universities are also part of our societies. *What's the point unless the accumulated knowledge, insight and vision are put at the service of the community?* With the privilege to pursue knowledge comes the civic responsibility to engage and put that knowledge to work in the service of humanity [emphasis added].

Chelsea Local responds to Higgins' question by imagining itself, not so much as serving or advocating for another community, though it is right and proper to say that projects like Ye's *Touch Bench* and the food trolley directly address community needs. More accurately, our studio seeks to constitute a community of communities of Millbank by providing a critical and creative context – a third space – for working on shared concerns.

In the spirit of live projects based on learning through social engagement, the knowledge generated in Chelsea Local accretes and iterates in response to opportunity, chance, desire, capacity and, importantly, relationship building and the acquisition of new skills. We take the view that design begins with organising material and experience. Hence this practice of cultural production is less something that one starts to do further to training as a designer and instead something we are all already doing. Our former colleague Manzini has termed this 'diffuse design' (2015). This diffusion is foundational as we work together to acquire skills and techniques for sensuous knowledge that keys into the visual, audible, olfactory, tactile and other kinds of insight. In doing so, we aim to cultivate the community of practice < > practice of community that distinguishes Chelsea Local and The Millbank Atlas as practice-based art research.

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