

# RE-MAKE, RE-MODEL: THIS IS DESIGN EDUCATION TOMORROW CALLING

**Joe McCullagh, Jane McFadyen, David Crow, Alan Holmes and Jane McKeating**

Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom;  
j.mccullagh@mmu.ac.uk, j.mcfadyen@mmu.ac.uk, d.crow@mmu.ac.uk, a.holmes@mmu.ac.uk,  
j.mckeating@mmu.ac.uk

**Keywords:** collaboration, multi-disciplinary, pedagogy

## ABSTRACT:

This conceptual paper presents a pragmatic, radical repositioning of design education practice at the Manchester School of Art in the context of U.K. design education. It discusses the strategic management and decision making that facilitated the re-engineering of new creative environments, the innovations in curricula and the re-branding of the School in drawing on the founding ethos of the Manchester School of Design of 1838 in 'supporting the creative economy of the region'.

Polemically the process has been to fundamentally question, challenge and respond to existing paradigms of design academic practice within the nexus of teaching, learning and research; specifically, to re-define what a contemporary design education should be.

To contextualize this, the paper references current design thinking and education theory. Two case studies will illustrate work undertaken in the school.

The paper will be of interest to anyone wishing to re-frame design education practice.

## DESIGN ON THE MOVE

Clearly design is moving in new directions with greater hybridity. The most creative contemporary designers no longer confine themselves solely to traditional disciplines and processes. The work of Hella Jongerius for example fuses innovative manufacturing processes with traditional craft; Marc Newson

incorporates rapid prototyping within traditional design processes and Hussein Chalayan works freely across disciplines creating diverse conceptual outputs. In 2008, the Museum of Modern Art New York exhibition, 'Design and the Elastic Mind', explored this further by focusing on the ability of designers to 'grasp momentous advances' in nano-technology, science and human behavior through translating those advances into functional human centred designed objects and systems. Simultaneously we are seeing the growing culture of design do-it-yourself (DIY), where self-authorship in design has emerged and where design is participatory as a social communal event with like-minded individuals in the counter culture of design. For example, the international events of collective 'Pictoplasma' bring large groups together through the power of social networking. It celebrates the disparate nature of character design, where context and content is created by designers leading to new work and trends in design culture. Through this we see that design is moving predominantly from a service model to one that is increasingly becoming event and scenario based.

## DESIGN NAVIGATORS

The designer now engages in a whole new world of participatory engagement, becoming navigators, 'designers find themselves at the centre of an extraordinary wave of cross-pollination' (Antonelli and Aldersey-Williams 2008, p.24) dealing with open ended customized solutions, where the user in effect takes a more participatory role. Sociological shifts away from the patriarchal to participatory practice in utilizing social media has also enabled learners to become multimodal, strategically working across distributed knowledge economies where learning by default is a social process. We can see this in the work of the 'makers lab' (<http://www.od10beta.info/dmy-maker-lab/>) highlighting an open design process of engagement.

Student as 'navigator' is something that educators are struggling to deal with and respond to. We are bounded by the curricula we previously created. Design is now a pluralistic practice and students are increasingly comfortable working within intimate yet public environments due to the rise of social media. However, as educators we need to respond to this within our learning and teaching and be more open to the idea of the social, the lived experience.

As Wenger considers ... what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? What if we assumed that learning is as much part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at it? (Wenger1998, p.3)

## INTER-DISCIPLINARY TO MULTI-DISCIPLINARY

In the last 10 years art and design education has also seen a move to more inter-disciplinary activity set within cognate disciplines; fashion combining with textiles; product with three dimensional design. However, designers are now working at a much more integrated cross-disciplinary active way using their abilities to become highly skilled interpreters, dealing with complex problems. In *Design and Elastic Mind*, Antonelli refers to designers as 'intermediaries' or 'well rounded agents of change' (Antonelli and Aldersey-Williams 2008, p.24) and comments 'how the figure of the designer is changing from form giver to fundamental interpreter' (Antonelli and Aldersey-Williams 2008, p.17). When we talk of design becoming more 'social' we can see it engaging and building new relations and relationships, this seems to be a natural evolution but as educators how are we working with our students to explore this further?

## THE RE-FRAMING OF PRACTICE – ART SCHOOL IN CONTEXT

Driven by changes in the socio-cultural, economic, political and the technological, and by the perceived danger of growing tired and self-referential, there was a need to re-make and re-model current design education in the school. Significantly there became a desire to affect a design education culture, which is truly flexible, responsive, adaptable, and where design becomes more integral to our lives. This necessitated enhancing multi-disciplinary working practices and collaborative relationships. We also sought to positively empower design education through forging a strong identification with its locale, in this case the city of Manchester, with emphasis on regeneration and the importance of the transformational effect design can bring. Our focus became the value of design socially, culturally and economically, and how it can regenerate and enhance our lives.

The re-framing responded to specific concerns both practically and theoretically:

- how design is diverging and further becoming a multi-disciplinary participatory practice
- seeing design as an active demonstrable process for enhancing lives and a social enabler
- the need for new pedagogical approaches to design centred on the emergence of 'social learning', 'social media' within 'open source' distributed knowledge economies
- the importance of external partnership building and how design can regenerate and support the creative economy of the region
- social changes in the 'value' of design education.

## RE-MAKE, RE-THINK, RE-MODEL

In view of the social and cultural changes just outlined, the need was felt to pragmatically reframe what a design education should be, clearly this has many implications. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail what has taken place but we wish to highlight three significant strategic directions that were needed to facilitate the changes:

- repositioning of the school and its brand
- radical re-modelling of physical resource
- radical restructuring of design curricula

The work described takes place within the Manchester School of Art. One of the largest providers of Art, Design and Architecture in the UK. The Design department has approximately 1,200 students studying from BA to PhD.

Looking both to the past and the future the original name 'Manchester School of Art' was re-instated and through reflection on its original ethos of "supporting the creative economy of the region" a core philosophy was articulated:

'Manchester School of Art believes an art school is more than just a place. An art school is a community and a laboratory. Our business is to encourage

creative risk taking, to question boundaries and challenge the conventional. Art school is a place where language is extended and dialogue developed. Art school is a bridge between the acceptable, and the possible, between what is and what if.'

By once again positioning ourselves with the city of Manchester as active engagers, the city in effect becomes the playground of our staff and students, accessing and embracing a breadth of external knowledge and ideas to work with and be influenced by.



**Old School**

4. In this competition against the Manchester School of Art came to perform in it specifically well and based on the results for 1958, the Council of Governors Act approved for all the content of art teaching. Manchester stands out prominently in the area which has made the most rapid strides and achieved the greatest success? By then the Subcommittee showed that a brand new building of Governor Board of Art Faculty, and for the first time it was composed of members of all professions that were designed specifically to meet the needs of the art school. In 1961, this new building followed closely the Department of Science and Arts guidelines for the layout of all art schools, as the Governor Board Building, as well as the building.

The 'South Manchester System' was not however without its detractors. There were some who were in favour of the traditional and the best way of educating the majority of students, especially in design, to be particularly in a state of mind to be trained in a particular way, and it was not until the late 1960s that the system was revised to give more emphasis to those who disagreed with the system to get education elsewhere with practice, and it was in Manchester that one of the first art schools was set up in the town.



**New School**

**Why Re-brand?**

The school is an opportunity for us to embrace what we stand for. We are not just a collection of buildings, but a community of people who are passionate about art and design. We are not just a school, but a place where we can learn and grow. We are not just a school, but a place where we can learn and grow. We are not just a school, but a place where we can learn and grow.

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Figure 1: Spreads from publication illustrating the narrative of the re-brand of Manchester School of Art

Alongside the re-branding, a £34 million building programme began, creating an entirely new Art School building and refurbishment of others. We recognized that to encourage inter and multi-disciplinary practice we had to design our spaces to accommodate this. In 2009, academic staff were invited to imagine the art school by representing the ethos as an image. This diagram captured their characterized by interweaving lines or crossing structures,

gave us our brief for not only the re-brand, the spaces we inhabit, but also the way we want to collaborate and develop our curriculum.

Interdisciplinarity and interplay surfaced as a theme for the entire school.

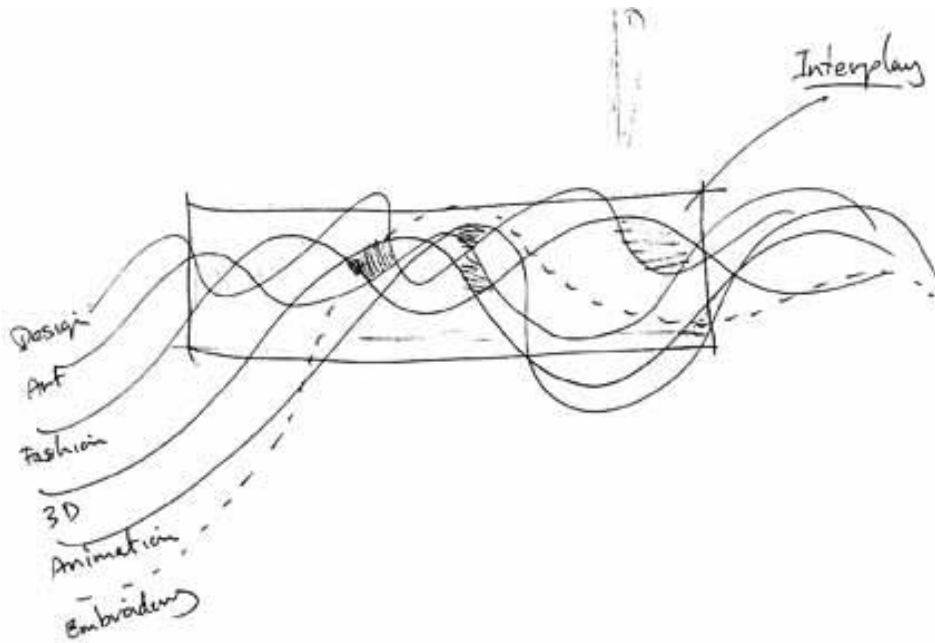


Figure 2: interplay diagram

The new environment allows a more open and fluid use of resources. Carefully considered facilities enable us to reinforce the school's plans for curriculum innovation through cross-disciplinary and collaborative working. The new 'Design Shed' houses the Department across 4 floors with 'village greens' forming the central heart of the accommodation. Much of the planning for these spaces and the shared resources they will house are informed by work undertaken in our two cases studies.

1.0 The Brief  
1.1 Update on Client Vision

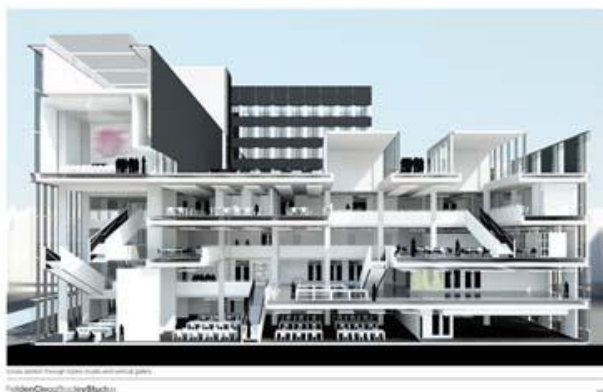


Figure 3: Vision for 'Design Shed'

## 2.0 Architectural Report

### 2.4 Design Shed

#### 2.4.1 Hybrid Studios

This part-by study illustrates all four floors of the hybrid design studio and is cut through the double height village green spaces with connecting staircases. Seminar rooms and enclosed studio spaces are visible on the far side of the image with glazed screen providing a degree of transparency between the two spaces. The section opposite is a remainder of the future idea that was previously proposed where the two storey free standing column in the middle of the village space takes signage and marks the culture's character. Acoustics in all these spaces are managed by steps of ceiling voids that rise under the concrete soffits and include integrated lighting.

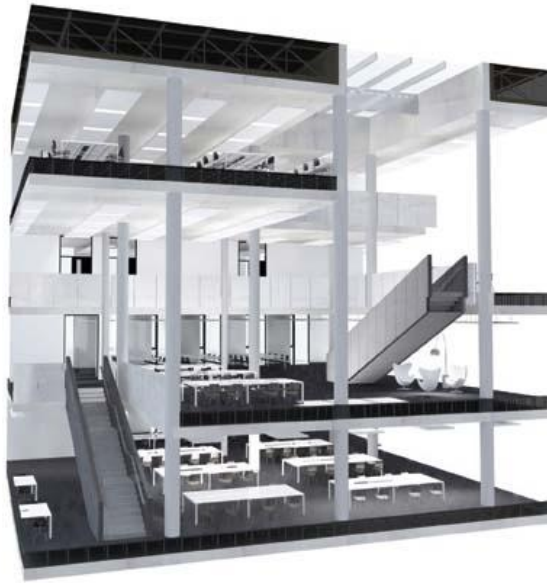


Figure 4: Vision for Hybrid design studios in Design Shed Methodology

The research methodology for the two case studies was a predominantly qualitative one through problem-solving and action research. A range of methods were undertaken, focus groups, interviews, documentation of events. It is also situated within a pedagogic research-informed teaching approach where teaching draws upon enquiry into the teaching and learning process itself (Jenkins and Healey 2005).

## CASE STUDY 1, MANCHESTER DESIGN LAB

The Manchester Design Lab is a postgraduate programme within the School of Design, a multi-tiered project linked to professionals working in the region: design studios; city galleries; regional politicians and researchers. The core of the MA involves students working closely with external partners on current 'live projects' connecting with the region's major public initiatives or issues. Taking the form of regular group meetings, presentations and debates around current thinking, the Lab facilitates collaboration, freethinking and inquiry in challenging paradigms for addressing change and development. With students drawn from across all programmes in the Design Department augmented with graduates in Fine Art, English and in one case Geography, the skills, knowledge and breadth of experience brought to the Laboratory of ideas, gives it a richness unseen elsewhere. This concept of inquiry and



development of cognitive skills is encouraged by Schleicher (cited in Design Commission 2011). She points out 'Educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations. Education today is much more about ways of thinking which involve creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making.'

With an annual intake of 10 – 12 students the Lab facilitates a creative process that has become valued by the city. In 2008 the first Lab project entitled "Post Regeneration Manchester – what next?" raised questions around what was the 'voice' of Manchester in the aftermath of a regeneration programme following the bombing of the city centre in 1996. After 5 years the programme has reached a point of maturity with partners seeking out opportunities to engage with it and where relationships are clearly seen as mutually rewarding. Since 2011, Design LAB have been working in partnership with Manchester City Council's 'Valuing Older People department on the 'Age-friendly City'. The project works at a local and international level.

To achieve this, academics have become instigators and facilitators, developing networks, negotiating partnerships. Their expertise as specialist practitioners in their field has been re-directed into designing experiences and forging relationships that enable students to behave as navigators, negotiators, activists and creative practitioners with a social conscience. They become 'versatilitists', 'people who can respond creatively to new challenges and situations' (Design Commission 2011, p.15).

Graduates from the programme are now employed by local social enterprises, design practices, organizations – continuing to build upon links and practices formed during the programme.

## CASE STUDY 2 'UNIT X'

'Unit X' is a 10-week curriculum spanning all undergraduate programmes across the School and forms 25% of each year of study. Introduced at year one in March 2012 it involved 430 students from 10 programmes engaging

with each other and the city of Manchester in an innovative project that represented novel and dynamic forms of teaching and learning. It will roll out over levels 5 and 6 in 2013/14. The unit broadens perceptions and applications of design thinking and practice by ensuring every student takes part in an external facing, multi-disciplinary team project in each year of their study.



Figure 5: Students working in the city, listening to a talk by an external psycho-geographer theorist

Year one sees them working in teams; investigating and interrogating; managing their own activity; sharing their design challenge and sharing solutions to design problems; contributing skills and knowledge to their peer-group without the constraints of subject discipline.

Year two offers 'colleges' engaged in a specific model of professional activity. For example: consultancy, educator, curator, freelance practitioner. Each college is linked to external experts.

Year three involves the development of personalised proposals. We expect to see collaborative publications, events, exhibitions, conferences, retail experiences and educational programmes being proposed and delivered by a

confident and articulate graduate body. We also envisage that this will assist in their transition into the much more closely aligned MA.

## ORIGINS

Between 2006 and 2010 the Design Department undertook a series of pilot experiential projects in multi-disciplinary working and collaborative practices. 'The Oxford Road project, 2006' involved students and staff in a four week interrogation of the Oxford Road, the 'main artery' into the city on which are located a number of major institutions (The Cornerhouse Gallery, BBC, Royal Northern college of Music, Manchester University, The Royal Eye Hospital, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester Museum). The project sat outside of the core curricula and saw students and staff engaging simply for the collective experience. This, along with further cross-faculty special projects in the following years critically highlighted that inter-programme collaboration was constrained by a number of factors:

- Timetabling/programme design
- Inflexible Learning Outcomes and unit requirements
- Differing pedagogical practices and thinking
- Academic aversion to change and risk-taking

It seemed the only mechanism available was to collaborate 'in-between the gaps'. Though many staff readily described the Oxford Road experience as 'inspiring' and 'rewarding', they expressed 'frustration' at the 'inflexibility' of the organisation and design of curricula set within rigid programme boundaries, mitigating against innovation, collaboration and creative risk taking. These frustrations when analyzed fell into two distinct categories, organisational and perceptual.

## DESIGNING CHANGE

To enable staff to become comfortable working across practice boundaries we had to overcome differing pedagogical approaches and an aversion to change. Strategic moves towards greater collaboration and inter-disciplinarity needed prudent development in order to embrace all staff and avoid alienation. At this point, as the successes of the Design Lab MA model were becoming clearer, and programmes had a strategic imperative to

develop transition from undergraduate into postgraduate study, a major institutional initiative entitled EQAL (Enhancing Quality and Assessment for Learning) provided the driver and opportunity to effect change at an unprecedented speed. EQAL involved reviews and re-structuring under a number of themes: Curriculum, Regulations, Assessment, Student experience, Student Records System, Timetabling System, Student and Staff Portal, Quality Standards. This provided an opportunity to tackle the organisational and management constraints, (programme documentation, unit specification, timetabling, staffing) and in doing so confront the perceptual issues around barriers to collaboration (pedagogic approaches, insular curricula). The school executive established a single programme map, and with this one key strategic decision made space for the development of cross-programme collaboration. Enigmatically named Unit X, the development of learning outcomes for a unit focusing on key skills in teamwork, communication, negotiation, reflection and awareness of disciplines in context became possible. The unit takes students through three years of study, tailoring their individual progression through professional, externally focussed, experiences.



Figure 6: found object 'X'

Investigation into existing curricula showed that opportunities for professional development and employability were directly linked to staff practice and expertise and housed firmly within programmes. In Fine Art for example, the emphasis was on the individual practitioner, in Embroidery students worked alongside educators and community artists. Creative Graduates Creative Futures (Ball, Pollard, Stanley 2010) found that 68% of Fine Art graduates were engaged in some form of education delivery. Therefore our key question became: 'how do we design a curriculum that will

share best practice, knowledge and skills whilst maintaining expertise within our discrete subject disciplines, and that will be relevant for each student and their individual aspirations?’ Crucial to our re-framing of the curriculum was to establish our strengths and develop structures ensuring expertise is shared and valued.

This period also coincided with over 30 academics in the school undertaking a research project ‘Pairings’ (Groppe-Wegner, 2010). This investigation and interrogation of collaborative practice provided invaluable insight into ways of thinking and behaving, opening a dialogue around interdisciplinarity and the benefit of collaboration. It gave us a knowledge base from which to develop the single cross programme unit X.

Introduction of the unit involved strategic risk. Not all staff were familiar with cross-disciplinary working, many were embedded within the pedagogical practices and language of their own programme and reluctant to embrace different models or share expertise. Negotiation and debate through cross programme meetings proved to be ineffective, with heated exchanges indicating this was reinforcing anxieties around risk and change. There was a need to re-think the process. Referring to drivers for employability and the previously described emerging external context we identified our brief. Expressed as learning outcomes, these gave us the baseline for focused activity around the generation of experiences for students. We formed new teams, with staff from each programme ‘volunteering’ to become the Unit X representative. They expected meetings to be centred on discussing and agreeing content, however, what they experienced was quite different. To engage the group we held ‘away days’ by physically moving out of the normal education environment and into the city. By designing the staff experience we engaged them in the active process of mapping Manchester, identifying their own particular places of interest, partners and approaches to the brief ‘interrogate the city’. This activity generated the resulting core structure, programme of events, visits, speakers, partners and venues for Unit X 2012. Through a ‘speed dating’ session they found new alliances and interests, common ground and new ideas. From a diverse group of individual programme representatives they quickly formed the Unit X team.

Further events, discussions, cabinet meetings and the creation of a central hub ('war room') facilitated the rapid development (January and March 2010) of a framework for delivery and a matrix of shared activities, some firm alliances and some more modest agreements to work in tandem. By designing a focused and responsive support system we found staff tolerance of uncertainty, risk and challenge was tempered, and that by collaborating they experienced new understanding of their own skills, knowledge, expertise and value. Staff recognized they needed to 'design' the student experience and support risk taking by the students through an open expression of 'doing something new' and breaking new ground in their own sharing of practice.

What this meant in practice is that students worked in teams, made choices from a rich programme of talks, workshops, seminars and visits, thereby tailoring their experience. They inhabited spaces across the city as studios or as venues to showcase their work. They gave presentations, recorded their thoughts, actions and as a final submission presented their experience and reflection on learning as a personal blog. For some the collaboration was modest, meeting for critique and events only. For others dynamic, with mixed subject groups formed from the Fashion, Interior Design and Three Dimensional Programmes. 'Radical Utility' as they became known saw 109 students customising wheelbarrows, taking walking tours from city experts, attending skills workshops and managing the daily issues of communication and project management. This resulted in 22 outputs across the Northern Quarter of the City, installations, exhibitions and events all promoted through an interactive map.

## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

By challenging staff to move beyond their normal programmes and share expertise they became collaborators in designing the student experience, focusing more on the learning process rather than expected outcomes. For some this was liberating, for others it was more demanding. As a management team we had to make compromises, from ideal to reality, moving some thinking forward in small measure, whilst supporting others in

taking substantial risks, all within a structure that ensured opportunity and support for all students.

In their BLOGS students clearly articulate their journeys and through their reflection we see the progress they have made, the ownership they have taken of their own learning and confidence they have developed in their own practice.

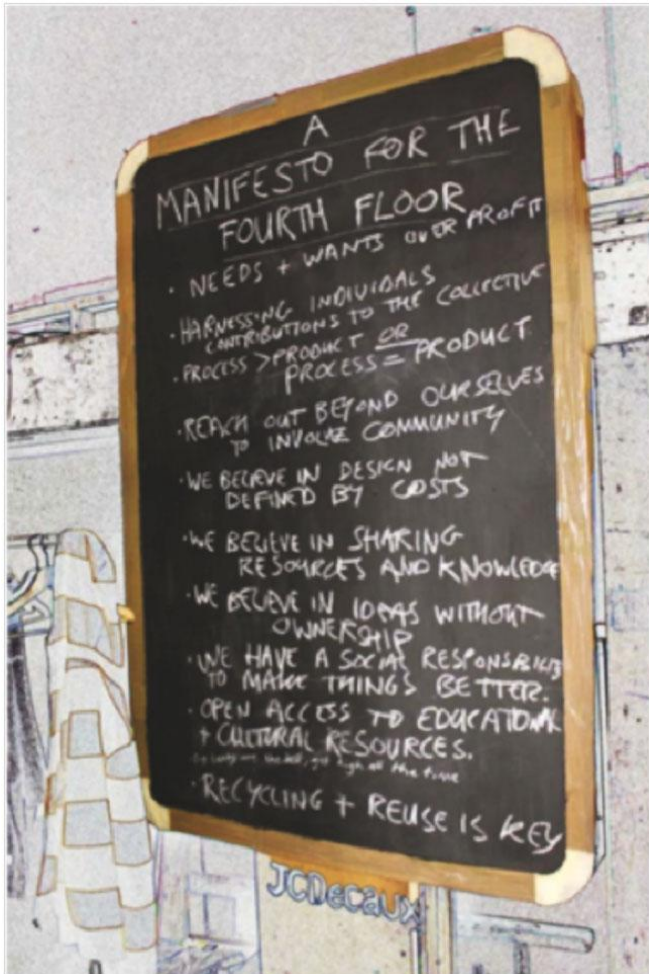


Figure 6: A Unit X student manifesto, developed in partnership with an external organization Ultimate Holding Company.

Excerpts from student unit X blogs:

'Our work consists of one projector, edited video footage x2 and two 3ft white balloons. The installation is to capture the essence of Unit X;.....basically saying, when two completely different individuals work together well, they bring out the best in each other.'

'We have finally managed to set everything up, although there were a few issues we struggled with, the final effect was really satisfying, especially that we received loads of positive feedback from other peers and tutors.'

The first Unit X festival took place across the city of Manchester from Wednesday 23rd May to Friday 1st June, 2012. It featured work in the form of exhibitions, events, installations, performance, films and debates by students from Three Dimensional Design/Contemporary Art History/Fashion/Filmaking/Fine Art/Illustration with Animation/Interactive Arts/Interior Design/Photography/Textiles in Practice. Each of these students significantly now return in their second year with a different experience and expectation from previous cohorts and a sense of independence and professionalism that is perceived by academic staff 'as unique at such an early stage of their higher education'. In terms of student progression, retention and satisfaction it would appear to be a success, however it is only year one. Student performance is positive; unit performance shows a pass rate of 98.9% with a median mark of 62.9%.



Figure 7: works in progress from unit x



## CONCLUSION

In reading this paper we highlight Manchester School of Art's narrative and journey so far. We set out to re-frame and re-define what a contemporary design education might be. A number of interconnected activities, initiatives and decisions have led to where we are now against a backdrop of socio-economic and cultural changes. Retrospectively, if we were to conclude perhaps it is that we simply opened the door to engage externally and work with real live contexts and as educators become much more socially enabled. Importantly we understand the value of community and value of design and purpose. 'Art school is a bridge between the acceptable, and the possible, between what is and what if.' As educators we look to our own students whose fundamental approach is one of curiosity and inquiry whilst having the confidence to attempt to deal with uncertain and complex situations.

'we shall see ... how teaching is becoming more like a process of inquiry; how research is becoming more like inquiry-based learning; how learning is becoming more akin to research, more focused on inquiry with students being involved in learning through their own inquiries and teachers through investigations into their own teaching' (Brew 2006, p.4).

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