

Making Byker: The Situated, Amateur Practices of a Citizen Architect

James Longfield

Thesis Abstract

Positioned on the margins of the architectural profession as an informal and amateur practice, my work explores connections between 'expert' practice and the city as a fluid socio-spatial construct of (re)production and consumption, freed from professional preoccupations with buildings as formal, static and aesthetic objects.

In 1969, Anglo-Swedish architect Ralph Erskine was commissioned to masterplan and design the Byker redevelopment project in Newcastle upon Tyne. He established an office on site, and a number of the architects moved to the area, a situated mode of practice emerging in the overlap between their professional personas as practitioners, and their social concerns as residents.

Having moved into a house in Byker in 2011, my work takes the approach of Erskine's team as a touchstone, inspiring a mode of relational practice that draws on situated and everyday ways of knowing, to inform acts of adaption, (mis)use and intervention, that investigate the unique condition of the hobby rooms which Erskine's team included in the design of the redevelopment.

The thesis employs a creative practice methodology, to inform and trace a series of tactical and reflective operations that emerge out of my engagement with the social ecologies and political structures of Byker, as a resident and an active citizen. Through the overlapping of my professional and personal identities, I pursue a series of architectural practices that traverse the boundary between the professionally distinct configurations of architect and user. Through reflection on these practices, the thesis establishes four distinct themes; situated practice, everyday practice, amateur practice and citizen practice, that situate contemporary theoretical positions on architecture in the context of Byker. A situated drawing, inscribed onto my dining table at home, provides a site to explore each theme and their intersections.

These situated actions also confront the illegitimacy of amateur practice, revealing the creative and empowering potential of the social engagement of the practitioner with the conditions of use and appropriation, alongside other citizens, embedding practice within a local network of individuals, agencies, local organisations and political bodies.

By deploying professional tools and methods within the context of citizenship, the thesis contributes toward ongoing discussions concerning the role of participatory practice in architecture, from the perspective of the practitioner's involvement in the rituals and rhythms of everyday life. In doing so, it frames an approach to architectural practice that is spatially situated, yet temporally boundless, a cyclical operation that weaves together spatial, social, and political activity, making a claim for a new mode of situated, amateur, citizen practice.