

Magazine Article for Design Exchange: Online

London Lost and Found

Studio 2: interiors, The Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design, London Metropolitan University

Cass Head of Interiors: the challenges of curating a brief for the studio that enables thinking of current issues and approaches and allows the student to develop their own practice.

It's never been more challenging to curate a brief through which Interior students strengthen their skills while developing a process and practice. My studio has homed in on Lower Marsh Lower Marsh which lies just South of Waterloo and dates back to Roman times as it sat on a raised through road cutting through the surrounding Marsh lands adjoining the Cut where it became one of London's longest market streets in medieval times.

The project identifies a cross section of themes and current issues surrounding identity and the make-up of a local High Street. It looks at values of authenticity, character, localism and how this conservation area sits within London itself. The project looks at the significance of living over the shop, and how the space above is as important as the row of shops beneath, where many dysfunctional non connected environments are often situated. The rising needs of suitable accommodation for both a growing older population and in expensive small spaces for the single inhabitant appeared to be paramount.

Lower Marsh sits in the shadow of Waterloo Station and whilst it has suffered the pervading pollution, it has remained quite secret and has avoided over development. However this is now about to change as Waterloo undergoes a revamp restoring the 4 Euro star lines for the South of England where the tunnels and vaults underneath are being developed into retail spaces and eateries to meet the needs of the travellers and other new surrounding developments. This will bring a new customer into Lower Marsh making it a more attractive business opportunity for high street retailers and therefore will provoke the argument of regeneration versus gentrification. Lower Marsh is also home to one of London's oldest street markets and therefore has a very visible vibrancy; it's quirky and has qualities that have been lost in many of high streets.

Last year I was very fortunate to meet with a member of the UN disasters committee and have pondered over our very meaningful conversation ever since. Climate change is now presenting itself within the UK through devastating floods. The Environment Agency, via the website 'What's in your backyard' present high risk maps showing areas deluged and overwhelmed by water. The south of London is in great danger of being flooded. Apart from the obvious destruction to property research shows that the lasting emotional damage is significant where behaviour connected to a civilised society can crumble allowing anarchic instances of violence and cruelty to breakout. Therefore the need to be prepared and to build in resilience for such a situation can't be ignored and put off for another day. Lower Marsh gets its name from the time pre 1768 where it was in deed a marsh flanking the Thames and it's this proximity to the river and the tidal forces will add to the overall inevitable destruction.

In order to house all of these issues within one project, I prepared a narrative that asked the students to design a Utopia which suggested that London had suffered one of the worst floods in history; consequently the whole of Lower Marsh was evacuated. Following many weeks the flood

subsided to reveal the true picture of damage and devastation. Through the seemingly hopeless challenge to repair and restore a wave of new inspiration emerged. A group of fresh thinking designers offer a new proposal that not only redresses the street and its properties but presents an innovative way of living, rejuvenating livelihoods and the neighbourhood as well as crafting a new direction. Is this a new republic, a new society or a fairy-tale?

It has been such a rewarding year; this scenario has offered the students a raft of mini briefs. The Utopia asks them to set up a programme where the inhabitants live as a collective where there is an inherent support system requiring a sense of neighbourliness. Creating shared spaces and thresholds that encourages friendly behaviour perhaps developing a sense of the extended family. It may not be everyone's cup of tea but how do we start to give the elderly better ideas for integrated living. Similarly student accommodation is proving to be a vast expense in London and in many cases a soulless experience. The whole idea of cohabiting has been explored and how there might be models of living that can be spatially quantified. We have explored ideas that surround moving the retail space up to the upper floors, increasing the business footprint and blurring the boundaries of public and private space, perhaps a family kitchen could also double up as a coffee spot for a bookshop. One of the students has looked at embedding a police house within the inhabited spaces, an old fashioned idea but perhaps custodianship might give the community improved confidence. The studio has developed ideas of flexible furniture that can be used in a multifunctional way for both the Interior and exterior, in a sense of preparedness for the next flood where livelihoods could endure this short-term situation.

The studio are still developing their ideas but I feel that the job of the Interior designer is so important to make these human connected spaces and experiences effective and meaningful, where I would argue that we should be considered as one of the caring industries.