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THE BROADSHEET OF THE AUCKLAND BRANCH OF THE NEW ZEALAND INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

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Duty of Care

Unitec's Changes and the Questions We Face



Photo: Jew Mason

Unitec staff face up to the realities of redundancy

Just a few days into the New Year, 50 teachers from Unitec's Design and Visual Arts department received their redundancy notices as part of the school's restructure of design education. The change, spearheaded by the idea that professional educators can be supplanted by industry folk, has garnered recent media attention, with the Tertiary Education Union saying the loss of 50 from 53 of the department's staff is one of the biggest shake-ups in the tertiary sector in recent times.

Mixed emotions must have accompanied the notice and the New Year it heralded. There will have been hope – hope the coming year is better than the last, hope that new opportunities arise, hope the mortgage can be covered, hope the family holds together under the strain. There will also be bitterness towards the forces, proponents, and processes of change. I have some personal knowledge of the turmoil facing many of these people as they

struggle to find ways forward both professionally and personally. A good number face significant financial stresses, with questions about where and how to live with no regular income to cover life's expenses. A publicly available video made by Unitec students offers some context to the redundancies and those affected. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlMGjlsijY>)

The particulars of Unitec's classic adventure in education are still to be made public - who the practitioners are who are qualified to teach and what in fact it is they are going to teach. And what the restructured course will look like is a mystery for returning students. Nonetheless, the general motives for the change have been marketed. Independent research amongst industry professionals in the creative sector reportedly identified a need for greater alignment between education and industry because graduates in the design sector were not work ready.

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Photo: Jew Mason

Students form a guard of honour in support of staff

The response to this research and subsequent staff 'consultation' was a "reconceptualising of the traditional role of tertiary teachers." Management propose they are looking to the future of design education, "aligning itself with a global trend," by making a swathe of professional educators redundant and looking to "blur the boundaries" between the worlds of learning and working. They are to going to sound the trumpet for the "best creative professionals in the industry" and the best will apparently ride on in, bringing their talent to the classrooms to coach hundreds of students through real world projects. Some 17 staff in newly created 'teaching manager' positions are being deputised to wrangle the creatives whilst also bringing \$20-30K a year into the Unitec coffers.

Whether the change is good is debatable. What is less debatable is an assessment of the process of change. And in this case, an assessment of whether the process is being conducted in a dignified manner is of importance to the practicing community. Every call Unitec makes to 'the industry' embroils us further in the process. Every statement about the role industry will play reinforces the idea that practitioners as a group endorse the change and the rationale and in some way sanction the redundancies of the Unitec 50. We are part of this process and part of an unfolding series of events that need to be carefully considered with regards to the way in which people, including ourselves, are being treated.

To date, the reasons for change Unitec have outlined are very general, but within these lie a number of points that deserve consideration. The first is that the change turns around a separation between education and practice. Separation is asserted on many occasions, generally along the lines of management's research identifying a disconnect between employers and graduates. But separation is also latent in the tale of how the newly structured course will 'blur boundaries'. The assertion is that change will in some way marry two things previously separated.

But on what grounds does the idea of separation stand? Answers to this turn around a supplementary question about how particular one wishes to get. For the current staff, the idea of a separation must appear suspect. If we were to ask any of them about their industry connections and listen to the ways in which they draw upon practitioners, one imagines we would hear quite a different story.

The intimate and intertwined nature of the design community is well known and the worlds of education and practice can more realistically be described as wedded. Educators often approach practitioners to help enrich their student's experience. What's more, they have a breadth of contacts to draw upon across a range of professional expertise, and they draw upon those contacts in a deliberate and pointed way.

A second point deserving consideration is the regular appeal to 'the industry' and the questions it raises about whether such a definite thing ever existed prior to the divorce. Is there in fact a coherent group of practitioners bound together by an expectation that they are to be served by education? Are we characterised by dissatisfaction with current graduates? Are we open to the idea of DIY-education – realizing that to get the graduates we want, we have to do the teaching as well as generate the work?

The idea that the industry exists as a definite thing, let alone as a group coherently backing the restructure and awaiting the call to teach, is a suspicious piece of reasoning. And a number of practitioners have already voiced concern over the assumptions made. In a recent Listener article, Pete Bossley is quoted saying he does not want graduates who know what he knows or think like he does. And in an open letter to Unitec management, Hamish Keith explained how, as a member of the professional panel reviewing the design and visual arts degree, he had concluded that the course was well aligned to the needs of industry and the community. Keith went on to say: "As industry representatives it is extremely ironic to discover belatedly that a view of industry that we do not recognise has been advanced as the rationale for unprecedented change." Keith has never before encountered the industry Unitec describes.

There are concerns here for a practicing community framed as 'the industry'. Management's rhetoric is all about the restructure being undertaken in order that education better serve us. But, given suspicions about the existence of 'the industry', it is wholly possible that practitioners are being used as a means to an educational end. It will be a coup for Unitec to be able to build a marketing campaign around the image of the practitioner in the studio, independent of our qualifications to actually be there. Our presence will readily serve an end, that of window dressing the degree and making this design department look like something new on the education market.

A final idea to contend with is that this move is radical – an idea expressed in the description of the change as something focused on the future of education in a way that cannot rely on "educational paradigms of the past". Here, a break with the past is implied.

In a number of ways, Unitec's change relies on past paradigms, it just depends on how one wishes to define 'the past'. Given the wedded nature of educators and practitioners it would be more accurate to describe the change as a revision of a current model of thought. Clearly there will be a different allocation of practitioner time to the course amongst other changes, but it is not in itself a radical educational move. Indeed, the claim that education is not serving industry is one of the most conventional claims an institution can make. Nonetheless, the claim to be radical is made and Unitec goes on to support its change by listing a number of other institutions that have already sanctioned the approach - Monash University, RMIT, the London College of Fashion etc. By offering a list of references, management seek to establish the authority of what they are doing by making reference to places that have done it before. That is, they are making historical connections to validate a course of action.

The conundrum of having to appeal to history to rationalize a course of action that claims to be a break with history is something that commonly besets radical artistic movements. For all manner of reasons, the radicals also need to be reasonable and therefore often historical. Unitec is no different and the rhetoric around the idea of being radical exhibits common tactics associated with creating a break.

If the idea of being radical involves a well-known manipulation, then to what end is that manipulation directed? What Unitec has certainly achieved is a radical annihilation of the department's staff. Is the idea of a break with history an effort to rationalise a radical break with staff – to position them as collateral? Perhaps the question is, if you wish to revise the way you teach, do you necessarily have to make an entire department redundant? And what is not clear is whether the institutions Unitec cite as historical precedents also made radical redundancies when revising their education models. Does history show that revisions like this are inextricably tied to redundancies, or have other places made the move in an entirely different fashion? And if you reason change only in terms of it being a revision, does this complicate making radical redundancies?

The changes to the Design and Visual Arts department are, it seems, a done deal. And despite suspicions about the manipulation of reason, one senses that questions of reason are not a risk to the campaign. Those in management will hold the party line about blurring the boundaries between education and work by radically re-conceptualising education in the service of industry. In holding this line, one of their greatest assets is time.

A Strange Church Continued from p.4...

It is tempting to stay on this track, to assume we are Oscar Wilde's few who "are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars". This is however a fairly precious and unsustainable view. What does it say of us if we truly believe our fellow travellers in the industry lived, without exception, lives that were solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short? No, for better or worse most of us have entered this world willingly, though perhaps lured and duped just a little by the rose tinted architecture school prospectuses with their hints of attainable utopias pouring forth from pencil and mouse. It is the implicit hope of giving birth to the new, the not yet done, the possible and the experimental that I assume has lured most, if not all, students to study. Despite this a priori visionary optimism it is the very poverty of such projects from the country's studios in the last year end AAA Unbuilt Architecture Awards that I find perplexing.

It may be a measure of just how comfortable most of us down in the gutter and gazing only occasionally at the stars above, or perhaps of just how revved up the industry is at present. Whatever the cause, there were few entries in the open section of the awards. There was some interesting work presented in the 'under construction' section, projects yet to break ground but well on the way. As we might expect they were generally illustrated with recycled presentation drawings and renders that invariably veer toward the explanatory at the expense of the evocative.

In contrast the 'open but not buildable' section included a few intensely wrought projects whose authors were clearly either unemployed, users of illegal stimulants or suffer severe sleeping disorders. Where the student projects are confident in their exposition of the imagined, and privilege provocation, wonder and delight over the practical and the occupiable, those by graduates are somewhat more respectful of gravity and spatial organisation, if not of the finer points of construction. The awards though do not seek the completely resolved and it is the combination of a potent idea with just enough information to suggest that the project might be able to be realised that makes this section of the awards so interesting. These are projects born of a restless desire to re-examine. They are a sort of paper architecture, driven to a higher level of realisation by the insistent precision of CAD models.

We are in desperate need of more speculative projects of this nature in Auckland. Despite the best intentions of the legion of planners buried in Auckland Council and the heroic representations made by the Auckland branch of the Institute, over indulged baby boomers have dug their toes in to defend the stand-alone suburban house. The elderly boomers, being rich in both time and property, have swamped Auckland Council's consultation meetings and all but routed the planners, sent them packing with their statistics and wall charts.

One suspects that as the boomers enter the broken hipster stage mowing the back lawn will have less appeal than an urban pad with a small raised potager for the herbs and a farmers market down

Students will very soon know nothing of the way the course used to be. Along similar lines, the decimation of staff seems like an attempt to erase memory. Arguably the greatest risk to the success of the change has passed, largely due to the brilliant work of human resources and legal staff who plotted a course to mass redundancies that has, to date, closed down all avenues for staff and unions to take matters to the employment court.

As things unfold, it will be interesting to see who Unitec deem to be the "best creative professionals in the industry". Such decisions could already be a done deal, but the on-going assertion that these people are 'the best' will have public impact. Unitec then becomes a player in shaping impressions of who is at the top of their game. But whatever the case, the importance for the practicing community is that there are moral questions to consider. And just because Unitec advertises that practitioners will teach, we have no duty to. We must, as best we can amidst the confusing rationale, try to reason things for ourselves. We are implicated in a process in which we have a duty to consider the treatment of human beings. And given the warning signs and what is at stake, nothing should simply go without saying. We have a duty to think things through carefully and to ask ourselves "what is the right thing to do?" SF

the street. This may, in the fullness of time, break the current impasse, but for now we are in danger of following some of Melbourne's shires and actually reducing density. Those opposed to increased density housing invoke visions of serried ranks of high rise tenements rolling across the isthmus and denying future generations room for backyard cricket.

The information produced in support of Auckland's great leap forward has a number of images showing in a generalised fashion what a more densely occupied city might look like but we have precious few built examples and the use of the typical and the general lacks the credibility of the specific and the actual. Given that statistical arguments have been dispatched as yet more pointy headed damn lies and the spectre of pre unification East German tenements raised, it falls to we architects to offer a vision of a more densely occupied isthmus.

To address this shortcoming and generate a number of propositions for a specific site that might better inform the public debate the Institute is delighted to be working with a company with a good record in medium density housing to promote a competition for a residential housing development on a site in the urban fringe. It's a little early to name names but the goal is to call for conceptual strategies in a quick fire first stage requiring minimal presentation, winnow out four or five for greater development and for the winning project to be constructed. The Institute hopes that the combination of brief, site, developer client and its own skill at running a fair competition will give greater voice to architects in the realisation of the city through the promotion of an innovative prototype. Keep a weathered eye on the Institute website and emails. PC

The Block Foundation is pleased to present *A Guide to Hawkes Bay Architecture*, the forth in our series of Block Maps.

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A Strange Church **It's Time We Reach for the Stars**



Photo: Natalie Morgan Photography



No. 8 Wire by architect Jonathan Gibb: Open conceptual category highly commended

It's a strange church, architecture – arbitrating the brilliantly elliptical entries in a student competition one day, bashed around the ears for not understanding the vagaries of entrance lobbies required by the Remuera bourgeoisie the next.

The former is a pleasure, a work out for the soggy grey matter, a test of current reading, of one's ability to launch into that layer of the atmosphere where dream and poesy float. For a few hours a possible world is glimpsed, a world, to paraphrase Matthew Arnold, of sweet cities with their dreaming spires, needing not November for beauty's heightening. There are some few people who manage to parley such dreaming into a lifetime of architecture, perhaps research, teaching and writing or those most blessed, attracting a steady stream of like minded souls upon whom one

builds a folio of lyrical, Arcadian delights. For most of us though we have to suffer a more earthly realm, peopled not by magical sylphs and salamanders but building inspectors, planners and the regiments of fellow travellers of our trade who lay siege to our dreams, wielding the dreadful engines of the district plan, the value management session and the critical path.

If judging unbuilt, and generally unbuildable, work is a delight suffering the capricious commentaries of Lazarus like developer's agents is somewhat less so. Barely have the court cases of those lured by the market's last wild fling been settled than the hucksters are back, returning as regularly as seagulls to newly ploughed land, whirling and pirouetting overhead as they search for fat wriggling prey amid the confusion of a changed landscape.

Continued on p.3...

Off to a great start! **It's a good time to make new plans**

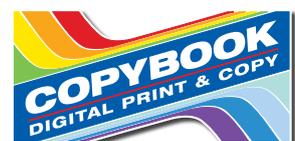
... and we have just the thing to copy them on!

We trust you have all had a safe and restful break and are ready for whatever challenges 2014 sends your way.

As ever we are here to help you in any way we can.

Best wishes for 2014.

Mac, Julie and the team at Copybook!



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