

Aalto ETHO talk

## Is it sustainable to take old practices into new spaces?

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I want to talk about meeting the demands of trying to please everyone from all the courses in all the schools, whilst trying to remain true to being a 'specialist' art school.

Its common that academic departments refer to our facilities as specialist and cutting edge when promoting the spaces and support that we offer to current and prospective students, but are we and is it possible to both remain specialist and cutting edge within the current demands of the art school.

So first of all let's look at what we call specialist and what place this has within the school, my starting point for this talk was in discussions with the printmaking team, we are moving into a new building, and it's an opportunity to plan change in the space, to add in some items they feel suit the demands of the space today, and remove anything they don't feel has much of a place with students of today and in the future.

The Columbian is a press that is used only a couple of times a year, in the new space, if we wanted to fit in all the new things that we wanted, we'd need to get rid of the Hunter Penrose, but we did actually consider keeping it in the space at the compromise of a more heavily used press. Our reasons for this were that it's the press that students, and anyone visiting the space for the first time that isn't already an etching specialist says 'wow', because of the way it looks, it's a real selling point for the space, the one people look at and think, 'these guys really know what they are doing', and yes, maybe it is a great, specialist piece of kit for those that want to invest the time into learning how to use it and specialise in its niche output, but for the most part it's a deceptively pretty façade that sells the space for no other reason than looking the part.

So is it the end for the Columbian? We decided to not include it in the space, but after two fires in five years we have very strict health and safety policies around including flammable furnishings in open spaces, so the top of the stairwell which may have been used as a seating area, can instead include this non-flammable pretty lump of steel as an extravagant way finder to the printmaking facilities, so it's hopefully been saved, and its beauty can continue to seduce students to the school, but we are no longer going to be using it in the workshop.

The points raised with the press apply more widely to a lot of specialist processes within the school, needing to weigh up the benefits of

- Spatial requirements – replacing for new or working around DDA compliance
- How often its used – increasing numbers of students on courses
- Number of students it benefits
- Demand on technical time – technicians have to split their time between more students now
- Limited range of output
- Investing time to specialise – are students willing to commit to becoming a specialist

In the area of Fine Art Printmaking, keeping this press wouldn't necessarily inhibit us from becoming cutting edge, the processes replacing it are still quite traditional techniques and a specialist craft, but it would have lead us to using our space less efficiently, and not being able to meet the demands of increased student numbers in our workspaces today.

In some areas however, keeping all the processes does inhibit the expansion of more heavily used, or more current methods. In photography, in order to include good analogue processes, we are greatly compromising on space allocation for digital and large format spaces and are hindering our ability to expand into new technologies within the area.

We have a large, specialist analogue photography area, it's something included in the Fine Art Photography curriculum and we also run continuing education classes from the area, so it's something we don't have power to decide as a department whether to continue these processes at a compromise to space for other more contemporary photographic techniques, without trying to feed into a longer term, wider school plan for curriculum development, one that takes time and feeding into it may always leave you five years behind current technologies.

Investing in these analogue spaces does fulfil the desire for specialist spaces, and if money and time and space weren't issues, it wouldn't be worth considering reducing the spaces in order for us to remain specialist. But factoring that we have them at the compromise of more cutting edge areas, or more heavily used areas that benefit more students doesn't necessarily seem a solid long term financial investment, especially when you consider how much of the kit is obsolete and we cannot replace it when it breaks, the more strict health and safety in workshops today meaning that safely performing the processes is more expensive to install and maintain than they once were to perform, and the fact that contemporary art and culture is something that often demands instant results and a multidisciplinary approach to making, meaning that very few students choose to commit the time it takes to become specialist makers in specialist techniques, and more often choose to use the space once or twice, heavily supported by technicians, for the novel value of having said they've tried it.

More things we need to weigh up in taking old processes to new spaces

- Set up and maintenance costs
- What do we do when we can't replace obsolete kit
- H+S of older technologies
- Continuing specialist craft or making room for new technologies
- Catering for specialist or multidisciplinary makers? Both and how?

This leads me on to how we try and create spaces to meet the needs of the contemporary 'all-the-processes-instantly' multidisciplinary maker, those that still want to grasp an understanding of the making processes and be able to do it themselves where possible, without outsourcing to a fabricator. Investing as little time as possible in each technique in order to learn the basics of as many techniques as possible in the time they have available. To satisfy the multidisciplinary in their making practice and to feel like they've got value for money from their time on their course as they've dabbled in as many things as possible.

To meet the demands of those that want to know a bit about everything we seem to have come up with the centralised space. Where everyone has access and we can provide efficiency to get through the basic demands of making for a lot of students in a shorter space of time, but where space becomes restricted for those who want to specialise due to the volume of students accessing the space.

In my opinion our centralised spaces are compromising on both specialist processes for specialist makers and on expanding into more cutting edge techniques due to the increased workshop demand, as the easier it is to access and complete a process, the more students from more courses become interested in physical making and the demands on the workshop increase again. Which means we need to increase and have repeats of kit in order to again meet student demand, leaving no room to include, or time for technicians to invest into learning new technologies.

To supplement the central space, and to cope with the ever increasing demand on the space, we are beginning to expand back into supplementary departmental workshops. With these we have the option to use them as over flows to relieve the increasing demand on the central spaces, or develop them into something specialist, cutting edge or both. Which best meets the demands of students and the visions of the school and how do we go about creating these?

Moving forward, how do we best compromise to meet the needs of students that want everything fast, with a school vision to provide cutting edge at the same time as specialist, some curriculums which is based around the facilities we currently have, but at a time when we had less students, some that have realised that they can get on board with using our facilities, and newer courses demanding more innovative technologies and expecting that we can support their needs?

- Student demands
- School vision
- Curriculum of existing and new courses
- Increasing student numbers

Can we remain specialist within the increasing demands on spaces?

Can we safely maintain old practices, and what is the compromise?