

Identities: A Royal College of Art Project

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Introduction

This paper discusses a first year studio design project from the Master of Arts Interior Design program at the Royal College of Art in London, UK. The project places emphasis on the need for students to consider materials and details as an integral part of the work of the interior designer. Its delivery employs teaching methods and practices that utilize 'Simulation-based Learning' approaches.

The Program

The program promotes a straightforward notion that, as a subject, interior design is concerned with creating an interface between people and the buildings they use. It is felt that this simple statement offers sufficient precision to define the core activity whilst accommodating room for a wide interpretation of what the scope of the work of an interior designer might encompass. The program is concerned with the education of interior design students, however, this work is undertaken in relation to the discipline of interior design and the interior designer in practice, therefore, this paper will refer to both the experience of interior design in academia and practice.

The two-year program attracts students from a variety of backgrounds and from around the world. Most students will have studied interior design or architecture at an undergraduate level whilst some will come from related disciplines such as furniture design, product design, graphic design or sculpture. Occasionally, students will come from another discipline which is less related to the subject (such as marketing). Although the majority of students have relevant educational qualifications in the core subject, the range and variety of approach, learning and experience that students bring to the program has led to the first year adopting a didactic approach that is intended to provide a solid foundation upon which the second year of the program is built. In year two, students opt to work in one of six tutor led 'platforms' each with a particular agenda. These 'platforms' evolve and change and are currently:

Interior Detail
Interior Display
Interior Futures
Interior Matter
Interior Re-use

The idea that the work of the interior designer relies on having a context is fundamental to work throughout the program. The context may be an ornate, historically important listed building, a generic retail unit in a shopping mall or the lines on a piece of paper that describe an architect's proposal for a building. All provide an interesting departure point for the interior designer and the program is pre-occupied with developing an understanding of the existing context and developing clear strategies as to how the existing should be treated and how new elements are to be introduced. The relationship between the new and the existing is key.

The First Year

The first year of the program aims to provide a 'foundational' grounding in the subject that introduces students to the consideration of interior design problems at a variety of scales from the site context through to the detailed realization of a particular part of an interior. To facilitate this learning each of the three terms explores a particular theme which are identified as; 'Proximities', 'Inhabitations' and 'Identities'.

The year's work generally focuses around a specific site to provide some cohesion and connection between the projects undertaken. Ideally this site will have a sense of 'place' and offer a variety of different buildings that are related in some way. Much time is spent in finding appropriate places that have the necessary qualities to support the agenda of the first year of the program. The perfect site would have an 'interesting' context, a selection of three or four buildings that are related in some way (often arranged around a communal courtyard) yet are distinct enough from each other (different scales, periods, construction types, materials, original uses etc.) to expose students to a variety of challenges and experience throughout the year.

In the Autumn term 'Proximities' involves students undertaking two distinct but related projects. Firstly, groups work together to gain an understanding of the site that will be used for the year's work. Understanding is developed through site visits, historical research,

analysis, drawing and model making. Particular emphasis is placed on gaining an understanding of the site's 'genius loci' – the sense of place that will inform ensuing projects throughout the year. Once the site analysis has been undertaken a particular building is selected for the first design project. A key consideration within this project will be the relationship between the proposed interior, the building it sits within and the site context. The idea of 'proximity' explores relationships between outside and inside, transitions and thresholds as well as opportunities to make horizontal and vertical connections both within and outside the building. The project is constructed with an expectation that students will resolve a scheme at a spatial level at scales of 1:100 to 1:50. Typically the brief for this project will examine a use such as a small gallery space in order to allow students the opportunity to develop spatial compositions that can explore quite 'pure' interior design issues such as; volume, proportion, circulation, light etc.

In the Spring term 'Inhabitations' asks students to undertake a design project where the main agenda is the consideration of the needs of the users within the interior. This project will explore a particular activity and demand the development of spatial organizations that reconcile the qualities of the given site with the demands of the given use. Key considerations will center around the development of spatial relationships, planning strategies and circulation strategies. Typically, the site will be multi-level demanding that volumetric relationships and vertical circulation must be considered as part of the solution. Students would normally explore this project at scales of 1:50 to 1:20 and the brief would consider a very precise activity such as a hairdressing salon where the specific needs of different users (staff / customers) and clear functional requirements can be addressed.

The 'Identities' project is located in the Summer term and continues the journey from more general proposals explored at smaller scales to a more focused project that demands that materials and detail are considered at scales from 1:20 through to full size. The project will provide an opportunity for students to create interior spaces that have an appropriate mood and character. Typically, the project will be of a very small scale and involve a single space / volume (room).

At the end of the year students are asked to prepare a portfolio of the work they have undertaken on these projects and this is then presented at the 'Interim Examination' for assessment.

This piece will describe the 'Identities' project from term three of the first year.

Pedagogical Approach

The method and practice of teaching employed in this project is one of "learning through doing". This experiential approach is rooted in the work of John Dewey and what could be termed 'pragmatism'. The approaches utilize ideas around 'Active-based Learning', 'Problem-based Learning', 'Project-based Learning' and therefore 'Simulation-based Learning'. In essence, the project brief creates a learning environment that simulates relevant aspects of the demands of a real interior design project and invites students to learn through the experience of responding to a series of clearly articulated objectives.

Through the learning and teaching methods employed within this project the aim is for students to emerge as interior designers who are empowered to embrace and explore materials and detailing with a new-found confidence.

Project Aims and Objectives

The principal objective of this project is to provide students with an opportunity to learn how an interior's identity can be established through the consideration of structure, materials, form, detail, color, pattern, texture and finish. In order to achieve this principal objective the project takes an unconventional approach in terms of its starting point. Educational interior design project briefs will often start with the proposed use and site in order to generate planning and organizational strategies that may then be developed into three-dimensional interior design proposals. Within these projects the plan becomes the principal driver and its development can dominate the design process to the extent that little time is left for students to consider the three dimensional formal articulation of a scheme and the associated use of materials, color and pattern to establish the appropriate 'mood and character' for the interior. In order to combat this the 'Identities' project introduces another way of working where students are asked to respond to a particular use and site, not with planning proposals, but with a palette of materials. This method of working introduces the student interior designer to notions that:

For some interior design projects, the establishment of an appropriate mood and character for the space can be much more significant than the creation of an ingenious or efficient plan.

The form and detailed development of an interior can be driven by the inherent qualities of the chosen materials and that these material qualities provide both opportunities and restrictions that can drive a scheme's detailed development.

Another key aspect of the approach is that students are provided with a 'fixed' planning diagram for the project that they are then asked to articulate in three-dimensions. By removing the problem of planning from this particular project students discover that the same plan can be realized in an infinite number of three-dimensional configurations whilst the process emphasizes the importance of materials, form and detail in the work of the interior designer.

Other objectives of the project include providing students with an opportunity to:

- Develop an understanding of the qualities of simple, inexpensive materials and their potential to contribute to the creation of beautifully crafted, intelligent interior spaces.
- Design at large scales to learn how to develop the form of interior elements and consider relationships / junctions / connections between different elements within an interior design proposal. In short - to consider the design of interior spaces in detail.
- Learn about the importance of model making as a development tool within the design process. Particular importance is placed on the sectional model as a key device for the exploration of interior space.
- Consider how, as an interior designer, it is possible to create design solutions that reconcile a variety of factors concerning dimensions. In this project's case, the existing building's dimensions, human dimensions, the dimensions of a product (e.g. a wine bottle, books etc.) and the dimensions of building materials.

To this end the project vehicle developed to deliver the educational aims and objectives will normally involve a simple, single space that has some historic or decorative interest and will ask students to satisfy a simple

functional requirement such as the design of a staircase or an environment where a collection of similar objects must be stored or displayed. Uses have included a reading room, a wine shop and a vinyl records shop.

Project Structure

Most first year projects on the MA Interior Design program at the RCA are structured around clearly defined project stages that are designed to provide students with a means of navigating the design process. These project stages vary depending on the project - the 'Identities' project has the following structure:

Stage 1: Materials (1 Week)

The first task of this project is the establishment of the materials palette for the project. To facilitate this each student is given a pack of sample pieces of materials that might typically include the following:

18mm Oriented Strand Board

18mm MDF

12mm Birch Faced Plywood

2mm Mild Steel

20mm Marble

3mm Wool Felt

45mm x 45mm Softwood



Fig 01: A typical selection of given materials.

The samples are provided to expedite the process giving the student direct and tangible access to physical materials and no excuses to delay or prevaricate. The choice of materials has been carefully considered to encourage exploration of the notion that simple, inexpensive materials can be used to create beautifully crafted interior spaces.

From this starting point students are given a precise set of rules that allows them to quickly decide on the materials that will be used for the project.

Firstly, they are asked to consider the proposed use and the given site and think about how the materials palette might respond to these factors.

In addition to the given materials students can include the following additional materials:

Hardwood of choice

Another material of choice

A maximum of three paint colors

A paint finish for the mild steel



Fig 02: Visits to materials suppliers and manufacturers are encouraged.

Students can use as many materials as they wish within their proposals but they must use a minimum of three materials and include a metal, and one of the timber board materials (OSB, MDF, Plywood). Any paint colors are used in addition to this.

The precise requirements challenge students to learn how to read a brief, understand the project requirements and then use their initiative to explore ways of being inventive within a set of constraints.

Within this stage of the project there are two tutorials. For the first tutorial students are asked to bring along three contrasting proposals of material palettes for the project. A range of options are demanded so that comparative discussion can take place in an attempt to find the most appropriate way forward. At this stage the materials are a loose collection of samples that can be moved around and interchanged as part of the tutorial discussion. Following this tutorial students must then decide on the proposed palette and are asked to make a three-dimensional composition of the materials to a presentation standard. The resulting artifact should consider the size of the materials, the proportion of each material in relation to the others, their finish, and the form of the composition. If done well the detailing language for the project can be established at this early stage. The artifact is presented for discussion at the second tutorial.



Fig 03: A materials composition for a wine shop.

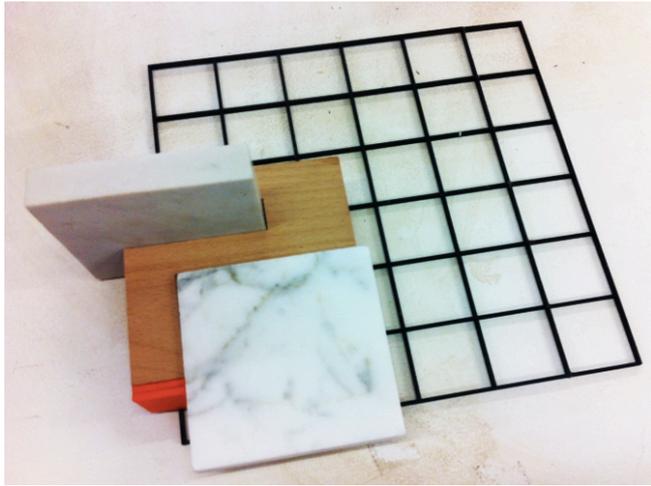


Fig 04: A materials composition for a reading room.



Fig 05: A materials composition for a wine shop.

Stage 2: Form (1.5 Weeks)

Having established an appropriate materials palette, students are then provided with a selection of diagrammatic plans from which to choose from. This is done in order to remove the problem of space planning from this particular project (planning is considered in both the 'Proximities' and 'Inhabitations' projects undertaken earlier) so that students can focus on the task of realizing a detailed design scheme in three dimensions. Providing a restricted choice of planning options also enables students to discover that the same simple plan can be articulated in three dimensions in an infinite number of ways with the intention that the emphasis of student's work moves from a pre-occupation with rather dull 'two-dimensional' planning solutions to much more interesting 'three-

dimensional' compositions of elements that are rich in detail and materials.

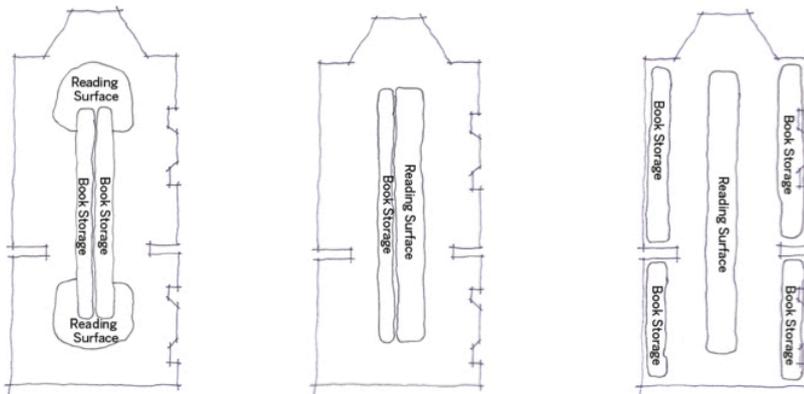


Fig 06: A choice of planning diagram options for a reading room.

Using their materials palette as a starting point students are asked to develop their chosen planning diagram in three dimensions. This work is done through model making that starts at 1:50 scale and then quickly moves up to 1:20 scale.

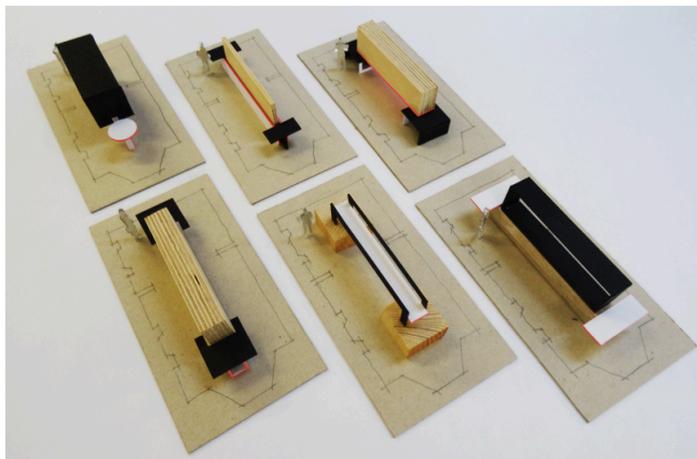


Fig 07: 1:50 models exploring a given planning diagram in three dimensions.

Students are encouraged to put together a set of model making materials that represent the actual materials so that there is an awareness as to what material is being used for each element as compositions are being developed. For instance a particular balsa sheet material may represent 18mm plywood and so the model making material is cut to form 2440mm

x 1220mm sheets at a scale of 1:20. This approach demands that students think about the limitations of material sizes and the importance of reconciling panel sizes within the detailed design development of a proposal.

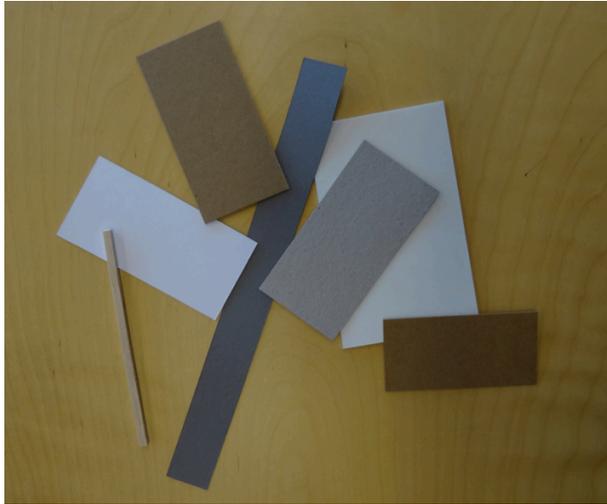


Fig 08: 1:20 scale model making materials representing the real materials.

During this stage of the project students are asked to consider the following questions and to incorporate responses within the work:

What is the big idea / concept underpinning your work?

What is your strategy for how your piece is to be placed into the existing space?

Will this be an 'intervention', an 'insertion' or an 'installation'?

What are the implications of your decision?

How does the form of your piece respond to the existing space and its features?

How do the qualities / sizes of the materials influence your decisions?

How do you propose to treat the fabric of the existing building?



Fig 09: Understanding of, and response to, the existing site are crucial aspects of the work.

Throughout this process students are encouraged to work in a speculative manner starting with the production of a number of exploratory models (the more the merrier) that can then be evaluated. From this evaluation positive aspects of models are combined to develop new studies that further evolve the direction of the project. The more this process can be repeated the better. For the 'Interim Project Review' at the end of this stage students are asked to present three alternative proposals in 1:20 sketch model form.

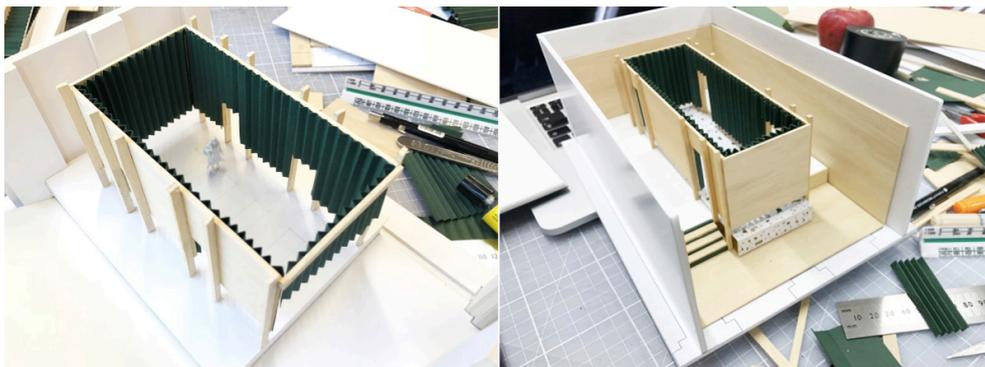


Fig 10: Work quickly moves up to 1:20 where models are used to explore options and develop proposals.

Stage 3: Detailed Design (3.5 weeks)

Following debate at the 'Interim Project Review' students develop a single design proposal in greater detail towards a resolved outcome at a scale of

1:10 and beyond. The process of continually exploring many options proceeds and questions raised in the previous stage of the project should continue to be addressed in more and more precise detail towards an outcome that is as resolved as it can be. The final outcomes of the project will invariably be large scale models and prototypes of particular parts of the scheme. These will often be at 1:10 scale but, where appropriate, full sized models in representative or actual materials will be made.



Fig 11: Endless making enables students to develop a greater understanding of three dimensional relationships.

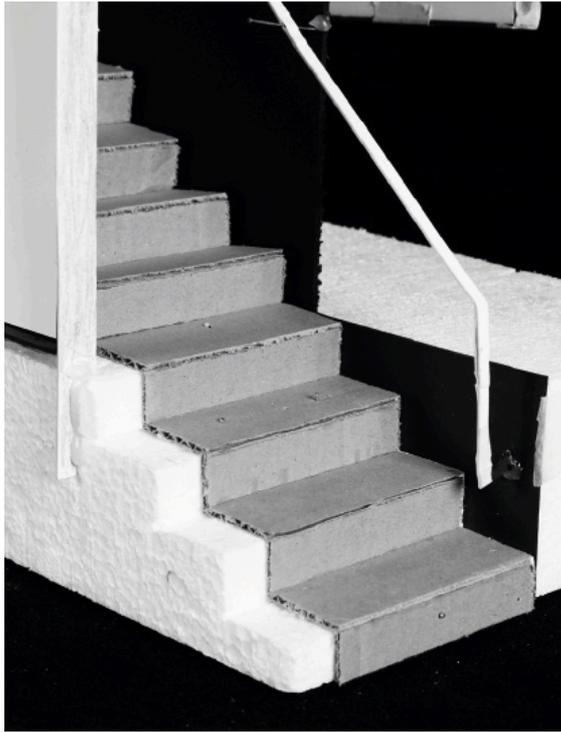


Fig 12: 1:10 scale models allow the form of elements to be considered in more detail.



Fig 13: Specific details are explored at full size.

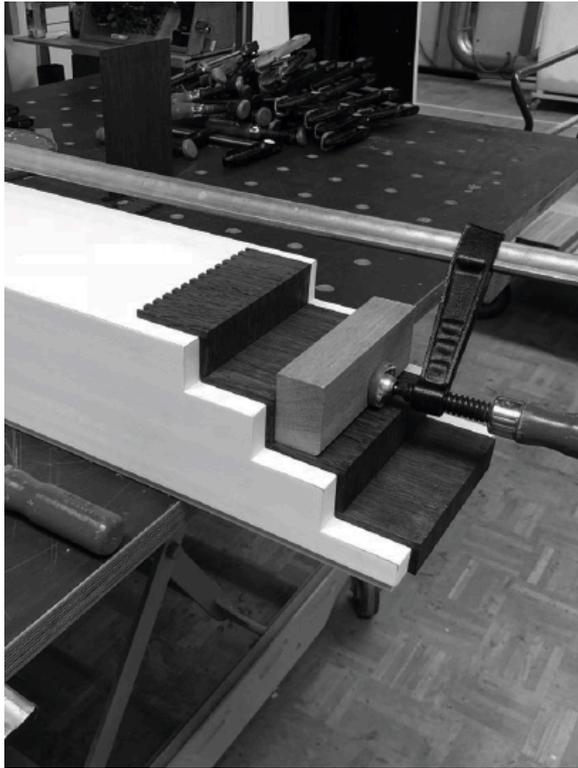


Fig 14: Large scale prototype models use real materials to resolve detail and present outcomes.

Learning and Teaching

The project structure outlined above is constructed around a clear approach to learning and teaching. A typical cohort may have 36 students and the project is launched with a briefing presentation to all students where the aims and objectives of the project are set out and the project content / structure is introduced. With a cohort of 36 students there would be three project tutors involved in delivering the project. A project tutor would work with a group of twelve students throughout the six week period of the project and there would be two tutorial discussions per week (on Mondays and Thursdays). The structure of the project is organized around the tutorial discussions and these will take one of two formats as appropriate for the stage of the project.



Fig 15: Group tutorial debate is crucial to learning and the development of the work.

A group tutorial will involve six students discussing their work whilst sitting around a table within a tutorial space adjacent to the studio. This meeting will last for three hours with each student allocated 30 minutes of time for the consideration of their progress. The group tutorial is designed to replicate the type of informal meeting that might take place within a design practice or might sometimes occur with a client. The intention is that a small group of six provides sufficient intimacy for students to feel comfortable in discussing both their own work and that of their colleagues. Tutorial debate is a crucial aspect of the education – this forum provides an opportunity for students to develop verbal presentation and communication skills whilst also learning how to critique and comment on both their own and other’s design work.

An individual tutorial will involve each student having a thirty minute discussion with their tutor about their progress on the project. This may take place at the students work space or in a tutorial space adjacent to the studio.

A ‘mid project review’ (on the Thursday of week three) would involve all twelve students, their project tutor and a guest tutor from practice. This review would require each student to present their work in progress to their colleagues and tutors for feedback. This review would last all day.

At the end of the project the ‘final review’ would follow a similar format to the ‘mid project review’ and consider the student’s final proposals.

Conclusions

Most subject disciplines within the art and design school are generally able to develop project outcomes that are real and tangible; the fashion design student will create the clothing item, the furniture design student will make the chair and the photography student will print the image. When set within an educational context the subject of interior design presents both the student and the teacher with particular challenges. Proposals for three dimensional space that surround and envelope the user are represented through drawings, models, computer visualizations and animations that can only offer a second hand experience of what has been designed. This is generally done at small scales that do not provide the space for the development of detail and within these constraints students of interior design will often never engage with what will ultimately be the purpose of their work - to create real, full-sized interior spaces that are made from real materials and occupied by real people.

The approach adopted in the 'Identities' project creates an opportunity for students of interior design to engage with materials in a tangible way from the outset leading to project outcomes that are more fully developed and resolved. Whereas previously students may have been hampered by a fear born out of a lack of technical, material and detailing knowledge (traditionally developed through years of practice) this approach enables students to learn through doing. The method has been developed and refined over a number of years and it is believed that this very particular approach liberates students and enables them to embrace this crucial aspect of the interior designer's work with confidence.