

What Is Atmosphere?

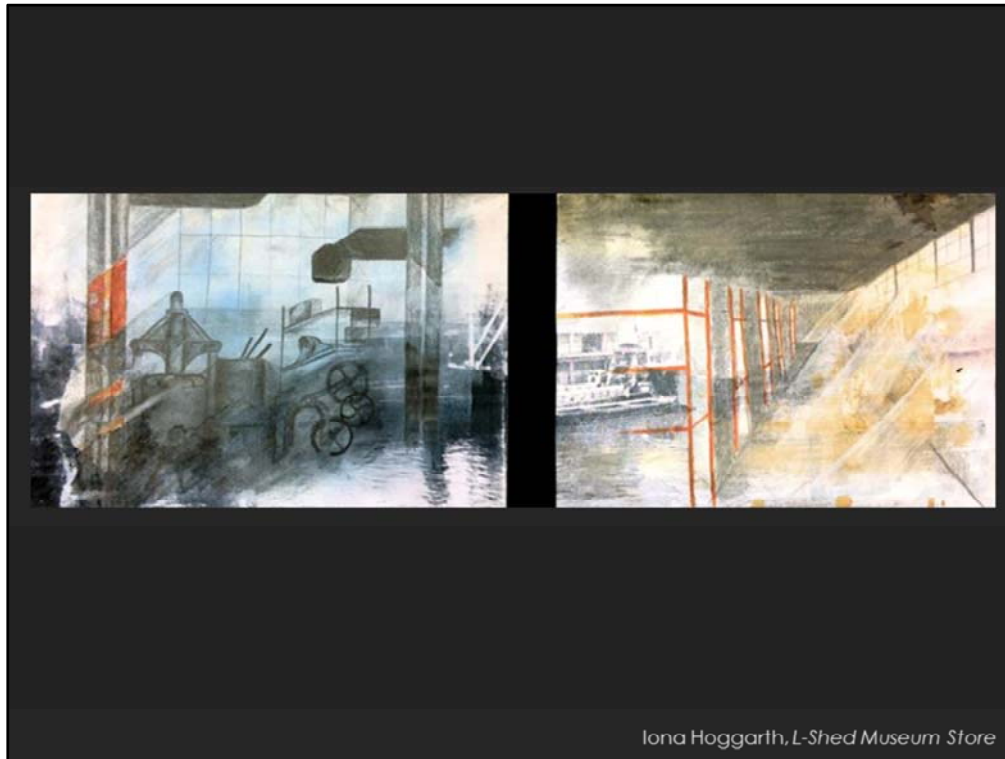
Architectural students' conversational, collaged & diptychal definitions

Atmospheres: Morgan Centre Interdisciplinary Conference, 2nd July 2015, University of Manchester

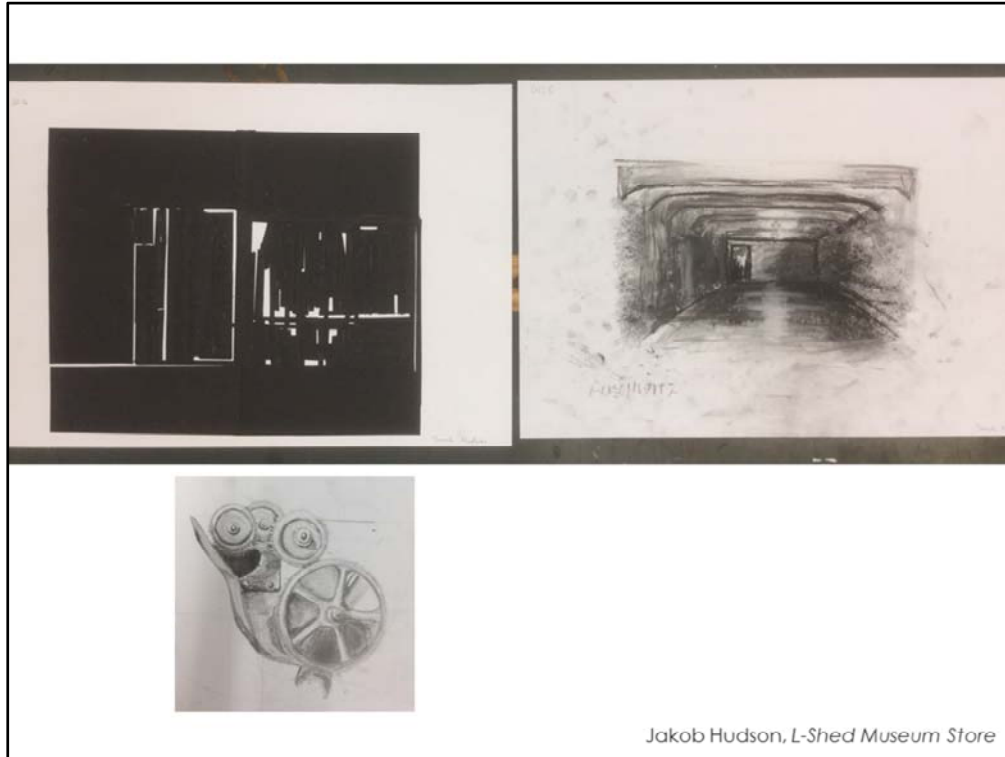
James Burch Bristol, UWE : Department of Architecture & the Built Environment
with Yvonne Buchheim American University of Cairo
& Nancy Murphy Spicer Freelance Artist, Virginia State

Sian Wells, *Christ Church St. Ewen*

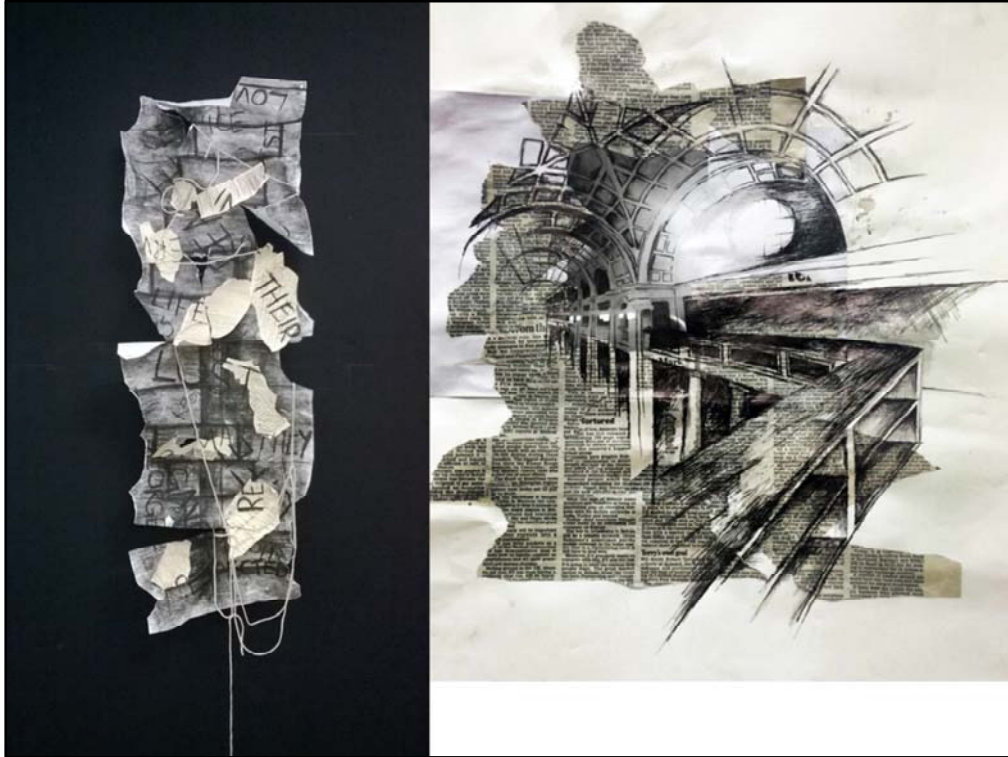
This paper presents a teaching project developed over the past five years at Bristol UWE. Over this time-period the project has developed as a collaboration between myself, James Burch, and firstly Yvonne Buchheim and then with Nancy Murphy Spicer. The images presented are first year work developed as part of this project in the autumn of 2014.



A predominant strand of contemporary criticism identifies the creation of atmosphere as the way in which an architectural space is distinguished from the 3-dimensions of physical buildings. For example, in Peter Zumthor's work (and in his presentation of that work in books of short essays highly prized by architectural students), he argues that the architectural qualities of a space are dependent on its atmosphere (Zumthor 2006, 11). Zumthor's case for atmosphere as essential to architectural meaning may take this position to an extreme. But the theory that there is an experiential and associative aspect to the creation of architectural meaning is a foundational aspect of architectural teaching; and most first year courses in architecture include design exercises that require students to respond creatively to some form of charged atmospheric stimulus (Cappleman and Jordan 1993).



The challenge presented to students in this type of project is how they might connect concepts and abstractions to artefacts they might be studying or making. In teaching first years to look for this connection between the abstract and the physical, projects often choose one of two positions. One position requires the student to move *from abstraction into architecture*. Students are presented with an abstract atmospheric essence, defined in only a few words, and are asked to invent an architectural space that evokes this essential feeling. The other position asks the student to move in the opposite direction, *from architecture into abstraction*. Here students are presented with an existing atmosphere and are asked to *abstract* representations of the atmospheric qualities they find in that space. Peter Zumthor's own version of this project, entitled *Atmospheres*, stands as an exemplar of the first way. He asks students to take three words and use these to develop three rooms, each with a distinct atmosphere, that are then joined with a precise articulation of the spatial threshold between the atmospheres they have been designed to contain.



Similar projects run in many schools of architecture. For example, I tutored a project connected to the Oxford Brookes' school that began with physical states – speed, cold, heat – to activate architectural design, which expressed atmospheres and the transition points between those conditions. In contrast Ruth Morrow's project for students in their first semester at the Sheffield school of architecture used the second approach moving *from architecture to abstraction*. Students visited particular spaces in that city, sometimes derelict, rich in use and history, and interpreted these in an expanded range of architectural representations – including drawing, sound, assembly, text and image. Here, the students' translation of physical space into architectural representation abstracts atmospheric qualities from the existing and communicates these to an architectural audience (Morrow 2003). In these atmosphere projects there is no practical brief as such. Both project forms demand the creative translation of the near-ineffable into some tangible thing that can be communicated to others – an objective that challenges first years' notions of architecture.

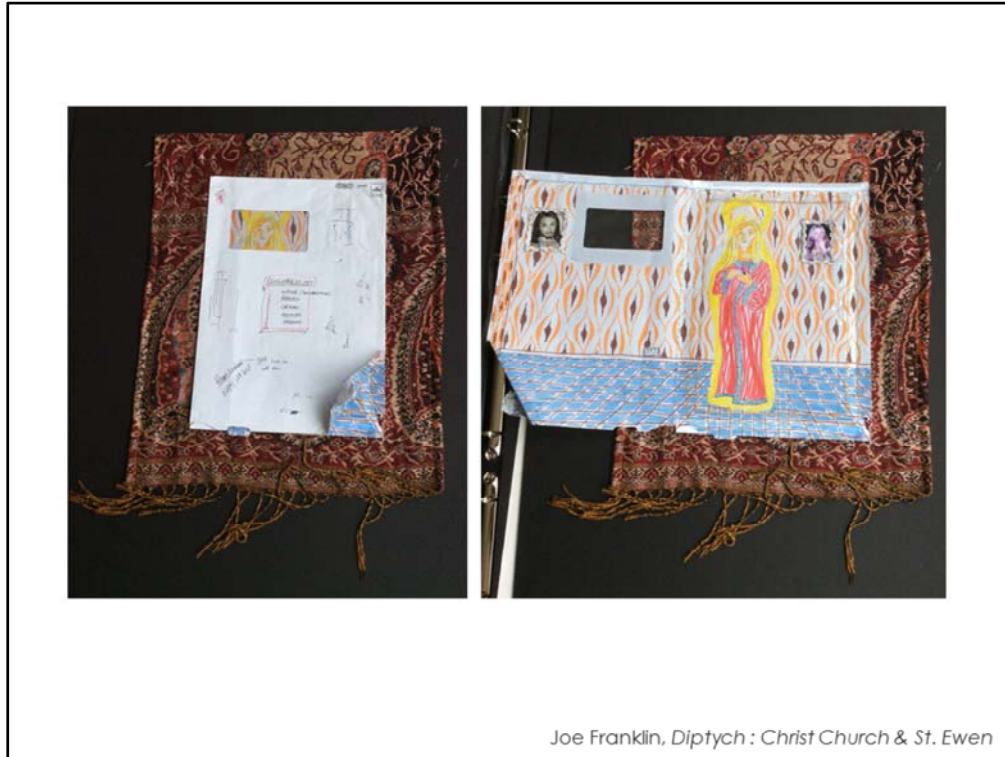


It is no accident that projects such as these are positioned relatively early in students' first year studies. The projects set students an open-ended experimental way of investigating design that is central to Studio teaching and introduces this notion of architectural quality as formulator of 'atmosphere'. This can be hugely uncomfortable to some students because the project requires the development of a set of interpretative and representational skills that they may not have encountered previously.

This paper presents another version of this first year architectural atmosphere project, which follows the second route *from architecture to abstraction*. This project has been taught at Bristol, UWE's school of architecture and has two key differences to the projects discussed previously.



The first difference is this project's focus on the production of drawn representations of atmosphere. These requirements connect into a broader theme of first year architectural teaching, which is the teaching of drawing. Its place in this broader pedagogical aim is to challenge both students' and tutors' preconceptions of architectural drawing and move the discussion of representation beyond the conventions of orthographic projection, in plan, section and elevation. The project asks for a drawn response, but asks the students what that drawn response might be.



In order to achieve this expanded approach to drawing I realised, as the project's designer' that I needed to invite contributors from outside my own architectural discipline. To this end the project has always run as a collaboration with practising artists teaching at UWE's school of drawing and applied arts - firstly, with Yvonne Buchheim and then with Nancy Murphy Spicer. The nature of these collaborations leads to the second particular characteristic of the project, which is that, both during its conception and in its execution, it has developed as a series of two-handed conversations - diptychs one might say - about the nature of *atmosphere*.

The project is delivered in the middle of students first term of architectural studies. Students visit a more eccentric, less accessible space in central Bristol. They are asked to record the atmosphere they find using a range of media, capture the atmosphere they experience and bring this atmosphere back in drawn-form to the considerably less atmospheric school of architecture. This brief poses questions for all involved. The students are asked how they might define and communicate architectural quality; and in return, quite reasonably, they pose the tutors the simple yet very complicated question:

What is atmosphere?

i)	Wednesday 22 nd October	First Visit to Bristol Atmosphere
ii)	Thursday 23 rd October	Assignment: Complementary Atmospheric
iii)	Monday 3 rd November	Workshop: Architectural Drawings
iv)	Monday 3 rd November	Workshop: Written Atmosphere
v)	Wednesday 5 th November	Second Visit to Bristol Atmosphere
vi)	Thursday 6 th November	Assignment: Touch Description
vii)	Thursday 6 th November	Workshop: Revealed Drawings
viii)	Thursday 6 th November	Workshop: Installed Drawing
ix)	Monday 10 th November	diptych 1 - black & white
x)	Monday 10 th November	diptych 2 - two colours & a third accent
xi)	Thursday 11 th November	Exhibition & Discussion

The answer to this question, which remains provisional and (will always I believe), has developed over a 5-year collaboration between Fine Art and architectural educators. Over four weeks the project offers a sequenced series of ten workshops and conversations that are designed to lead the students away from the pictorial and towards the abstract representation of atmospheres they discover in the buildings they visit.

I will now use these ten steps to show you some of the students' explorations of atmosphere. (And in doing so it is important again to acknowledge the different authors of these steps - Yvonne, Nancy and myself – and that the current teaching structure is the result of this long-term collaboration).



Bristol Museum

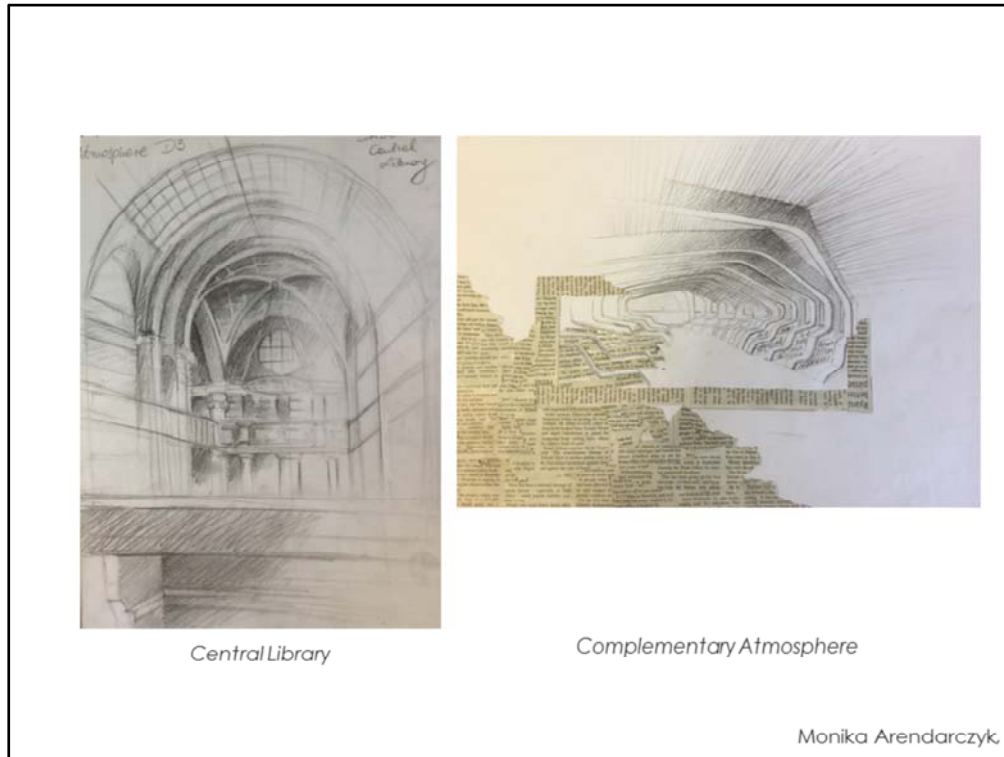
George Matthews



Amos Vale Cemetery

Zineb Saadi El Hassani,

Step 1 - Students are assigned one of ten or more locations in Bristol. Their brief is to visit this place and record its atmosphere, in drawings and any other media they see fit. The buildings are chosen for their secret eccentricities and sometimes access needs to be negotiated: a Victorian drawing office, for example, or the store for an industrial museum, a crypt, a boatyard or a grotto. As they start the students are often confused. They stand in these spaces and ask: *Where is this atmosphere we are supposed to record?*



Step 2 – *Complementary Atmospheres*: Over reading week the students are asked to recall and represent another place they know that can complement the atmosphere they are studying in Bristol. Any appropriate drawing technique is encouraged, and the representation should **not** be pictorial, but expressive of atmosphere. In connecting Bristol to personal memory a student might enhance and emphasize, complete or contrast, or critique their Bristol atmosphere. For example a Museum Store complemented by a Garden Shed; Central Library by a Big Yellow Storage Building; private Victorian Cemetery by a gridlocked London Street.

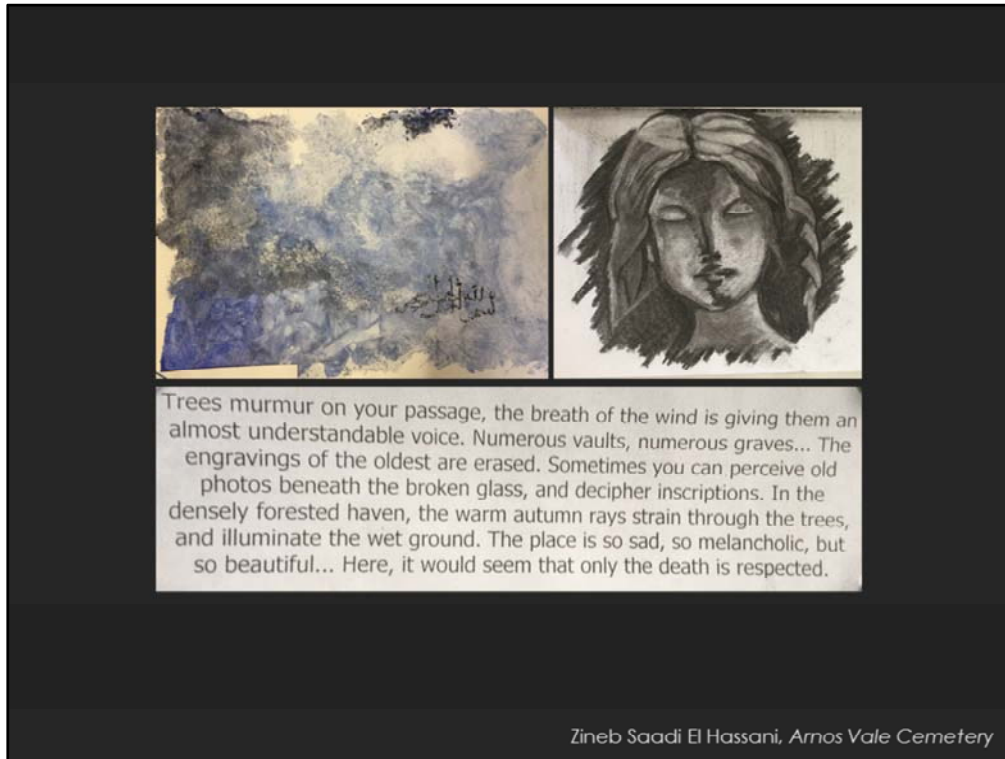
Step 3 – The students are asked to examine, discuss and interpret presentation drawings by post-graduate students of architecture at the Bartlett school (Borden and Cook 2003). These beautifully crafted images challenge first year preconceptions and expand their conception of what architectural drawing might be.

"The gold touched ceiling and pearly white gates of the ornate altar felt like an over obvious attempt at symbolising heaven, as it would be shown in a children's storybook. This contrasted uncomfortably with the bleak memorials, dark pews and sparse walls elsewhere in the building. Light shone down from windows high above, as if from the heavens, illuminating the stale dust we'd disturbed on entry which now hung like a thin fog in the air, yet it didn't feel warm. It felt disjointed, incomplete, with no focus other than the constant reminder of inevitable death and loss."

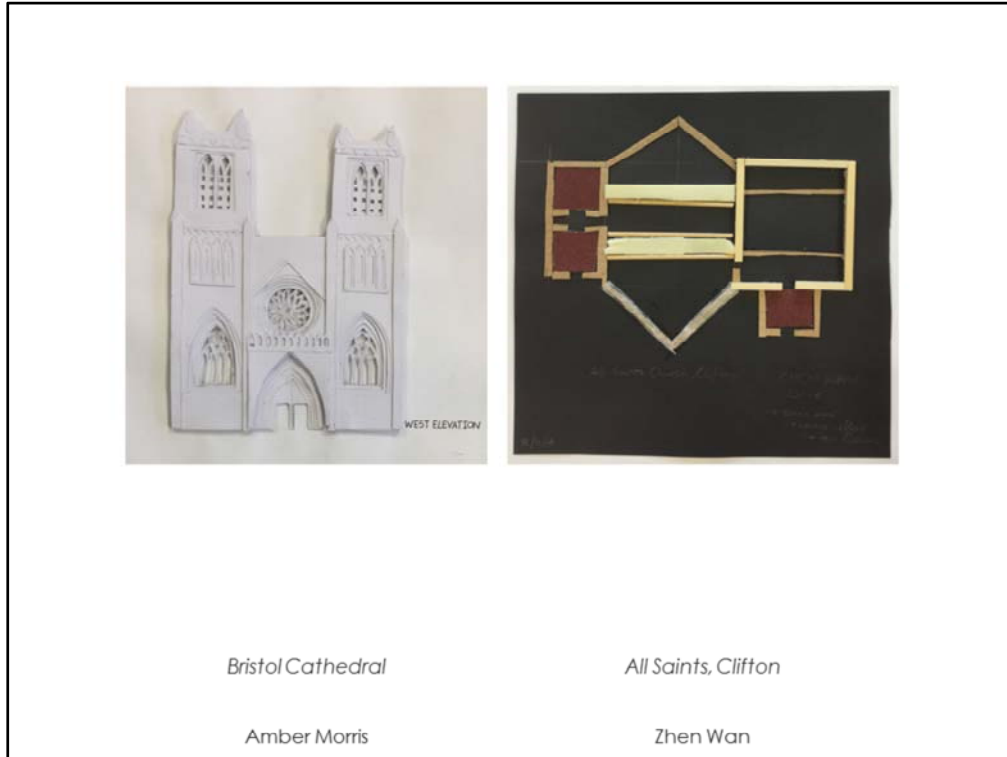


Sarah Parrish, Christ Church & St. Ewen

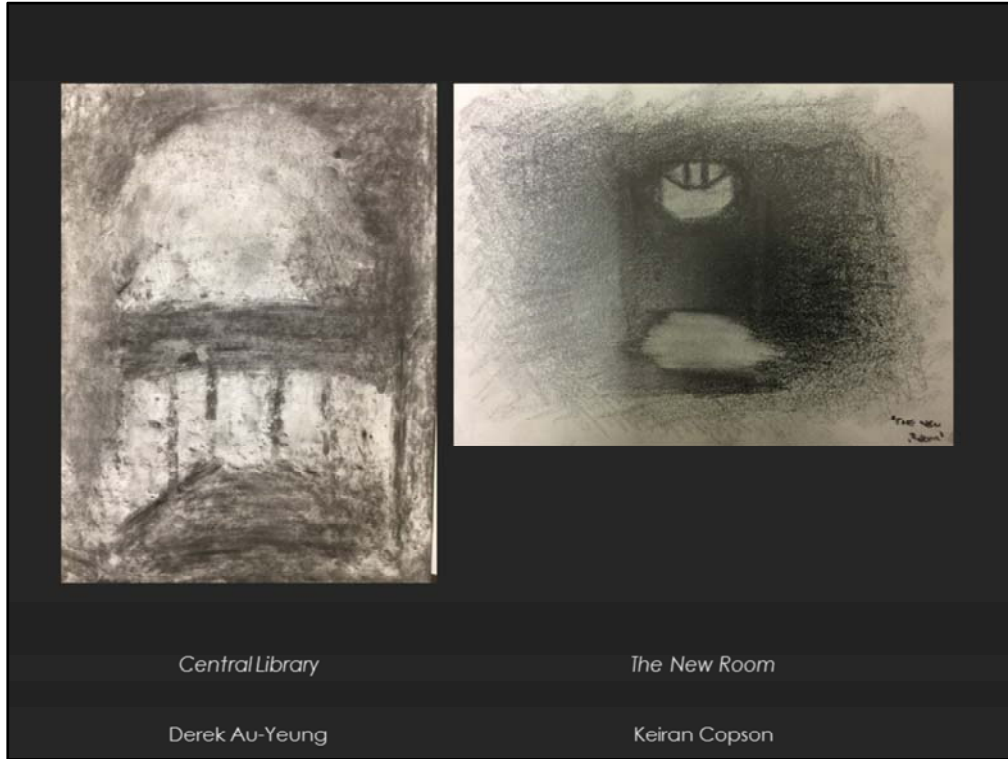
Step 4 – The students pause, to write a 75-word description of the atmosphere they seek to capture in their Bristol building. They show their findings so far – sketch book, recordings and complementary atmosphere – to a partner and read out their descriptions. This process is reciprocated and the pair of students identify for each other five key words that will guide a second site visit.



Step 5 – A second site visit. The students revisit their assigned location, this time with a pre-meditated agenda formed over the previous 2-weeks of work and discussion.



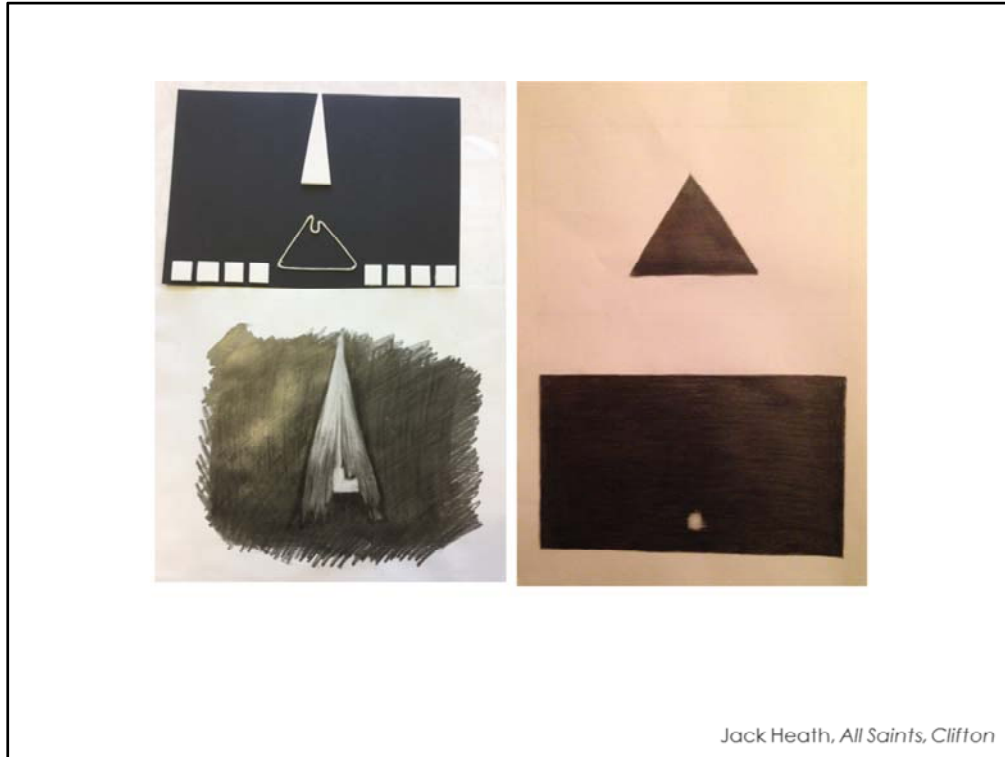
Step 6 – *Touch Description*: The students are set an assignment, borrowed from Marco Frascari (2011), to make a new drawing of their Bristol atmosphere that might convey the qualities of their Bristol space to a blind person. This drawing is to use ‘raised lines and minimal textures’ in plan, section and elevation and can include applied odour (Ibid, p. 134). For some students contemplating the production of this drawing feels a step too far.



Step 7 – *Revealed Drawing*: Beginning with a wholly shaded pages the students are asked to reveal the abstract and essential proportion, light and shade of their Bristol space.



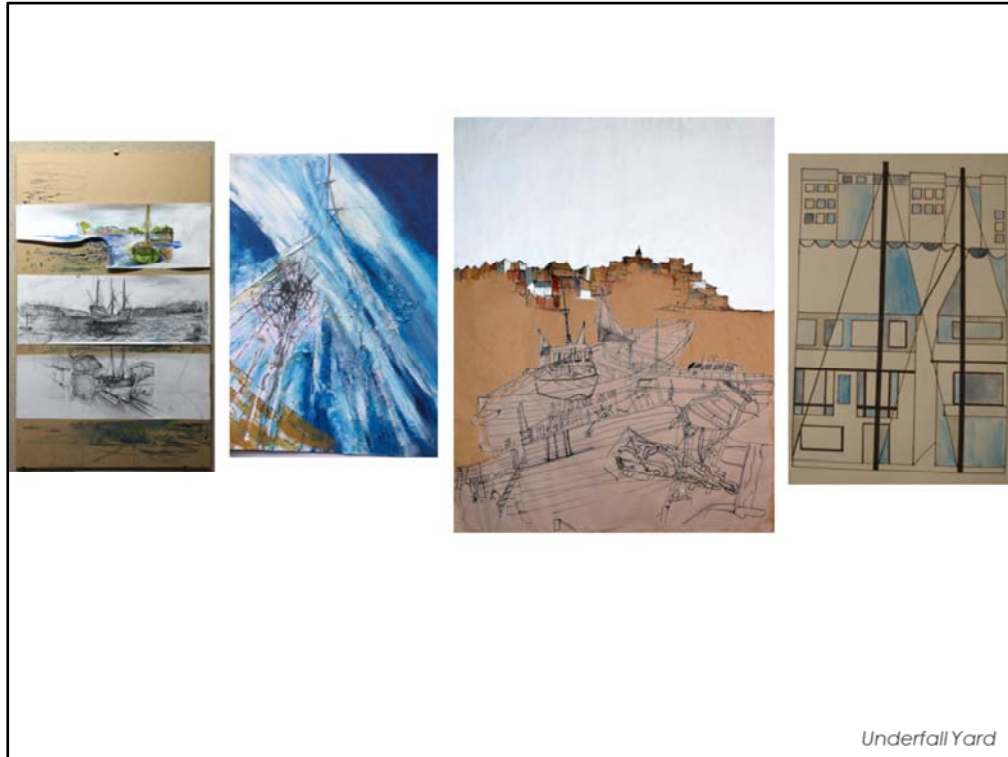
Step 8 – *Installed Drawing*: Working in small groups, where all group-members share the same Bristol building, groups survey the school of architecture and choose a location in which to install a shared characteristic of their Bristol atmosphere.



Step 9 – The students pause, to re-present their work to a peer. The student shows and discusses her findings so far with a partner – sketch book, recordings, complementary atmosphere, touch description, revealed drawing, installation. The partner abstracts 5 keywords from this presentation, writes them down and gives them to the presenter. This process is reciprocated; and then using the keywords as guide each student makes a further drawing of the atmosphere they are developing. The students then swap projects, making a collage in black and white paper only, to complement the most current drawing their partner has made of their atmosphere. A first diptych is formed between drawing and collage of the explored atmosphere.



Step 10 – The conventions of the diptych form are introduced to the students. Using two colours of paper and a third coloured accent students make diptychs of their atmospheres.



Underfall Yard

And finally, the students produce one final drawing and short complementary text, all of which are brought together as exhibitions related to each building. The students then debate their atmosphere and re-curate their exhibition for a public viewing.

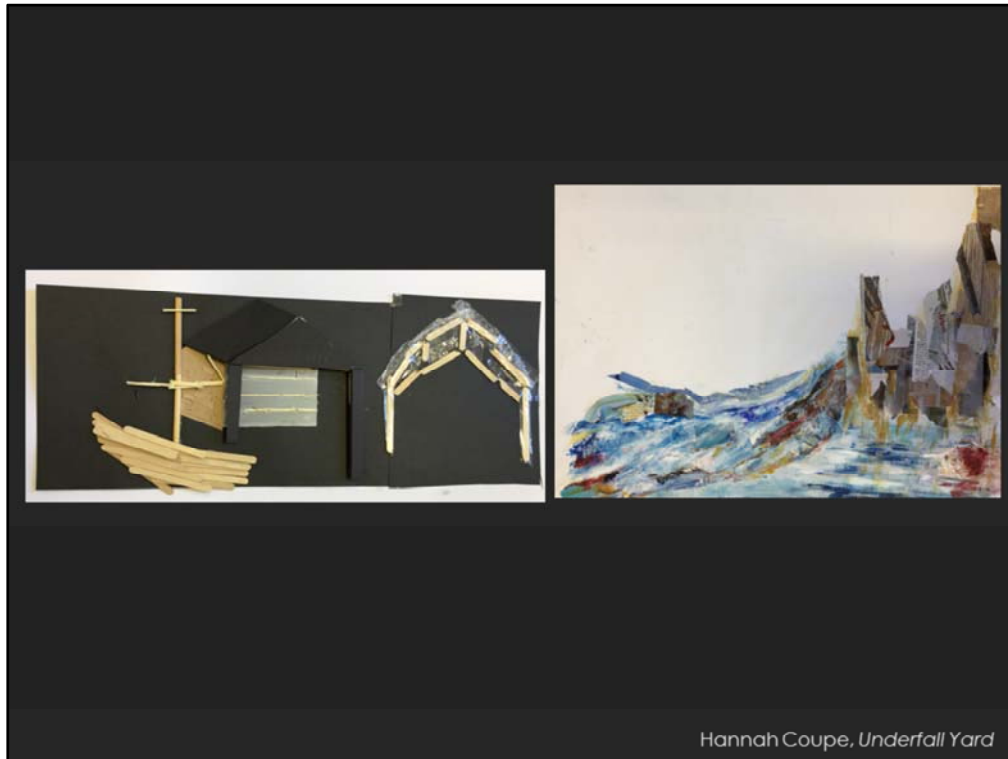


In the words of one student: the project is Marmite; loved or hated. Each step nudges the students away from a pictorial description of space towards an exploration of related meanings and their visual definition. But each step references the same atmosphere and asks each student to define it for herself. An endless exploration that students have to decide whether to enjoy or not. Many come back to this project six months later at portfolio review and re-work their submissions, continuing to ask:

What is this atmosphere?



I still can't answer that question, but I feel the convention of a diptych has given me a useful tool students can use to answer this question for themselves. The format of two images or texts related by a formal connection that suggests a third reading supports a precise exploration of related meanings; and creates a space, at the point of connection, where the atmosphere can be found. The project structure itself has evolved into a series of dyptichal relationships, in the suggestion of complementary atmospheres, the two-handed peer reviews – where presenter and reviewer each offer definitions of an atmosphere, and in installation of a new atmosphere within the school of architecture itself. And perhaps, when both the student and the building are present in a space somewhere between them lies the atmosphere of the building.



Foolhardily, 5-years ago I entitled a project 'Atmosphere' and then tried to teach it. Students' development of diptychs and a reflection on the nature of *atmosphere* as something found *between* elements through the association and conversation between ideas has become central to this teaching; and from my exploration of this pedagogy I would suggest a definition of *atmosphere* as just such a dyptichal combination of associations and images, visitor and extant space, participant and observer.

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Frasconi, M., 2011. *Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing*. London: Routledge.

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