THE PLAYFUL PAVILION: LEARNING FROM RISKY EXPERIMENTATION IN REAL TIME
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This short reflection on a student-designed pavilion for the London Festival of Architecture underscores the importance of pavilions in providing experimental and pedagogical spaces, where risk-taking is less encumbered by the minutiae of pragmatic considerations.

Keywords: pavilion, play, ping-pong, experimentation, pedagogy, student, festival, risk taking, ambiguity management, professional behaviours.

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Abstract

This short reflection on a student-designed pavilion for the London Festival of Architecture underscores the importance of pavilions in providing experimental and pedagogical spaces, where risk-taking is less encumbered by the minutiae of pragmatic considerations.

In summer 2012, I launched an international, 'live-project' collaboration, enabling students to design and build a Ping-Pong Pavilion (Figures 15.1–15.3) as part of the London Summer Olympics.[1] During the process of developing the brief and realising the project, it became apparent that pavilions are far from benignly beautiful constructions or frivolous follies, and are instead among the most risk enabling and innovation engendering architectural typologies possible.

Many architects harbour dreams of designing pavilions, almost as much as they do chairs. The design evidence suggest that both can act as the creative equivalent of a panic room during moments of artistic frustration. A swiftly doodled chair or pavilion sketch; diminutive enough to squeeze onto the 'back-of-a-fag-packet', can offer satisfying results within the time it takes to finish a cigarette.

Like the architect-designed chair, the pavilion typology can prove remarkably diverse, transcending context, culture and materiality. Their fair weather inclinations evoke sun dappled summer freedoms and an urge to move outside of the boundaries of our wintery mental and physical enclosures to embrace emergent optimisms. Whereas a chair succeeds by its ability to be sat upon regardless of how uncomfortable or transient this encounter might be, pavilions are 'free' to withstand any consensus on the nature of their functional remit.

Quite reasonably, the general consensus on risk taking in architecture concedes that one should always experiment in ways that avoid seriously injuring anyone. Yet pavilions have inherently 'risky' characteristics,

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1   Further images of the Ping-Pong Pavilion are on the website for the London Festival of Architecture http://www.lfa2012.org/events/view/the-playful-ping-pong-pavilion-101, and a blog for the Ping-Pong Pavilion http://playfulpavilion2012.blogspot.com/.

including exposure, porosity, temporality, material crudeness and environmental fragility – attributes that seemingly characterize the most addictive form of creative release. It is therefore the pavilion's freedom from these 'real' building constraints that appears to encourage greater levels of experimentation and risk taking during both the conceptualization and making phases: a freedom that subsequently makes them an optimum learning vehicle for architecture students (Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, and Walker, 2004, pp.53–56).

Similarly, for design tutors keen to encourage experimentation, asking students to both design and build a pavilion can liberate students from the usual expectations regarding both methods and outputs. Resisting the established *modus operandi* in schools of architecture is not easy. The tendency is to assume that authentic 'experimentation' can only be achieved by asking students to respond to recondite briefs delivered within the practice nursery of the design studio: an approach that often achieves mixed results and can throw even the most creatively fearless students into the arms of architectural cliché, rather than innovation.

Alternatively, students who are engaged in designing and building a pavilion at the scale of 1:1, are comparatively 'free' to create a dialectic between a liberated typology and a liberated process of design development and realization, and transcend the educational equivalent of repeatedly firing an empty catapult. As collectively enchanting and even self-seductive as the archetypal photo-montaged CAD renderings dominating the 'design crit' might be, the ability to design a good image and a good building are not one in the same thing.

The playful Ping-Pong Pavilion project was therefore intended to offer students from Oxford Brookes University and Montana State University, 'freedom' from pervading methods and outputs characterizing the design studio. The brief asked students to respond creatively to the anticipated Olympic fervour, by designing a playful and interactive pavilion whose tour of duty included our end of year show, the RIBA's 'Love Architecture' Festival and the London Festival of Architecture at the canning town 'Industri[us]' site.

The pavilion brief stipulated that students responded to the LFA's 'Playful City' theme, and develop pavilion proposals that playfully engaged the public in exploring spaces for sport (Johannson and Linde, 2005, n.p.). Implicit within the brief was the requirement to take the concept of a 'game' of ping-pong, appropriate its rules and apply them to the 'game' of architecture (Saggio, 2007, p.399; Schrage, 1999, xiii). Subsequently,

Figure 15.1: Harriet Harriss (with students from Oxford Brookes University and Montana State University), Ping Pong Pavilion, London Festival of Architecture, 2012. Courtesy of Harriet Harriss.

Figure 15.2 (above): Harriet Harriss (with students from Oxford Brookes University and Montana State University), Detail of the Ping Pong Pavilion, London Festival of Architecture, 2012. Courtesy of Harriet Harriss.

Figure 15.3 (right): Harriet Harriss (with students from Oxford Brookes University and Montana State University), Ping Pong Pavilion, London Festival of Architecture, 2012. Courtesy of Harriet Harriss.

the winning pavilion design deconstructed the game of ping-pong, embedding the rules, players' maneuvers and even descriptive terminologies into and onto the pavilion structure. The end result was a pavilion that could accommodate up to twelve players in one game and even assume an active role during the game itself.

With all 'design and build' focused 'live-projects', there are inherent health and safety constraints to reconcile before institutional as well as practical concerns are assuaged. The pavilion endeavour involved a 'risk triptych' that combined the inherent risks in experimentation, the risk to and from students' brandishing electric drills rather than android mobiles and the physical risk to the public during interactions with the end product. At times however live projects pursuits can easily evoke the tyranny of litigation, and can constrain schools that would otherwise seek to engender greater opportunities for students' creative risk taking and experimentation.

The problem is the architects in practice are increasingly exposed to higher levels of risk and liability. This places increased obligation upon schools to delivering practice-ready architecture graduates, and to ensure they are equipped with relevant skills needed to work with and manage their exposure to risk effectively. To isolate students from the freedom to experiment with risk only further undermines a school's ability to offer professional training and education.

The Ping Pong Pavilion students were required to breach the threshold of the speculative risk space of design studio and instead take real risks. If the design studio is as Dana Cuff puts it, 'intended as far as possible to provide a risk free environment for students to learn and experiment,' then the implication is that learning and creative experimentation can only occur if 'risk' is removed (Cuff, 1991, p.106). Yet this notion is at odds with the purpose of education to prepare students for professional practice, and even the very term 'design studio' – which denotes its claim to be modelled upon the architect's 'practice studio' – is called into question.

Within the commercial world, creative experimentation and risk taking are considered core competencies for innovation. It is widely accepted that although taking risks has only two possible outcomes – success or failure – it is failure that will get us to reach better solutions more quickly. As captured in the popular business maxim credited to Bill Moggridge (2012) of Global product innovation company IDEO, the route to innovation involves a, 'fail early, fail often; succeed sooner,' approach. In other words, failing (but not collapsing) pavilions offer a 'sooner' route to successful innovation than other building typologies.

When the Ping Pong Pavilion roof leaked, the students had to experiment to find a solution. Trying to play ping-pong on uneven timber boards identified a risky trip hazard. Cutting into scaffold poles to create a ball return exposed the untreated metal to oxidization. When the team seemed unable to agree on a course of action, everything stopped. The build was physically as well as mentally challenging. Problems needed to be resolved under real time pressure. Even the solutions sometimes failed. Yet slowly, the pavilion emerged chrysalis-like from deep within the tussle of abandoned intentions, failed experiments and missing drill bits. In places, the Ping-Pong Pavilion captured the architecture of elegance, humour, thoughtfulness, invention and intelligence, even if the price of interaction could be counted in splinters.

Although the build proved physically arduous at times, the purpose of arming students with tools on a pavilion build is not to develop their physical muscles, but their commercial ones: the kind of muscles that will enable them to risk success and profit from failure, to prosper in adversity and make architecture an innovative rather than reactive profession.

The two-week pavilion live-project did not set out to teach highly educated architecture students to build less than adequate sheds. Its real purpose was to allow them sufficient freedom to encounter the kind of risky experiences that will characterize their lives as professionals, and perhaps most importantly, to develop the kind of creative and experimental instincts that may yet lead the profession forward in ways we have yet to imagine.

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