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“What about Learning?”



This brief was produced in collaboration with **Jane Wong**, architectural and research assistant at DSDHA.

# 'What about Learning?'

## Introduction

'What about learning?' is fundamentally a question about the right to knowledge and the right to participate in civic life. With the neoliberal turn in education, learning as a life-long activity has become codified and commercialised by educational institutions that operate within existing market conditions and infrastructures of knowledge distribution. With its seamless blending into the digital fabric of the consumerist life, much of learning has lost its intrinsic relationship with the communal experience of knowledge production, its critical distance to the object of its critique, and its ability to challenge its own complicity with ongoing crises. Between disembodied learning and a renewed sense of civic participation on the streets, the architectural question here is what is the site for learning today, and what are the alternative forms of learning and exchange it could nurture?

Published in May 1968, at a no less tumultuous time in history, Cedric Price's AD issue 'What about Learning?' is a poignant critique of the strictures of education and institutional learning at large. Today's ongoing crises and protest movements have created a new impetus to question the ethical and spatial relationships of educational institutions to diversity, the climate and the pandemic. With the campus now extended out from Rudolph Hall to the geographically dispersed living rooms of students and professors,

there are radical questions of communication, mobility and participation in knowledge production and design. As a studio, we will look beyond just bricks and mortar alone and apply spatial intelligence to the analysis of wider environmental, political and socio-economic relationships in learning and their different manifestations in urban and virtual environments.

With the blurring of private and communal boundaries, the new forms and conditions of learning present difficult spatial and ethical relationships and are open to new risks and contingencies. The spatial strategies of the 60s and 70s which promised open access and further democratisation have been increasingly appropriated in privatised institutions, and more recently, adopted ubiquitously in new forms of 'remote working'. Such forms of appropriation undermine knowledge exchange in learning, where education becomes pure dissemination confined within a closed loop of networks. Emerging from the current crises which plainly underscore deep-rooted inequalities and injustices, our task today is to envision new forms of participation and engagement in spatial practices to reestablish a reciprocity between knowledge and civic life.

## The Project

Covid-19, BLM and the climate emergency pose urgent questions to education and its role in shaping democratic life at large. What and how we learn are political questions that are mediated through spatial conditions – sites of learning – which provide ground for certain processes in knowledge dissemination, production and exchange.

The site for learning does not refer merely to its physical space, but to its wider networks of relationships to governance, resources and users. Taking learning outside existing privileged enclaves, we will consider shared territories as parallel or alternative sites for new encounters, where a communal experience of knowledge production and exchange can be cultivated with a more critical relationship with the environment.

Students will define their own site of personal relevance based on appraising their physical or remote learning experiences. We ask students to reflect upon the multitude of ‘publics’ in their geographies of now, and to select an area or a series of spaces that could be considered as shared territories with the potential of shaping new forms of learning. Through applying spatial intelligence and pace layers thinking (see Stewart Brand), associated infrastructures and networks will be analysed at different scales with respect to jurisdiction, accessibility and use to uncover wider shared interests. The Emerging Sites – plazas, parks,

parking lots etc. – and their inherent functions will be reinterpreted to enable new pedagogical relationships between users and their territory, providing, as the Eamesian principle asserts, ‘the best for the most for the least.’

We will together survey and reassess radical pedagogical models and sites of architectural learning across history, starting from the Yale School of Architecture, considering ‘architectural’ in the widest sense to encompass inter-disciplinary practices. We will track the trajectories of alternative learning models to their conceptual genealogies, such as the London School of Architecture (LSA) which Deborah Saunt helped to co-found and its resonance with the university model of 11-12th c. Paris where the whole city was considered as the campus, and the Independent Group’s (Paolozzi, Smithsons, Banham and others) connection to the urban art collective. As recent social and digital ruptures have demanded, pedagogical and spatial tools will be assessed and reinterpreted with consideration to the site and its wider networks. With the dispersed learning of ‘Potteries Thinkbelt’ (Cedric Price) and the city-as-curriculum from ‘Learning from Las Vegas’ (Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour) as key precedents, we will propose new forms of learning where the site is intrinsic to knowledge production, and where knowledge production generates new democratic spaces.



Top: Architectural lecture and drawing room at Rogers Building, original site for MIT’s architecture school. Collection of the MIT Museum.  
Bottom: Serpentine Gallery annual marathon lecture series housed in summer pavilions. Photo by The Dome Company.

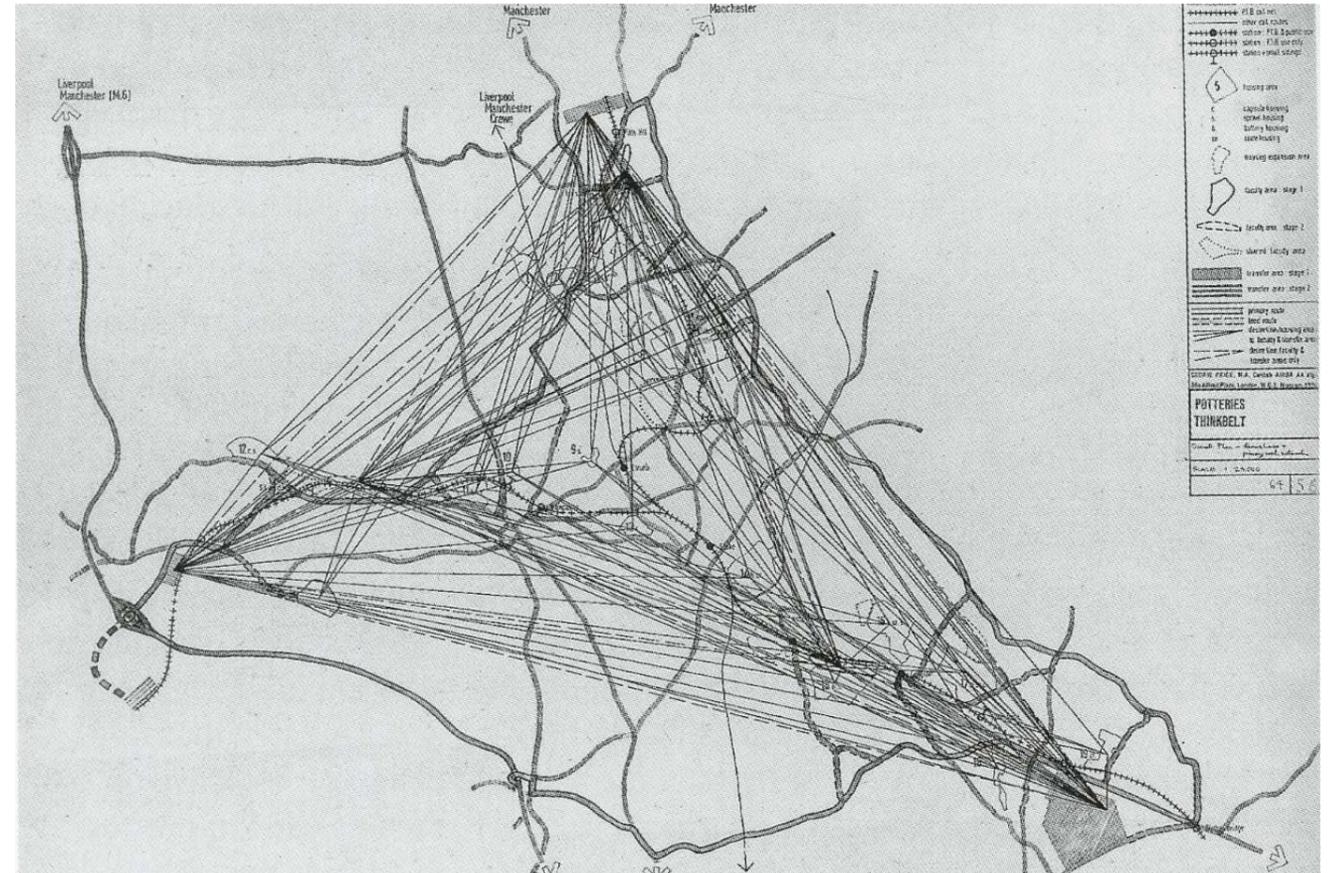
## The Prophecy of the Learning Network: The Potteries Thinkbelt

In May 1968, at the cusp of the student movements that would later usher in a decade of radical political and cultural discourse, AD published 'What About Learning?', a seminal issue guest-edited by Cedric Price on the problems of contemporary education. The cover of the journal featured Price's collage of a televised image over the clock face of a wristwatch, one of his many prophetic provocations that anticipated the total acclimatisation of everyday life to digital technology and virtual networks. Price believed in the emancipatory potential of learning and sought to liberate the life-long activity from its temporal, spatial and institutional strictures, a major theme that runs through his work, from Polyark, the mobile school of architecture, to Atom, a system of dispersed educational units across town.

'Potteries Thinkbelt' (1963-7) or 'PTb' put forward a radical critique of the existing model of higher education as an isolated enterprise hosted in polite cathedral-town amenities, with a curriculum and organisation divorced from their wider communities. Despite its broader commentaries on education at large, PTb was not developed in a theoretical vacuum; its design proposal was premised upon specific socio-economic conditions of the declining pottery industry at northern Staffordshire, with considerations to the local attributes, amenities and population. PTb is a learning network that appropriates existing public

infrastructure – regional road and railway links – to facilitate flexible learning for a cohort of 20,000 students and faculty members who will travel across the network to learn in different educational establishments and lodge in temporary housing embedded within local communities. Where physical exchange is not important, individual study is enabled by electronic communication systems. The traditional functions of the university are reinterpreted and redistributed across the network, with new typologies for faculty areas and housing, and 'transfer areas' of large laboratories and workshops anchoring the three extremities of the triangular-plan. Yet for all its technological novelties, PTb is premised upon a basic economic principle often neglected in appraisals of this project, which is that under this proposed network of learning, students are paid for their work. Price argued that student loans and the wider financial model of higher education drew a separation between the students and the wider community, and proposed publicly funded salaries as an alternative.

Today, proliferating learning networks, some bearing uncanny similarities to that suggested in PTb exploit the flexibility and expediency of dispersed modes of learning and reduces the status of the student to a consumer. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 whilst promising unprecedented mobility for students across the EU, introduced wholesale standardisation



Potteries Thinkbelt's primary road networks with desire lines of linkage between housing and faculty transfer areas. Cedric Price, Architectural Design, October 1966.

processes that oriented learning towards qualification and aligned the knowledge industry with market forces, in creating the 'most competitive knowledge economy in the world.' The communitarian values espoused by PTb are wholly undone in hyperconnected academic circuits and virtual learning where students move within closed networks accessible only to those who can afford, networks which depend on infrastructures and tools – accommodation, electricity, the computer – wholly paid for by the students themselves.

At this impasse, PTb could be criticised for its unquestioned belief in the emancipatory potential of cybernetics and dispersed learning, however, its relevance today is its first implicit question – what is the site for

learning today? Building upon this question in the context of contesting education networks we will ask what alternative networks can be identified and reimagined to open new forms of access and exchange.



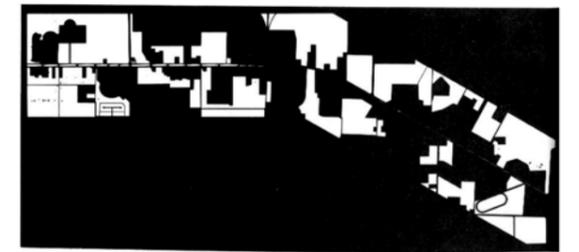


## Site as Curriculum: Learning from the Road

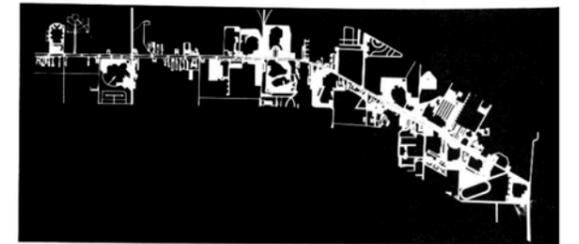
The road trip that would eventually transform architectural history and education took place in the fall of 1968, a few months after the publication of Cedric Price's 'What About Learning' issue. The transatlantic confluences were not accidental; in fact, Cedric Price and Robert Venturi certainly met the year before, at the Rice Design Fete in Houston Texas, a twelve-day-long charrette on the subject of "New Schools for New Towns" organised at the School of Architecture at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Price and Venturi's teams developed divergent schemes, with the total dispersal of learning facilities in Price's decentralised model, and the centralised "educational strip" in Venturi's, prefacing the radical affirmation of the Strip as site and subject of architectural learning in the 'Learning from Las Vegas' studio.

In the following year, Denise Scott Brown proposed the new studio at Yale, with the intent of interrogating the Strip as 'a very large as-found object', embracing the totality of its commercial vernacular and iconographic phenomena. Together with Venturi and Steven Izenour, Scott Brown led students to exhaust all forms of media in documenting the city, from film and photography to diagrams and maps (some of which generated from imagery from a lent helicopter). The studio's approach was challenged by fellow faculty members, who regarded its indiscriminate embrace of the total environment of consumerism

dubious. Indeed, the success of its iconography overshadows its critical lessons on engaging here-and-now with the ordinary and the everyday. 'Learning from Las Vegas' as an alternative learning model, positions the site as the central subject of study – the site is the curriculum – and leaves open-ended the question about design.



19a. Upper strip, undeveloped land



19b. Asphalt



20. Noll's Las Vegas



The succeeding studio 'Learning from Levittown' (1970) applied the 'learning from' pedagogy to the then still unpalatable and controversial topic of suburban housing and expanded its cross-disciplinary collaboration to other fields beyond those explored in Las Vegas, such as economics to inform students' understanding of the housing market. Besides insisting upon an intimate relationship to site, the "Learning from" studios grounded the architectural endeavour to wider interdisciplinary learning.

Scott Brown articulated this pedagogical attitude in the working sessions of the Universitas Project (1972), a symposium dedicated to the formation of a new university of design concerned with the man-made milieu. In the company of speakers and participants ranging from Hannah Arendt to Henri Lefebvre, Scott Brown remarked:

'I think we should be discussing the design of instruments that would elicit new values, or asking ourselves what types of instruments could help mediate value conflicts.'

The 'Learning' studios took place against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, worldwide student protests and the destructive fire in the Art and Architecture building in 1969. Today, at no less critical a juncture of racial and climate injustices and the pandemic, we ask ourselves, what alternative learning instruments might we employ and what new values could be elicited in the reframing of our present realities? How do we remake our site of learning today?



<p>LEARNING FROM KILBURN (A tiny experimental university)</p> <p>Feb 22 2014</p> <p>CLASS SCHEDULE for FEBRUARY With Preston in my Fists, Conway and Young, Doran Massey and Michael Rustin</p> <p>ANTHROPOLOGY: WHO IS KILBURN? A class with Mary Hickman Thursday 27 March, 7-9pm, venue TBC (see website for update)</p> <p>URBANISM: LOOKING BEHIND THE HIGH ROAD A class with Jane Clossick Saturday 29 March, 12-4pm, venue TBC (see website for update)</p> <p>GEOGRAPHY: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE HIGH ROAD A class with Doran Massey and Michael Rustin Thursday 27 February, 7-9pm, venue TBC (see website for updates)</p>	
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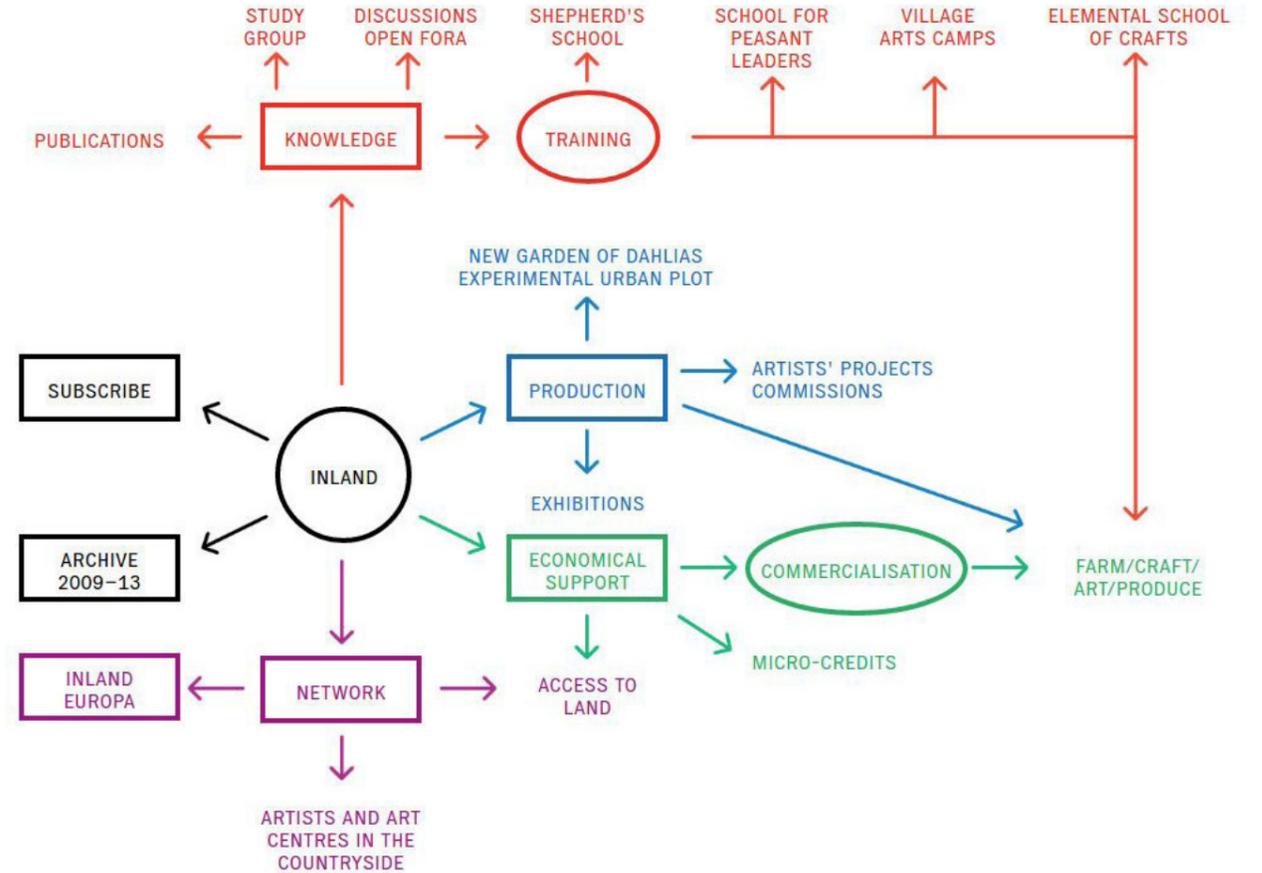


**Learning from Kilburn, London**

Top: A roving “tiny experimental university” at the Tin Tabernacle, a corrugated metal structure home to the Kilburn Sea Cadets.  
Bottom: An instantly deployable classroom set, providing a functional and unifying backdrop to the classes at any given site. Drawing on Kilburn curriculum and campus, the university offers a series of free classes, each led by a range of artists, architects and thinkers.

**Lucius and Annemarie Burckhardt, learning from walking**

Top: Strollology—the science of walking—as an instrument with which to render visible hidden aspects of the man-made environment, and to challenge conventional modes of perception. “The Voyage to Tahiti”(1987)  
Bottom: “Perception & Traffic” (1991) a walk challenging the spatial perception of the car user.



FLOATING THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 05 16.00

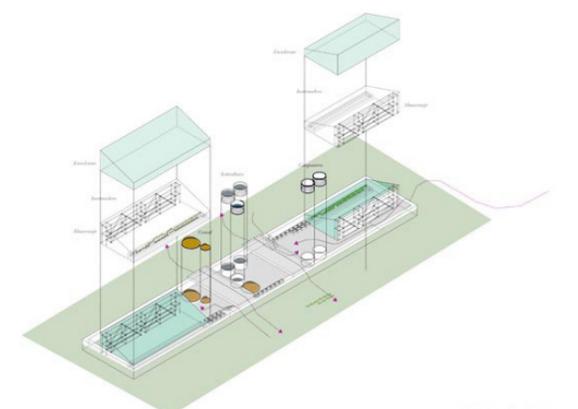
# FLOATING FLOATING THURSDAY THURSDAY

19.00 **BOOK-LAUNCH:** FLOATING UNIVERSITY 2018 AN ILLUSTRATED REPORT

19.30 **CONCERT:** K-GRUPPE: EDUARD MONT DE PALOL, RICO LEE, AARON SNYDER, NICHOLAS BUSSMAN

20:30 **TALK:** BRAND-WANDGE-SPRACHE

**FLOATING UNIVERSITY BERLIN**  
Lilienthalstrasse, 10965 Berlin, floatin@universitU.or9



**Raumlabor, The Floating University and Spacebuster**

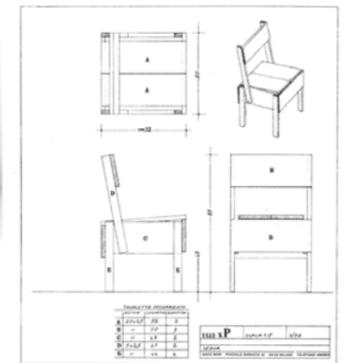
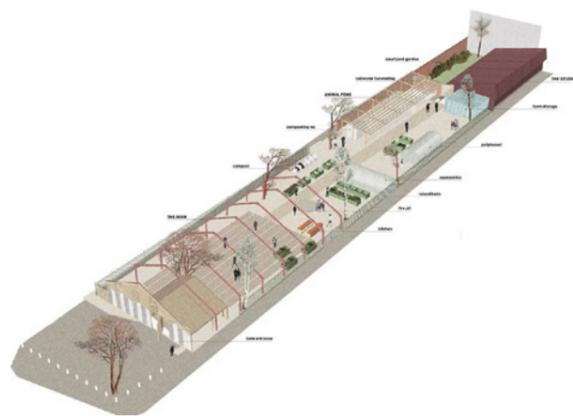
Top: The Floating University, an offshore- laboratory for collective, experimental learning at the rainwater retention basin of the former Tempelhof Airport. In the summer of 2019, it held a transdisciplinary programme on the climate crisis.

Bottom: Spacebuster, an inflatable space deployed from the back of a van generating urban space for temporary collective uses.

**INLAND, Fernando Garcia Dory**

Top: INLAND Organisational Chart. INLAND enters specific agricultural settings in Europe, bringing together a variety of people to arrive at a "communit of practice" to merge cultural and agrarian production.

Bottom: "Paese Nuovo", a project in Puglia in the South of Italy. "Colony" a temporary community at the Spanish Cultural Heritage Institute.



**Waterloo City Farm, London**

Top: Waterloo City Farm is a community farm located on a previously unused strip of land to the south of Waterloo Station, London.  
 Bottom: The site has been transformed into a collaborative home for a trio of organisations with a shared focus on education: architects Feilden Fowles and the charities Jamie's Farm and Oasis Waterloo.

**Autoprogettazione?, Enzo Mari & CUCULA**

Top: "Autoprogettazione?" ("Self-design?"), was a manual published in 1974 with designs of furniture which could be realised by anyone with wooden members and simple tools.  
 Bottom: CUCULA, a Berlin refugee organisation was granted rights in 2015 to reproduce and sell Mari's furniture.

## Studio Schedule

The schedule for the studio is organised in three stages:

1. Thesis, site selection and analysis
2. Proposition, pedagogical tools and spatial strategy
3. Detailed architectural design, representation and model-making (subject to faculty arrangements)

We are well-versed in working remotely and will embrace the challenges of combined physical and remote teaching, adapting where necessary. As current restrictions stand, Deborah will be available for virtual sessions on a weekly basis. And whenever travel is feasible, Deborah will endeavour to teach physically in New Haven for as substantial a period as possible.

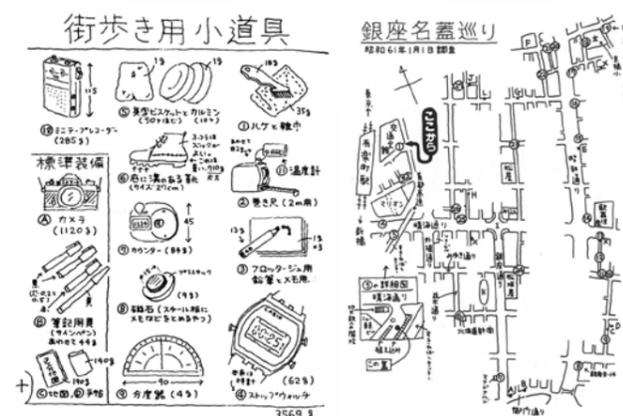
The first stage will begin with a series of seminars and workshops where we study, as a collective, precedents of alternative learning models and physical sites of architectural learning. In parallel, students will select individual sites for learning and define their thesis based on their analysis of the site.

At the second stage, students will develop individual propositions for alternative learning through the translation of pedagogical tools to spatial devices. Spatial strategies will be developed for different scales of the project.

At the third stage, students will continue to develop their architectural design and representation. The resolution of the design proposals may be different depending on the nature of each individual project, and we will encourage students to develop forms of representation that reflect specific subject matters and proposals.

## The Road Trip Symposium

In place of the travel week, we will host an open international symposium and collaborative workshops bringing together invited speakers and participants to share their diverse interests on the subjects of learning as a spatial practice and architectural learning in the expanded field. As part of the symposium, we will invite students to prepare their individual working theses on an alternative model of learning, to be distributed to the invited participants prior to the symposium and discussed during the working sessions.



Urban detectives, Terunobu Fujimori, and Shinbo Minami  
Street observation equipment and street observation map of Ginza district. From "Street Observation Studies Primer".

## Initial Readings

Price, Cedric. "What About Learning?"  
Architectural Design, May 1968.

"Potteries Thinkbelt." Cedric Price Works  
1952-2003: a Forward-Minded Retrospective,  
by Cedric Price and Samantha Hardingham,  
Architectural Association, AA, 2016.

Holert, Tom. "Educationalize and Fail."  
Eflux, 2020, [www.e-flux.com/architecture/education/322663/educationalize-and-fail/](http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/education/322663/educationalize-and-fail/).

Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown & Steven  
Izenour. Learning from Las Vegas. MIT Press,  
1972.

The Universitas Project: Solutions for a Post-  
Technological Society, by Emilio Ambasz, The  
Museum Of Modern Art, 2006, p. 407 (for  
Denise Scott Brown remarks).

Buchanan, Peter. "The Big Rethink Part  
9: Rethinking Architectural Education."  
Architectural Review, 2012.

Colomina, Beatriz, et al. Radical Pedagogies,  
2010, [radical-pedagogies.com/](http://radical-pedagogies.com/).

Prosthetic theory: The Disciplining of  
Architecture, Mark Wigley

## Lectures

Samantha Hardingham. "Potteries Thinkbelt  
(PTb): A City Caused by Learning"  
<https://youtu.be/ihlDbxXY3A8>

Denise Scott Brown & Thomas Weaver. Soane  
Medal Lecture  
<https://youtu.be/PyRp-maHzK4>

Beatriz Colomina. "Radical Pedagogies",  
<https://youtu.be/qPog2YVNVnw>

Dean Robert A.M. Stern, "100 Years of  
Architecture Education at Yale"  
<https://youtu.be/Bi-U3Hc1dZ4>

Edward Soja. "Seeking Spatial Justice and the  
Right to the City"  
<https://youtu.be/Wo14EQNfJRI>

Stewart Brand, "Pace Layers Thinking",  
<https://youtu.be/L7ggrxLabKQ>