

Inhabiting Space Within the National Curriculum

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Abstract

Recent debate has highlighted the extraordinary range of interests that will need to co-inhabit a very small amount of time and space in the new arts National Curriculum. This paper moves away from a 'large picture' discussion of this problem to present a more practical and personal perspective. It will suggest that answers lie within our very artistic practice. Visual Arts' long term wellbeing will not be dictated by the structure of the Australian Curriculum document, rather by the way we 'inhabit' that construct, whatever form it takes, and this inhabitation must recognise the multiple and varied post-schooling pathways our students take using the skills we provide them with. To argue this point, the paper will use the author's own art making as a metaphor for how we should be approaching the creation of this new space, referencing briefly the philosophies of de Botton, Foucault and Bachelard, who all explore the interplay of space, place and inhabitation. The paper will argue that creating a new place for Visual Art in any Australian Curriculum is not dissimilar to the process we take when creating and inhabiting our own personal places.

The debate concerning an Arts Australian Curriculum is a conversation about inhabitation, of creating (under the figurative umbrella of an Arts curriculum document) a place and a space for the various arts forms to co-exist and independently grow. Understandably, the conversation is fixated on nuances of The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010), whereas I believe the longer term impact for Visual Art has more to do with the way we inhabit that document, whatever form it might take. The choice of language here is deliberate; the concept of inhabitation owns its own comprehensive body of scholarship, principally within architecture and geography, and while it may seem a stretch to link two such

disparate topics – architectural discussions on habitation, and arts curriculum reform – it is possible we have much to learn from such a comparison.

What is common to many writings on inhabitation are three core components. The first is the *genus loci*, the mystical place we seek to live within that is somehow greater than the sum of its parts; we consciously seek to make our lived environment more than just shelter and comfort. The second is the *sanctum*, the place of safety, a state of mind that embraces, protects, and envelops. Like a church, within the sanctum, the realities of the outside world can be looked upon objectively, from a distance. It is a place to seek utopia. The third is the *habitat*, the actual physical place in which to find personal happiness, and which is occupied by the habitué, those who keep returning to such places. These three elements that arguably define inhabitation of a place, one to do with inspiration, one to do with safety, and one to do with collaborative occupation, are coincidentally what is also best in arts curriculum. Good curriculum leads to outcomes that exceed expectations. Good curriculum provides the opportunity to safely dream and create. And good curriculum is a place where actual people, the habitué, reside to make and talk about and celebrate art. It is possible to argue that writings on habitation lead us to a wider, yet paradoxically more personal perspective on the nature of curriculum. While a curriculum document will explain a structure, the real issue is how we inhabit the resulting construct, and this is, in essence, a very individual and subjective thing.

Curriculum is more than a document. It is a structure within which we must reside, and in which, by its design and features, we will either grow or suffocate. How do we construct such a habitation? Lately, I have been immersed in my backyard, like many Australians, extending our modest home. This has been a hands-on experience; my family conceptualised and designed the addition, we did the drawings and built the structure. We are amateurs, evidenced by the fact that we laboured during the hot summer to build retaining walls, and through a bleak winter on the framing, the roof, the rough fitting out, building of windows and doors, the final cladding, and now the construction of internal furniture. We are constructing a habitation, and for me the experience has the added benefit of strong connections to my own art making.



Figure 1: Exterior images 1 & 2

Most would agree much of this process is not particularly artistic. There is little that is creative in joining pine studs or fitting tin to a roof or installing a door or window. This type of creating is a trade, and in the old definition of 'art, craft and design' at best approaches the definition of 'craft', something that uses established means to achieve a pre-planned product (Education Department of South Australia, 1984). Even there it falls short because, unlike good craft, these structural building processes are of necessity very tightly controlled, regulated and pedestrian in their undertaking. Often, though, the interior is different. The way people design and occupy the interior space often differs dramatically from what the exterior promises. The layout of rooms, those places for specific types of inhabitation, create a 'world within a world', a very art-like outcome. Partition walls are built and moved and moved again in a dwelling's life, each change significantly altering how living is organised and enjoyed (Brand, 1995). Like good art works, the more you look the more you see. The further you go into a habitat, the more personalised it becomes. Furniture, decorations, bric-a-brac, are the highly personalised details that allow us to recreate a space using our own senses of aesthetics, often to the extent that the habitat becomes a statement about our most inner being (Cooper-Marcus, 1995). A dwelling is an enigma, its creation and occupation a process that embraces the most pedestrian tasks, through to a product that can be highly aesthetic and personal.

Building this edifice has been good for my art making. I am not a builder, but

what I have done is construction, not so far removed from the principles and skills taught to me in ceramics, where a judicious mix of problem solving and adherence to established conventions resulted (mostly) in a successful product.



Figure 2: Construction, bookcase

So, too, the design aspect. I am not an architect, but the ability to 'see', to observe and record and refine and conceptualise a three-dimensional object on a two dimensional plane, taught to me by my art teachers, has provided the opportunity to research, design and refine my own habitat. Neither am I a cabinet maker. However, the realities of my current phase of life have led me to become one. My family is growing, we need more space and better facilities, so I must build them myself. I spend my evenings and weekends creating in wood; not sculptures, but objects for the use of my family. This has allowed me the opportunity to engage in a private passion. As part of my academic travelling, I have visited noteworthy dwellings of the world to see how architects deal with space and place and permanently impact on the environment. I have thrilled to look at and reflect on how artisans create visually engaging and stimulating living environments, to explore the intricacies of the decorative arts and find out their secrets.



Figure 3: (a) Lavirotte, J. (1901) Doorway at 29 Ave Rapp, Paris; (b) Lloyd-Wright, F (1956) Balcony detail, Kentuck Knob, Pennsylvania; (c) Imms, W, Door design, detail. Photos by the author.

And of course there is the practical outcome, to refine my woodwork skills while meeting my family's needs. The latest space I have completed is the one shown in Figure 4, a study, a place heavily in demand. In keeping with my training as an artist, I have not avoided making a statement, of doing more than is necessary, of making complex some household ornaments that should in reality be quite simple.



Figure 4: Imms, W (2008). Detail, study

What drives us to manipulate our most personal environments? It comes back, I believe, to those tenets discussed earlier. Firstly, the *genus loci*. We instinctively want to create something that is a special place, that is more than the sum of its parts. Bachelard (1958/1994) recognised this in his *Poetics of Space*. He recognised the house goes beyond a utilitarian place. Its very being is an art form, a poem in the making. Bachelard argued space is the beginning of creativity. We can simply walk past, into, or through a structure, or we can engage in and with it. The former repudiates the poetry of our very existence – the latter is to embark into the creativity of living. Secondly, it has to do with the concept of *sanctum*. Foucault (1984) described this engagement with our living environment as the need to seek a 'heterotopia'. My existence in my home is physically real, but part is illusion – the dream of what this place might be and what it might be able to do for me. For Foucault, the second, illusory reality is as real as the physically obvious space. The home is a model of this duality, and within that space we can affirm our difference, while still existing in the reality of our daily lives. Finally there is *habitat*. De Botton (2006) treats the home more pragmatically. He adds a touch of reality to Foucault and Bachelard's more philosophical views. De Botton argues we are inescapably linked to the places we inhabit. To some extent they control our emotions and feelings and, as a result, impact our actions and thoughts. We are, hopefully, in a most pleasant way, habitués, captive to the homes and spaces we inhabit.

So too with curriculum; we have been speaking in metaphors: the façade is the curriculum document, a necessary but often boring surface, the product of a pedestrian process akin to the most mundane of craftwork. It is created, most often, through a largely non-artistic process of obeying rules and adhering to strict building conventions. But it is also a most necessary structure through which we must pass to gain the interior. Inside, we can access the rooms, each having a purpose and a function. As each room in a house differs, so too each art form takes on a personal identity. And within each room are the surfaces and the finishes and furniture, each creating an ambiance unique to its creator. These are the products of our personal tastes and needs, similar to the highly personalised works produced by countless thousands of art students who have used the

skills and knowledge imparted by art education curriculum in highly personalised ways. The students and the teachers are the inhabitants, the habitué, people with compelling and often differing needs from the curriculum, yet bonded by those elements of inhabitation, genius loci, sanctuary, and space for habitation. The parallels with our situation at the moment are obvious. The curriculum document on which we are understandably fixated is being created through servitude to government regulations and policies, by well-meaning people who have their hands tied by a process not intended to allow any individuality. Within that façade, we are currently negotiating the spaces, each arts form with differing needs. But what is most important are the habitué, those who frequent these spaces. Through the multiplicity of our arts forms, we allow them to modify and change that space. To select what they find most useful and inspiring and gloss over the rest. Through this process our students define their own space within the curriculum and its' qualities, entirely different for each person. This is what makes the overall structure of value, not vice versa. The curriculum document, the façade, exists only to allow inhabitation.

Bachelard had it right – dwellings are very much an art form. If one recognises the poetry of our surroundings, one is immeasurably enriched. I am not saying the advice paper has this potential for inspiration, but within the structure of curriculum that will eventually emerge, we must remain confident that we and our students will create a *genius loci*, a 'special place' where the Visual Arts will have a life-long impact on students. I agree with Foucault: the process of engaging a space is to overcome its physical parameters and recognise the heterotopia within. It is a reminder the construct suggested is at best a shell within which our students will construct their own reality, achieve *sanctuary*, and re-interpret their world through more educated eyes. De Botton rightly reminds us we must accept the rigidity of the structure around us, in our case the curriculum, that *habitat* is about seeking happiness in this structure, something of our own making, achieved through community with fellow habitué.

I do not wish to sound like an apologist for the poorly conceived and poorly written Advice Paper. I am not. It contains significant flaws that may prove terminal. The

idea that the Arts forms can each exist within twenty minutes a week is absurd; the Arts are uniquely different and require quite differing approaches, from the earliest years of schooling onwards. Developing as a visual artist who uses his or her talents to grow and improve is, firstly, a personal thing – each of us does it in quite different ways. Secondly, development as a life-long artist is so multi-pathwayed (if there is such a word), we cannot afford to lose any early developmental years of schooling to a bland generic curriculum. What Visual Arts curriculum must continue to do is teach and develop core skills and knowledge from the earliest years possible, and then facilitate students' divergent application of those skills during the important secondary years in a manner that is, for many of us, the foundation of sustained growth over the rest of our lives. The current proposal does not accommodate the fact that students need to actually be taught, that our subject is built on the timely and sequential acquisition of skills, achieved both intrinsically and extrinsically, and this can't happen via the osmosis of some generic Arts program. The current proposal does not acknowledge that Visual Arts need to progressively teach "skills and knowledge" – including art history, appreciation, the competencies and conventions inherent in the many art disciplines such as drawing, painting, printmaking, textiles, design; and the ability to rationalise those skills into what is constituted as 'knowledge'. The current proposal struggles to recognise that intellectual development is part of a Visual Arts curriculum; schools are about developing cognitive skills, again not through the miracle of osmosis, rather through well planned, evidence-based programs. Finally, "enjoyment of life", and "betterment of community"; these are the enduring social competencies that naturally result from students' acquisition of skills and considered use of those skills. They are a product of Visual Arts curriculum, not (as the advice paper supposes), what drives that curriculum.

The lack of adequate time, the generic approaches to the Arts, failure to acknowledge the need of process within intellectual development are all flaws that undermine the very essence of inhabitation, of creating a habitat within which a Visual Art community can flourish; providing an environment that gives Visual Arts students a sanctuary to question and explore the world; facilitating heterotopias, remodelling of our own learning to meet our unique and special needs (not just

as students, but also providing the skills for life-long participation in the arts). The remarkable collective voice that has emerged to confront these flaws is a testament to how much is at stake and how poorly the current paper meets our needs. However, we also need to remain confident that what is being provided is at best a shell and not a dwelling. For the latter, we must rely on those who will occupy this space to create habitation according to their needs. On this count, at least, we can be confident that the Visual Arts will endure, and remarkably so.

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