HYBRID WAYS OF DOING: A MODEL FOR TEACHING PUBLIC SPACE

Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani and Elliott Maltby

Abstract
This paper addresses an exploratory practice undertaken by the authors in a co-taught class to hybridize theory, research and practice. This experiment in critical transdisciplinary design education took the form of a “critical studio + practice-based seminar on public space”, two interlinked classes co-taught by landscape architect Elliott Maltby and environmental psychologist Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani at the Parsons, The New School for Design. This design process was grounded in the political and social context of the contested East River waterfront of New York City and valued both intensive study (using a range of social science and design methods) and a partnership with a local community organization, engaging with the politics, issues and human needs of a complex site.

The paper considers how we encouraged interdisciplinary collaboration and dialogue between teachers as well as between liberal arts and design students and developed strategies to overcome preconceived notions of traditional “studio” and “seminar” work. By exploring the challenges and adjustments made during the semester and the process of teaching this class, this paper addresses how we moved from a model of intertwining theory, research and practice, to a hybrid model of multiple ways of doing, a model particularly apt for teaching public space. Through examples developed for and during our course, the paper suggests practical ways of supporting this transdisciplinary hybrid model.

Keywords
Transdisciplinary, hybrid, public space, collaboration, urban design, urban research, seminar, design studio.

Introduction
One afternoon, the conversation in our class took a surprising turn. “I don’t want to design anything. It just ruins places that are best left the way they are,” one student burst out. A student across the room retorted, “Well, if you don’t want to design anything, why are you in this class, anyway?”

The class joined in, debating the roles of design and research, the active making of place by designers and the accretion of place-making by users of a public space. What began as a tense exchange between two students developed into themes that we would encounter throughout the semester, and became a touchstone for thinking about the hybrid model we were trying to create. What were we trying to do in this class, anyway?

The class in question was the “Urban Public Space critical studio + practical seminar”, one of the first double-class senior seminar/critical studios
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at Parsons, The New School for Design, which we, Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani and Elliott Maltby, co-taught and developed in the Fall 2009. We were each charged with teaching one aspect of the class: Maltby, a landscape architect and urban designer, was charged with the studio. Bendiner-Viani, an environmental psychologist and photographer was charged with the seminar. Over the course of the semester, we learned that this distinction between different “ways of doing” did not always serve us well - and collaboration, negotiation, dialogue and exploring the challenges of hybridity became central to our thinking.

This paper explores the ways in which we developed a collaborative course, managed our own and our students' expectations, and navigated disciplinary differences and similarities. We examine how our original conception of an intertwined studio and seminar was challenged and refined over the semester: a dualistic pedagogical approach was transformed into a hybrid one that integrates multiple kinds of theory, research and practice. We propose that this model is one particularly suited to teaching and learning about public space.

About the Course: What is Theory? What is Practice?

This hands-on course was an interdisciplinary collaboration to develop a critical understanding of the complexities of the broad topic of urban public space. A central goal was for students to re-conceptualize the relationship between design, theory, and social science in this context, as well as to consider how different kinds of practices (active research and design) could engage with each other. Originally framed as two co-requisite classes in back-to-back time-slots, we constructed the class to intertwine seminar and studio work, and realized from the start that this new model meant that we each, representing “seminar” or “studio” felt it important to overlap with each other, to truly co-teach, and to be there for both halves of the six-hour class. We structured these two intertwined classes to further come together through a careful analysis of one local site: the remnant/ liminal space defined by the FDR Drive south of the Manhattan Bridge, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

Bringing complex perspectives to our particular site, the class addressed contemporary philosophical, theoretical, methodological, and design/production issues related to ‘public space’ in New York City and beyond. We explored ways in which relationships between public space and cultural and civic concerns could be examined, imagined, and reframed. Site visits, readings of proposed plans and policy for the New York waterfront, and partnerships with several community organizations were crucial in grounding the class in real-world concerns and relevance.

Our theoretical readings considered the political context of defining the public; the psychological experience of self in public; embodied spaces and cultural spaces; critiques of control, fear and privatization in the public realm; loose space and informality in public space; and space and its representation. Throughout, design-based readings addressed design philosophies, critical examinations of urban design, public art and planning practitioners’ work and processes, varying approaches to community-based design, and case studies that unpacked the complex mechanisms involved in the implementation and
maintenance of public space. Students took turns leading weekly discussions based on these readings, exploring the breadth of experiences, functions, and morphologies of small urban public spaces.

Beyond theory, we began to challenge our students' conceptions of practice in the service of knowing, and changing, the public sphere. We introduced and encouraged a variety of methodological approaches to public space research at our East River waterfront site. These methodologies grew from environmental psychology and ethnographic models, including reading the site through trace observation, behavior mapping, participant observation, interviewing, and collaborative exploratory mapping. It was crucial that our students began to see and analyze the way human use shaped the site, and crucially, how the political, historical and physical reality of the site shaped usage.

We also taught methodologies that emerged from our shared language of art practices that appropriate social science and design methods to create engagements and interventions in the public sphere. For example, students were assigned to design small temporary interventions into our site as sources for research; reactions to these interventions were recorded, considered, and later informed the larger projects. These first forays into changing the space were crucial to our students being able to link the processes of research and design.

Why Public Space?

Public space was an ideal territory for our collaborative approach in a number of ways; the concept itself is a compelling hybrid of practice and theory. We explored public space as an embodied enactment of political philosophy, a site for civic discourse, an arena for cultural and individual expression, the built articulation of a city’s values. With its origins in Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, our working definition was shaped and stretched by an eclectic range of thinking that included, among many others, sociologist Erving Goffman’s notion of the presentation of self and the “back stage”, urban planner Kevin Lynch’s sense of scale and imageability, and art historian Rosalyn Deutsche’s writings on democracy and art in public.

While flexible and open to multiple interpretations, public space, as a physical entity and as a field of inquiry, is also a contested site where different agendas don’t always align comfortably. Among other differing visions of the public realm, we examined the iconic clash between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses and the more academic debate between Margaret Crawford and Michael Speaks. This complexity and occasional outright disagreement translated into an interesting opportunity to examine moments where the ideal of transdisciplinarity did and did not work. While we wondered if we should shape a coherent narrative, it was more instructive to reveal and examine those moments where theory and design were at odds. Drawing from a broad range of perspectives, we were able to carefully structure the readings so that there were both strong resonances and divergences within each module.

We often talked about public space as being a porous topic, of interest to and a point of departure for many disciplines, including our own complimentary ones. Relevant to students of all
stripes, public space also acted as an equalizer: the students had extensive practical experience with the topic, simply as urban residents. Thus were we able to draw on material specific to their respective disciplines, augmented and made tangible by examples from their daily lives, and their engagement with our East River site.

A critical element of the course, which formed a firm foundation from the start, was the use of a single site for all assignments. In the evolving feedback loop we strove to facilitate between seminar and studio work, our East River waterfront site provided source material for these linked strands. Traditional site analysis, in which the students were required to look at the site though a given lens, was layered with individually defined topics explored in written assignments. We required multiple visits, temporary site interventions, on site performances, mappings, and observation, all of which served as productive source materials for the papers and design. This returning to the site, the adjustments and refinements that new information required, produced a strongly iterative and layered process. Individual work and research were folded into the team designs, each exploring Grahame Shane’s idea of “test beds of change.”

The specifics of our site, and in particular its present status, allowed us to carefully examine the multiple players and issues, making legible the public space themes we were exploring in class. While most studios tangle with real world issues, whether of site or program, we wanted to ensure that the students were engaged in an active New York City dialogue. Our stretch of the East River, north of the South Street Seaport, and much of it underneath the FDR Drive, is soon to be developed. While the exact details and full scope are still under consideration, Phase 1 (south of our site) of the latest conceptual design was being implemented as we began the course. In response, a neighborhood coalition of community groups, “O.U.R. Waterfront” generated an alternative “People’s Plan”. The Hester Street Collaborative, a local advocacy design group, presented the coalition’s plan, along with the research and methodology behind it, to the class in September. The sense that the future of the site was not yet fixed resonated strongly with the students. In addition, we explored the site’s history as a rich layering of productive ecosystems, active trade, manufacturing and food distribution. With the loss of these animating features and lack of city investment, cut off from the neighborhood by the elevated FDR, the site has become a compelling peripheral site, with a unique cast of urban actors and activities. Here was an evolving mix of politics, theory, and practice that make public space such an interesting and amenable topic.

Our goal to integrate practice and theory in public space, and in our site in particular, was problematized by a suspicion held by some of our liberal arts students that design was a shibboleth for gentrification. Given New York City’s current trends in public space investment, this was an understandable concern. Our site could be construed as the shadow site for pristine spaces on Manhattan’s West Side such as the newly completed High Line and the Hudson River Park. Our site’s qualities of looseness and informality stood in stark contrast to the meticulous park detailing, sophisticated plantings, and visible policing in these parks along the western edge of the island. Hence, some of our students equated design with a sanitized and privatized city, undermining the viability of a robust public-
ness. Delving into these conceptualizations and challenges of real public spaces gave us an opportunity to broaden our group definition of design, moving beyond conventions of “high design” to reframe what constitutes a design agenda.

**Collaboration**

At the heart of this class were negotiations and dialogues between students and teachers from several disciplines. As teachers, when we began planning this class we had only recently met. Hence, the process of developing, and later teaching, was a way of getting to know each other, and it was imperative that we face head on the questions of collaboration from the first day. After a preliminary meeting, we headed to a large seminar room with a blackboard that ran the twenty feet of its length, to begin to develop the syllabus.

We began to write down the readings and ideas each of us wanted to include in the course on two groups of post-it notes, and this making visible of elements of collaboration would become a theme throughout the class. We considered ourselves charged with different kinds of readings: blue post-its were Bendiner-Viani’s methodological and ethnographic readings and green post-its were Maltby’s design readings. Yet, many of our readings overlapped - and sometimes we would find the same readings posted twice, on both green and blue post-its. This process made powerfully visible our own intersecting thinking, through our intersecting literatures. It made it clear that we could indeed collaborate on the class, showing us that we had often come to similar ideas via different routes. From this beginning negotiation, we continued to etool and negotiate over the semester.

In addition to an interdisciplinary collaboration between two professors of admittedly hybrid and interdisciplinary practice, the course included students from both liberal arts and design backgrounds. Encouraging collaboration between students from these two backgrounds became a central goal of the course. We structured each design team to include three...
students from a range of backgrounds, but we also considered this collaboration in other ways. One way we addressed this was through assignments that took different forms, in which all students had to take part, and which played on their different strengths. Hence, architecture students had to write papers, and economics majors had to draw plans, maps and diagrams. Students who worked with performance art had to consider the psychology of interpersonal distance, and students who wrote about urban policy had to develop Situationist maps of our site. In this way, they all modeled different skills for each other.

**Intertwined Assignments**

Over the course of the semester, students worked on many short-term elements of two intertwined long-term projects: both individual research projects (termed “seminar work” at the start of the semester), and team collaborative design projects (termed “studio work”). Both of these developed over time, through an iterative process, working at multiple scales and from multiple lenses, while integrating issues addressed in readings and discussions. As we thought it important to intertwine disciplines, theories and practices, we also valued intertwining opportunities for individual and group work.

The class was structured as three modules of three weeks each: People/Place, Control/Privatization, and Looseness/Informality, with a fourth day on representation. We strove to intertwine assignments so that each module had a “seminar” and a “studio” benchmark assignment, due in staggered weeks, with the hope that they would build on each other. This was not always the case, and necessitated some adjustments and our move toward a hybrid model, which we will discuss in the next sections. An example of the studio/seminar intertwining between first papers and mid-review follows.

In the first few weeks of the semester, each individual student developed a research question that they would hone throughout the semester. Students’ questions ranged broadly, including: how to develop exploratory participatory methods for community research; interpersonal space in public; the role of the table as a catalyst for gathering; and the imageability of public space. In each process paper, students used the lens of the module’s readings to address their chosen questions and our site. These papers could be a combination of image and text - though most students stuck with the more standard paper formats, a trend we later intervened to change.

As the class progressed, design teams were tasked with developing a broad design strategy, which examined Roger Sherman’s notion of resilience, requiring the team’s strategy to be flexible enough “to adapt to multiple contingencies or unforeseeable events.” It was a group approach to testing, exploring and negotiating a joint philosophy of public space as manifested within a particular set of conditions. This joint philosophy arose from the issues that each student was addressing individually in their research questions and process papers. A later development was the outlining of three tactics that reinforced and explicated the group strategy.

We will endeavor to explain how we moved from this intertwining model to a more hybrid model and the one we propose for future work by considering our challenges and the adjustments we made in response over the course of the semester.
Challenges and Adjustments

Challenges

Studio work/seminar work duality
We had each previously taught both seminars and studios, and felt excited and well equipped to hybridize these course forms. That said, perhaps because one of us was designated the “studio professor” and the other the “seminar professor”, to some extent we reproduced the outlines and expectations these terms carry. Over the semester we often pondered the best terminology for the course. At the outset we tried to suggest the linkage by calling the class a “critical studio + practical seminar”, reinforcing the notion of intertwining of two linked elements. With hindsight, we feel that a name that emphasizes the link between theory and practice would be better, and would better present the course as a single entity.

In addition to our own expectations, the students also came to the course with preconceived notions about what these words would mean in relation to the work required. While we often talked about how the different elements should inform and support each other, a major challenge to the hybrid process was the students’ sense that there was “seminar work” and “studio work”, distinctions partially due to departmental requirements but also embedded in the course structure - the morning class called “the seminar” and the afternoon session, “the studio.” We also unintentionally reinforced this schism by having discrete assignments with--what we had seen as a savvy strategy--alternating seminar and studio deadlines. Yet, this resulted in students setting aside the studio work during the weeks of seminar deadlines, and vice versa.

Time and skills
Expectations of time, types and means of production, and what was considered the work of “design” were a challenge. This was true particularly in regard to clarifying for students the range of practice that was a part of the new kind of design process we were helping them to build. We struggled with how best to use our six hours a week, which often barely seemed enough to incorporate reading, discussion, feedback and work on site, as well as hands-on work, and developing skills. In addition to many students needing hands-on guidance for practical work, teams had difficulty coordinating schedules out of class.

The question of how to best allocate time is certainly a familiar challenge, but a particular challenge was learning how to manage and build the skills of the highly diverse student group. We saw their sometimes divergent viewpoints and strengths as a boon to the class, but this also meant that we could neither assume that they all had the writing skills of a liberal arts student, or the facility with visual work of a design student. A solution we developed only toward the end of the class, within the design groups themselves, was to have students teach each other the skills in which they were expert. In future, this approach would be core to this kind of interdisciplinary class. One great benefit of this was that while many students were not experienced in traditional visual work, they were not afraid to hand-draw and be experimental, and these were often some of the most effective drawings in conveying concepts.

Adjustments Along the Way

As the course developed it became clear that we needed to reassess the typical trajectory of a
studio assignment, as well as the typical form of a seminar paper. Several kinds of adjustments were made. Firstly, we began to more tightly weave together, to really hybridize, the skills and form of “studio” work with those of “seminar” work. Hence, we developed several assignments that were for both studio and seminar, and explicitly brought drawing into the seminar projects and writing into the studio projects.

This began with requiring students to create a series of mappings in response to our readings on cartographies of public space: each student was required to visit our site and to create their own individual situationist map, paying close attention to their own experience of the site, and each design group then had to pool their observational resources to create a behavior map of the site. These two kinds of maps highlighted vastly different elements of the site, and also brought into relief the experience, negotiations, assumptions, and analysis of doing research alone as compared to as a group.

Secondly, writing became an inherent part of the design process. At the mid-review of the “studio” portion of the class, teams proposed a group “vision”, which was comprised of an articulate, graphic narrative describing their process, including relevant site analysis, individual research and group interventions, which demonstrating how their strategy and tactics developed from observation and analysis. This presentation also incorporated each student’s use of Walter Hood’s “vision” method, using language to describe the impact of the team strategy and tactics on the site. Teams were required to present their tactics’ spatial and socio-cultural impacts on the site - and drawings to demonstrate the ideas. This began to weave together both individual and group research into a presentation of design strategy, while also building writing into the “design” portion of the class. At the final review, writing was also an important element, as every presentation was required to begin with each team’s statement of their definition of “public space.”

Third, drawing became an inherent part of research, as we challenged students to give visual form to their research findings, and to diagram and visualize ideas, even as we had first used visual strategies ourselves to collaborate and plan the class. The third and final “process paper” was revamped as a series of three process diagrams that furthered each student’s thinking for both their individual paper and their team’s design. Multiple media were encouraged using layered photographs, collage, hand drawing, or computer-drawing to develop these diagrams. The three diagrams were: [1] using a base map to spatially diagram the existing conditions through the lens of their final paper topic [2] individually diagramming one portion of their team’s design [3] a conceptual diagram of their final paper, visually showing their final thesis question and the kind of dynamics they were exploring, rather than solely using text.

Other adjustments incorporated highly directed on-site assignments and interventions, making group collaboration visible, and including multiple benchmarks. One such shift to make group negotiation visible took place online. While we began the class with required individual journals, over the course of the class these were transformed into design group blogs. These were required to include both individual notes as well as group conversations, and reinforced the hybrid class that was emerging - including both
images and text. These hybrid individual and collective productions became an effective way for the students to work together, once they embraced the form.

**Moving from an Intertwined to a Hybrid Model**

**Site Intervention**

Each class has its moments of cohesion and eureka, and for us, they occurred when our students, and even ourselves, engaged closely with our site, and when we began to truly see the hybridity of the class at work. At the end of the semester, the class agreed that when it had started to come together for them was through one of our adjusted assignments, an on-site intervention. This built from our methodological readings, and was tweaked through the lens of art practice. We had the students take as a starting point “Gotham Handbook,” artist Sophie Calle’s playful response to novelist Paul Auster’s wry set of instructions for “improving a public space.” Each team developed a single tactic, a simple activity to test and explore their strategy, which they implemented on the site the following week. Students documented their interventions with photos and note-taking, which they posted with written analyses on team blogs and presented in class. They considered how their experiences supported or challenged their design strategies, or what additional tactics they suggested. This moment, when students started to change the physical space of the site, and to grapple with the effects of those changes, even temporarily, was the first moment where research, design and observation were integrated into one iterative process and one temporal connection.

**Learning from Final Work**

At the end of the class, two further eureka moments emerged, as the hybridity of the project became strikingly clear. Both the final research presentations, and the following week’s final design review were deeply instructive, though for different reasons.

During the individual final “seminar” presentations, when students finally saw each others’ research, they saw how their individual thinking had been influencing their group projects all along. In these presentations and papers built from their earlier papers, readings responses and diagrams and using both primary sources and theoretical texts, we clearly saw how their individual theoretical ideas had gained focus through grounding in our site and their active research practice. In addition, we all saw how these ideas had grown through being challenged by the questions raised during the group design processes. The students also saw how the research they had each been pursuing helped to craft infinitely stronger arguments for the group design projects they had been working on together.

From these presentations it was clear how much each student had invested in their particular perspective on the site. We celebrated the fact that we had allowed the design projects to be driven by these individual interests, ensuring a rigor and engagement that may have been lacking had a more narrow program for the site been defined. At the end of the day of final seminar presentations, we were excited by the students’ insights into the human experience of our site, and the way this resonated and supported the design decisions we had seen them making. We looked forward to their presentation to the following week, when they would use this work to
create their design narratives and rationales. We felt that they were set up to clearly show the way the two halves of the class had become one.

The following week, during the final review of the studio, another eureka moment emerged. While the projects were quite good overall, the productive relationship between the individual and team work evident the week before was absent. The review itself was a puzzling experience, both for us and the students. While the conversations within the student teams to determine project parameters had always been compelling, if occasionally contentious, this complexity was missing at the review. The breadth of their thinking, the ‘thick’ process we had cultivated, was flattened. Given clear instructions to narrate their process, as well describe their project, the omission was surprising. In retrospect, our sense is that the students edited work they deemed not ‘final’ enough, based on their sense of appropriate work for a studio review.

While two of the teams succeeded in representing a portion of their process, the critique was particularly problematic for one team who had developed a sophisticated set of linked elements. They had their core components at the mid-review, but had not yet determined how these pieces created an integrated narrative. We felt they had the most rigorous process of iteration, refining their designs to create a strong theoretical framework for the site as a whole. Like all the teams, their studio work was strongly informed by the work presented in their individual papers. While their project was a successful example of linking of theory and practice, this relationship was not well represented in the final review. They had left out a number of descriptive diagrams that explained the framework, and focused on the ‘design’ elements instead. The resultant dialogue centered on more traditional, though important, architectural concerns such as scale, materiality, and circulation. As such, the conversation didn’t address how the project succeeded in embodying the intent of the hybrid class: through a collaborative process, this team’s full work had indeed articulated a detailed, coherent theory of public space using interventions finely tuned to the particulars of the site.

Crucially missing from this final day was a structure that would allow a discussion of the projects in relation to each other. The range of interventions, research insights, theoretical perspectives and practical outcomes had been critical for the breadth and intensity of dialogue throughout the course. On that final day, we did not have time to examine how the teams’ different strategies, taken together, successfully elucidated the ideals and realities of our site’s public-ness. The studio review reinforced the need to redefine the final outcome and its presentation.

A Hybrid Conclusion

We faced some intriguing questions regarding a new model for the course’s conclusion. How to ensure a comprehensive overview of the semester’s work, and give that final presentation a cohesive focus? Did it make sense to retain distinct final presentations for individual work and team work? How to best use critics at different stages; what kind of insight was most beneficial during the process versus at the completion? How to support a robust discussion that explored both the internal logic of each project, and the various projects taken as a whole?
The strategy we have developed is a series of consciously collective productions to be woven into the class conclusion, comprised of a final day symposium and a class publication. The final day symposium, rather than a “presentation” or “review” does justice to the course’s intent while also creating a better context for a vigorous and constructive discussion. In this revised model, students first present their research and team projects several weeks before the event, to garner practical criticism. Guest critics help clarify the conceptual frameworks, and assist in making appropriate editing decisions for the final presentation. At the symposium, teams present their process, their individual and team work, and show how these elements are related. Together, this hybrid presentation demonstrates each team’s theory of public space through a set of practices and perspectives. In this model, professors moderate conversation between the students and guest critics, providing discussion points for each group, and examining themes relevant to all.

An additional element of this model, a class publication, would accompany the symposium and document all of the course work, including process materials, to highlight the relationship between the individual research and the team projects. We created a booklet of this kind once our semester was over, but this unifying step should be moved into the course itself, to make explicit the integrated nature of the work.

Moving forward with this kind of pedagogy, we see that our project was to take the best of the seminar and studio frameworks to create something new, a hybrid way of thinking and doing. The strength of bringing together these two kinds of pedagogy was not just teaching in tandem, but having the practices and processes of each work together and contribute to a whole. While we had originally imagined the studio and seminar sections of the class as informing each other, we now imagine this pedagogy of theory, research and practice as inextricable and simultaneous, a hybrid way of doing.

References

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Gabrielle Bendiner-Viano and Elliot Maltby

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