Architectural design proposal of reading space

3. 1 Historical Purpose & Context

If we surmise that temporary architecture is, essentially, something that is not permanent, then in one form or another – as stated – it has existed since antiquity, with examples traced “ from prehistoric wooden huts and shelters, through medieval stage sets, circuses and world fairs, to the mobile home and post-war pre-fabs, and wartime and disaster relief.” Interestingly, as early as 58 B. C. E in ancient Rome, such architecture functioned as “ a form of revolution” – ancient Romans circumventing governmental opposition to permanent amphitheatres by building temporary versions – with the Metropolitan Museum of Art noting that despite their impermanent nature, this architecture was “ a rich celebration and an expression of anti-establishment ideals.”

Together with other classical forms, a revival of temporary architecture was also particularly prevalent during the Renaissance; civic groups would welcome King Henry II of France to their cities with “ festivals showcasing the best and most elaborate in temporary design of the time,” such as the specifically commissioned *Fountain de Innocents* (1550) – a collaboration between architect Pierre Lescot and sculptor Jean Goujan. As the University of Toronto’s Professor of Art History, Christy Anderson, notes: “ *for designers and architects of the Renaissance the ephemeral nature of the installations lent themselves to design innovations believed to be too unconventional or extravagant for lasting architecture [and] afforded the opportunity for experimentation* .” Such events were used as tantalising opportunities for the realisation of a new style, made real perhaps for a single day; the transient enjoyably consumed, creating a taste for the permanent.

In contemporary architecture, we have become more familiar with *the temporary* as expressed at exhibitions and pavilions; Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's L'Espirit Nouveau Pavilion (1925), Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion (1929), and Alison and Peter Smithson's House of the Future for the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition in London (1956) – each showcasing their designers' stimulating philosophies and ideas on the future of architecture, and ' advertising' these compelling forms via memorable, provocative images. Moreover, these challenges to established or conventional approaches to design were yet further inflamed by Archigram, with mobile, inflatable or temporary projects – albeit resigned to paper and remaining unbuilt – during the 1960's and 70's.

3. 2 Academic Discourse & Urban Change

However, it was the aftermath of the great recession in 2008, which crippled economies – with the construction, architecture and engineering sectors arguably hit the hardest – and the inevitable temporary suspension of many large-scale projects that ensued which elevated small-scale, bottom-up spatial interventions from niche to mainstream practice, and subsequently exposed them to more intense levels of critical review. Though this opened up possibilities to " test scenarios and subvert preconceptions of what our cities should be like," giving architects and designers, often young, the opportunity to " push the boundaries of architecture and [take] the city back into their own hands," as Cate St. Hill writes in her RIBA published book ' *This is Temporary* ,' very soon, and perhaps unavoidably, established companies found they could make use of these strategies too, " evaporating

[away] any freshness," writes Douglas Murphy in his article for the Architectural Review: ' *The Pop-Up Problem* .'

As a consequence, it has now become utterly commonplace for food & drink, fashion or design retailers, for example, to make their inaugural entrance into any given city via a succession of ' trendy' pop-ups before the ' proper' shop opens. Though this could be considered fairly commonplace ' cool-chasing,' it stems from the constant procedure of reducing risk: a temporary shop doesn't require payment for a full lease, and it also has an aura of edgy ' cool.' These types of structure therefore offer us a " corporate regurgitation of anti-corporate commerce."

Importantly, and perhaps more pressingly, in academic and mainstream media discourse, more original spatial intervention projects, which featured smiling locals and were so often portrayed as joyous and likeable, have also since been subject to a considerable amount of criticism – primarily contemplating if the " actual impact of these projects is overestimated." Though proponents of the ' pop-up' refer to the wider impact an intervention can have – galvanising local communities to change the way their public spaces and buildings are used to the benefit of everyone – in practice " the actual effect remains limited to the most local scale, involving or reaching out to just a handful of locals." This is due, in part, to the perceived lack of ' scalability,' as Ella Harris highlights in her article for The Guardian: the " possibility of scaling up such projects, beyond their immediate surroundings, is often minimal" due to the " specific local conditions."

Therefore, when addressing if temporary architecture can act as a catalyst for urban change in the context of this thesis, ‘ a catalyst for urban change’ relates to the ability of the project or intervention to have an impact on an area wider than its immediate surroundings, stimulating local inhabitants to actively seek to utilise public spaces for betterment of society, or to at least raise the question.

4. 0 Formulating a Position

4. 1 Understanding Current Trends

Despite such criticism into the perceived overestimated effect or corporate commercialisation of temporary architecture projects, there are a plethora of younger architects and designers that are ’emerging’ as a new generation of a “ subversive, socially-minded” practices, each combatting these concerns by “ inspiring new definitions of architecture” – not just in terms of the physical structure, but in the process of creating them. These practices all share a concern for engaging people and enriching local communities, and their projects are well-considered and endowing ways to create animated, deeply-rooted places in the neglected, disused and sometimes inaccessible parts of a city. Therefore, before attempting to formulate my position within the field of temporary architecture, it was necessary to speak to a few of these firms in order to develop a more succinct, albeit limited, understanding of the temporary situation in this moment in time.

Set up by Kevin Hayley and David Chambers in 2009, Aberrant Architecture is a London-based “ multidisciplinary studio and think-tank” who create temporary structures backed up by rigorous research into the history of a

place and the construction of whimsical narratives, “ inspired by the way contemporary lives are evolving,” Kevin explains. Featuring projects from a tiny mobile theatre towed by a campervan, to an interactive instillation built in collaboration with local community groups, their work is “ playful, provocative and interactive.”

Interestingly, both Kevin and David agreed on the two most prominent driving forces between each of their projects – specifically ‘ setting’ and ‘ reusability.’ First is the idea of historical heritage, or ‘ setting’ – “ we always approach a project with attention to the history-we look to engage people, perhaps through participation events, in a way that connects them to a story or history,” Kevin stresses, as it is this side of the projects which the public are “ increasingly embracing, and really enjoy.”

Also, and equally as importantly, is their desire for temporary projects to have a lasting effect: “ if something is there for three days or 30 years, does it matter? Surely it’s about measuring the effect it has on a community.” However, though they both agreed that “ the actual physical thing is temporary but the activity or use should be very permanent,” they also stressed that being able to reuse the structure was important – “ if something stays in one place for a long time, we’ve found it can lose its appeal really quickly. With mobile structures, as soon as you move it to a different context it becomes new again.”

Contrastingly, *Assemble* – a multidisciplinary collective founded in 2010 and comprised of 16 members each under the age of 30 – champion a “ self-initiated style of building that engage communities in the making process,”

and rely on “ collaborative teamwork,” as Amica Dall joyfully explained. Fascinatingly, Amica and Jane Hall revealed that this preference of such projects stems from a desire to “ involve the community in a more holistic way,” as habitually, they “ only participate in a small part of the process of creation, [usually via consultation groups] and involvement often only starts after most of the more critical decisions have been made.”

Self-built projects – such as the ‘ Granby Workshop’ in Liverpool, built in collaboration with local artists and craftspeople – afford the chance for everyone involved “ to be part of the whole life of a project.” By collectively “ working out how to make it possible in the first instance, having to fabricate them ourselves, and then living and working with the outcome whilst running the projects,” this method allows them to “ understand the consequence of our design decisions.” This approach to temporary architecture allows the physical structure to “ underscore some doubts in some areas and give confidence in others,” affording a continuously evolving understanding of what a community needs. Ultimately, both Jane and Amica agreed that “ working with people and for people brings extraordinary opportunity to learn from them, to grow sensitive to new things,” and most importantly, to “ find things you weren’t already looking for.”

4. 2 Addressing Systemic Societal Issues

Undoubtedly then, ‘ pop-up’ architecture can offer something rare: “ design that is undiluted.” Permanent, traditional architecture often needs to serve multiple purposes and changing surroundings – the Shard, for example, is at once an office building, transit hub, hotel and retail space. Contrastingly,

temporary architecture, as exemplified by Aberrant and Assemble, can “ advance a singular purpose and concentrate its impact.”

However, in completing further research, what also became evident, and highly significant, was that the ‘ singular purposes’ very rarely address some of the ‘ real-world’ systemic challenges we face in society, especially in major cities, with just a handful of examples responding to challenges like social inequality, youth unemployment or public health and wellbeing, for example. Moreover, in the few instances where projects do address such issues, services are regularly provided by “ unpaid, well-meaning volunteers instead of professionals,” often filling the “ gaps left negligent (local) governments.” With pop-up interventions providing services for free, local governments might well be pleased to see that they “ can get away with” formerly expensive services. Further still, as Ella Harris writes for The Guardian, in celebrating these projects, “ are we simply distracting from the lack of structural public provision in these areas – and worse still, normalising, even glorifying, its absence?”

4. 3 Formulating my position

Therefore, as discussed, in conducting interviews with specialised practices, there were several reoccurring key themes which became immediately apparent, and naturally proved decisive in narrowing my research scope – chiefly, involving the public in an aspect of building or completing the structure, and using a specific element(s) of a site’s historical heritage as a way of engaging the public in a larger story.

However, following further research, the noticeable lack of projects, events or constructs attempting to address some of the systemic societal issues we face in modern society – and the possibility that even the minority that do may simply be masking the absence of appropriate structural public provisions in those areas – was highlighted, again adding to a more refined research scope which could look at the possibility of using architecture to address one such challenge directly.

As a consequence, formulating my position came as a direct result of twinning these two key themes, and attempting to address them simultaneously. Firstly, building forms expressive of context – styles that embrace the environment they inhabit – have always stimulated my interest, so in meeting *Aberrant* and *Assemble* and understanding that the uniqueness of a design can be found in the *particular* – embedded in the lives, the people, and in the history of a city – the first theme lay in a specific alchemy of Architecture; using the combination of distinctive physical, societal and/or cultural contexts to produce innovative, site-responsive design. The second, in identifying a lack of contemporary projects addressing ‘ real-world’ societal challenges, lay in endeavouring to understand if temporary architecture could be used to do just that, or to at least promote such issues into the public domain. The more defined scope for this thesis therefore became an investigation into ‘ if/how Temporary Architecture can act as a catalyst for urban change *by specifically addressing ‘ real-world’ problems through a contextual approach to design.* ‘

5. 0 Project narrative alchemy

5. 1 City + Site Specific Investigations

Embracing Aberrant’s view that temporary architecture projects can lose their appeal if they remain in one place for an extended period of time, and our joint view that such projects can, and should, be representative of, or embrace their local historical heritage, the decision was subsequently made for the project to move around a selection of sites in Canterbury – with each site located in appropriate open public spaces, or pockets of disused, inactive, space to test the structures relative ‘ success’ in various locations (as outlined on the ‘ site locations’ map, left). Therefore, in order to conceive a design taking a combination of Canterbury’s distinctive historical, physical, societal and/or cultural contexts as its inspiration, studies were conducted into each of the prospective sites so that it could appropriate itself in each site, whilst also being representative of Canterbury’s heritage as a whole to produce a holistic theme for the project.

Following these investigations, one overriding theme became immediately apparent – Canterbury’s vast, enduring, and continuing affinity with literature. Throughout recent centuries, Canterbury has proved home to several authors, poets and playwrights, and the city has been an inspiration to the writers of English literature. Playwright Christopher Marlowe, after whom the Marlowe Theatre is named, was born in a house in St George’s Street, Canterbury in 1564, and despite being a contemporary of Shakespeare, was the most popular playwright of his day, and is often acknowledged as the ‘ Father of English drama.’

Furthermore, Charles Dickens also regularly visited Canterbury, and the protagonist of one of Dicken's most loved novels, *David Copperfield,* has strong connections with the city. Canterbury is also incredibly famous for Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* collection, which have stood the test of time for more than 600 years and are known throughout the world. Additionally, the instantly recognisable *Rupert Bear* (which features in the Canterbury Heritage Museum), and Ian Flemming's *James Bond* book ' *You Only Live Twice,'* were both conceived in Canterbury, whilst Flemming's ' *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang'* was based on Canterbury's colourful, local character, Count Zborowski. Moreover, Canterbury's *Buttermarket* – situated directly opposite the Cathedral entrance in the heart of Canterbury's historical town for more than 800 years – features in the wartime classic film ' *A Canterbury Tale.'*

In addition to current and historical contextual ties, it was also important to consider links which may have been lost – especially those concerned with the built environment – a collection of which are remembered in Paul Crampton's ' *Canterbury's Lost Heritage'.* In Canterbury, numerous buildings disappeared in the twentieth century – a century, of course, of vast changes and technological progress. However, though the famous Blitz of Canterbury is one of the main tributaries of this, it has " now been widely accepted that the City Council's ruthless post-bombing clearance policy accounted for many more properties than the Luftwaffe," as the city fathers were " seduced by the ideas of Corbusier and the contemporary styles exhibited at the Festival of Britain."

Interestingly, though there was “ no special reason why they should disappear” – one of the most lost building typologies was Schools (and School Buildings). Demolished, with the site sold for other uses – such as the *Simon Langton Boy’s School* which occupied the current Whitefriars site in 1959 – or “ in more recent years, closed and amalgamated with adjacent schools” – the majority of Canterbury’s principal Schools are now located on the outskirts of the city. This prompted teachers like Frances Bingham to initiate her own one-room schoolhouse, which has since been converted into a family home. Teaching children from the ages of 4-10, Frances taught 32 students over a period of 6 years in Canterbury, achieving “ the same results as students who were educated in separate classrooms,” with some of her students going on to become “ lawyers, engineers, teachers and nurses.”

Therefore, given the city’s, and each respective site’s, respective affinity with literature – expressed in all forms – and education, via the loss of School building and the resulting captivating story of Frances, the contextual narrative of the project was to draw on Canterbury’s historical literature and educative ties as a way to draw activity to a space.

5. 2 Identification of Associated ‘ Real-World’ Problem

Upon identifying a ‘ contextual narrative,’ sequentially, the next step was to identify a ‘ real-world’ problem associated with both literature and education, and, naturally, the logical bridge between these two themes is reading. Interestingly, though reading is a pleasurable pastime for many, following further research into current discourse around reading in schools, in recent years the UK has seen a serious decline in the number of parents reading

with their children, as the headlines in Figure XX demonstrate, to the point where several studies have found the situation to be one of the fastest growing systematic societal challenges faced in the current climate.

In a survey conducted by the Oxford University Press, it was found that “ more than half of primary school teachers have seen a least two children begin formal education with no experience of being told stories at home,” whilst another study managed by YouGov found that “ only 51% of children said they love or like reading books for fun, compared to 58% in 2012, and 60% in 2010.” Moreover, according to the report, only 54% of children up to the age of five are read to at home at least five days a week, with this declining to 34% of six to eight-year-olds, and drastically, just 17% of nine to 11-year-olds.

The studies also discovered that the main causes of this issue stem from the home-life, with parents often finding “ a lack of available space at home,” being “ too busy” with other commitments, “ unable to afford” appropriate literature, or simply “ feeling embarrassed at their own inability to read to their children.” However, Pie Corbett, an educational advisor to the government, stated that: “ *This isn’t just an economic thing – it’s not just people who come from poor backgrounds, it’s across the whole of society. You get a lot of children coming from very privileged backgrounds who’ve spent a lot of time in front of the TV and not enough time snuggled up with a good book. The TV does the imagining for you – and it doesn’t care whether you’re listening or not* .” This is despite research clearly demonstrating that children who are read to on a regular basis before, and after, they start school are most likely to succeed – “ it’s a key predictor in terms of

educational success," Corbett continued, as " children who are told stories are the ones who first form abstract concepts across the curriculum- [and though] parents may have lost faith with this idea, education is the way out of poverty."

Furthermore, these studies have shown that " regular access to books has a direct impact on pupils' results, irrespective of parents' own education, occupation and social class," as " keeping just 20 books in the home can boost children's chances of doing well at school," it was claimed. Finally, YouGov's study of over 17, 000 young people also revealed a strong correlation between children's literacy and what goes on outside school – specifically that being raised in a household with a large amount of literature " would result in a child remaining in education for an average of three years longer" than those with little or no access, which could be " the difference between leaving school at 18 and going to university, which can be worth up to £200, 000 more in lifetime earnings."

5. 3 Project Narrative Construction

Therefore, given the systemic societal issue currently faced in the UK with the number of children reading with their parents being in sharp decline, and that several studies have repeatedly, and explicitly, identified that reading at home and access to books has a proven, positive impact on a child's future life, the project would aim to address this issue specifically – either by attempting to ' solve' the issue directly, or simply raising awareness of it – via a ' contextual' approach to design which would use Canterbury's

historical, and continuing, affinity with literature and education as its main source of inspiration.

6. 0 Design response and realisation

6. 1 Design Response

Out of this defined project narrative – and a subsequent series of design iterations and developments (for which Kevin from Aberrant kindly provided assistance and advice, and are shown in the Appendix), and scale and structural models – was born the ‘ Fun-Size Story Box’ of Canterbury, as shown.

The final design was a 2. 5 meter cube, constructed entirely of softwood and corrugated cardboard (as they are low-value, easy to source and condition materials), featuring both recessed and projecting volumes inspired by stacked books, and the nature of Canterbury High Street’s various building facades. The structure was also to ‘ open up’ to the public, much like a book opening along the spine, to reveal the interior performance and open reading spaces. Via a series of these fun and colourful reading corners, story creation + performance spaces, and open seating areas, the design aimed to provide parents and children with a safe and fun architectural intervention in which to read together. The projected volumes were also to be transparent, so as to make the bookshelves visible from the exterior, creating a sense of intrigue, and the selection of books available would be free for children to take home, donated from local retailers and charity shops, such as the *Demelza Children’s Hospice* , and *HMV.*

The ‘ recessed reading corners’ and ‘ story creation + performance spaces’ come as a direct result of twinning classroom reading techniques with brain development in children research data, outlining where, why and how children like to read. According to the *Centre on the Developing Child* at Harvard University, traditional ‘ reading corners’ employed in schools do not conform to “ children’s actual reading habits,” with most spaces tailored instead to improving scores in assessments. Alternatively, children actually prefer “ smaller, more interesting and inviting reading spaces” – a small space, often hidden away, where children can enjoy a book – therefore, the ‘ Story Box’ features recessed areas where children can do just that with their parents.

Furthermore, in early years, children learn best through “ active, engaged, meaningful experiences,” and research suggests that “ learning is easier when experiences are interconnected rather than compartmentalised into narrow subject areas.” This is echoed by “ ground-breaking” kindergarten architect, Takaharu Tezuka, who states in *The Guardian* that “ designing for children involves recognising their right to play as well as learn,” as from “ these experiences, they construct their own knowledge and apply their taught knowledge by interacting with their environments.” Therefore, rather than having all reading material collected in one space, the ‘ Story Box’ has books arranged throughout the structure, with the provision for interconnected interior and exterior ‘ story creation + performance spaces,’ where children can imagine their own story with their parents, and then act it out, engaging them in a playful experience.

6. 2 Council + Legislative Influence

In addition to research data, council guidance and legislation were hugely influential on the design. Prior to any formal discussions with representatives of the council, a ‘ Planning Analysis’ was conducted to identify any legislative and/or planning requirements which the project may or may not have to adhere to – forming a ‘ paper trail.’ This study found that as this project’s Temporary Structure would be classed within the Building Regulations Exemption as a “ Class 4 – Temporary Building,” it would subsequently be exempt from several, if not all, regulations, providing it did not (amongst other possible ‘ objections’) “ remain where erected for more than 28 days,” and the floor area did “ not exceed 30m².”

The project was subsequently designed following these requirements, however, the design continuously evolved following feedback from council representatives David Kemp (*CCC Property Asset Manager*), and Andy Jeffery (*CCC Emergency Planning & Events Officer*) – all of which is collated in the appendix ‘ Council Correspondence.’ This correspondence tackled many issues, such as; ensuring children didn’t get their fingers caught in hinges, impeding pedestrians or emergency services vehicles, proximity to any highways, gaining relevant liability insurance, and proving the projects structural integrity. Once these issues were satisfied, and all required documentation was completed and accepted (*Event Application Form, Events Policy Terms + Conditions, Event Management Plan, Events Risk Assessment and Public Liability Insurance Certificate*) – permission was granted to stage the event in the Buttermarket and Marlowe Theatre Forecourt on the weekend of the 11 th -12 th February 2017.

7. 0 Implementation and feedback

7. 1 Placement

Despite a fully designed and rationalised scheme, like many temporary architecture structures, the project was affected by time and financial constraints, and as a result, only one of the two sides to the ‘ Story Box’ project was fully realised and constructed – as outlined in the appendix ‘ Construction + Realisation.’ Yet, despite the unfortunate inclement weather conditions, the project was implemented on site (in the Buttermarket, between 11 th -12 th February 2017), acting as a prototype to test the validity or relative success of each part of the design, and project.

Furthermore, though the event only lasted for two days (running from 10am to 5pm both days), and adverse weather ultimately hampered opening times and the possibility to set-up in more than 2 of the prospective sites, there was sufficient opportunity to engage with members of the community, and to receive valuable feedback.

7. 2 Representative Data – Movement

Firstly, due to the stated limitations, it is important to note that the data collected doesn’t represent a statistically significant number, therefore cannot be wholly accurate (this data was recorded by myself, and the 2 other ‘ staff’ members present throughout the day). However, one of the main ambitions of the project was to attempt to attract people to (or ‘ activate’) pockets of often neglected or disused space, to highlight that these spaces can be re-invented and used for something more – and in this sense the project was successful. Due to the weather conditions on the first day, the project was set up under the arcade of arches on Burgate Road, and

though this was not envisaged, it meant that the project was truly located in ‘ dead space’ as, on average, only 20 people pass this location every 10 minutes (throughout the day), and of that number less than 10% (2 out of 20) stop in the immediate area for more than 30 seconds. However, whilst the event was held, though the ‘ people traffic’ remained fairly constant, the amount of people stopping for more than 30 seconds trebled to 30% as people stopped to inspect, or engage with, the structure. On average, parents and children who stopped spent 17 minutes with the structure – a significant increase.

On the second day, when set up in the more exposed Buttermarket Square (in considerably better weather), on average, the amount of people passing through the site was much higher, at around 120 every 10 minutes, whilst people stopped for around 13 minutes. Again, though ‘ traffic’ remained constant, persons who stopped at the structure spent an average of 37 minutes there – almost a 300% increase in time spent in the site.

7. 3 Community Engagement + Feedback

Aside from statistical data, the design featured “ tell us what you think” message boards and Post-it notes, whilst several interviews were video recorded (stills of which can be found in the appendices) – affording parents and children opportunities to express their opinions, either written or verbally. As shown in Figure XX, the written feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with parents agreeing that – in attempting to raise awareness of declining reading levels – the structure was a “ good idea-[and] interesting for architecture.” One user wrote that she though the project was “ a really

creative idea, imaginative and engaging- [with] fairy tales brought to life before your eyes," before, interestingly, adding that " it captures your dreams with your child which may be lost on a busy shopping day," and stating that " nothing is more important than a parent seeing their child's imagination grow." Similarly, a mother, Jane, who took the time to read with her 6-year-old daughter, Emma, stated that the structure was a " really great use of space" showing that " you can create engaging and creative spaces for public engagement without costing loads!"

This sentiment was also echoed in the video interviews, with one mother stating that " it's nice to have somewhere to sit and read because they [her children] get fed up around the shops, giving a little bit of time for them" before adding that " it's such a simple idea, but no-one else has ever thought of it before." In another interview, Adam, a father of two girls added: *" It's very homely and cosy. We took the girls to visit the Cathedral, but they got a bit bored, and kept talking about coming back to the Story Box the whole way round. As you can see, they're having a whale of a time drawing all over the walls. I think the durability of it, and the fact you can just scribble all over it is great because they can't do that at home!"*
Fascinatingly, though blank " create your own story" pages were placed on the interior walls as a place for children to draw and write, most children drew directly onto the cardboard walls, an unintended feature that another parent appreciated: " Great portable pop-up space ideal to give kids somewhere to be free and creative to draw on the walls (like they can't do at home!)"

Moreover, during the event, I had the opportunity to observe if the project was actually attracting parents who weren’t necessarily reading wi